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The Allure of Untranslatability: Shafi‘i-Kadkani and (Not) Translating Persian Poetry

How could one translate into any European language a Persian poem as culturally and aesthetically embedded as this hemistich by Hāfez: beh may sajjādeh rangin kon garat pir-e moghān guyad. This is the central question Mohammad-Rezā Shafi‘i-Kadkani addresses in his essay titled “On Poetic Untranslatability.” For Shafi‘i, translation is primarily a function of cultural—and not linguistic—affinity. Therefore, he argues that Hāfez’s poem is all but untranslatable in European languages given their fundamental cultural difference from Persian. This article critically engages Shafi‘i’s essay by outlining and analyzing the set of problematic assumptions embedded in its rubric of untranslatability. It places Shafi‘i’s view on translation in conversation with theorists of untranslatability in comparative literature and translation studies. Ultimately, it outlines why untranslatability is not a useful conceptual framework for the analysis of linguistic and cultural difference.

Keywords: Untranslatability; Persian poetry; Shafi‘i-Kadkani; Emily Apter

There is as much difference between us and ourselves as there is between us and others.
Michel de Montaigne

How do we identify and mediate linguistic and cultural difference? This question has been the subject of many debates in comparative literature, a discipline broadly concerned with analyzing literature as an aesthetic object of study across different linguistic, national, and cultural boundaries. The answers to this central question vary significantly depending on the conceptual framework within which it is placed and examined. In the past two decades, scholars of literature have regularly used the idea of literary untranslatability as a conceptual framework and a way of understanding, mediating, and translating linguistic and cultural difference.

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Contrary to what the idea of literary untranslatability may imply at face value, few scholars today question the importance and urgency of translation as a process of crossing linguistic and cultural boundaries. In his *Poetry & Translation: The Art of the Impossible*, Peter Robinson, a scholar of English poetry, clearly underscores this point: “The untranslatability of poetry is what precisely creates the condition for its translation and makes an activity that can practically be done, and be practically done, and done practically.”¹ For Robinson, poetry is not a “special case of [an untranslatable] language” but rather a case whose transference to another language is universally assessed through the rubric of “inevitable losses and gains of translation.”² Framing the translation of poetry as a paradox, Robinson argues that “it is only because poetry cannot be reproduced whole in another language that it can be translated, meaning that it can be interpreted and rendered, with whatever results, in another language.”³ In other words, the impossibility of poetic translation persists because it is made possible time and again.

For Emily Apter, a scholar of comparative and world literature, the idea of literary untranslatability serves to disrupt the universalist fantasies of a neo-imperialist capitalist market set on bringing the world’s literary texts into a singular field of equivalence, thus potentially collapsing their distinct cultural and aesthetic features. In *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability*, Apter militates against the “translatability assumption” of the field of world literature, the “tendencies in World Literature toward reflexive endorsement of cultural equivalence and substitutability, or toward the celebration of nationally and ethnically branded ‘differences’ that have been niche-marketed as commercialized ‘identities.’”⁴ Whereas for Robinson untranslatability primarily concerns language, Apter uses it to foreground and critique the political, economic, and religious aspects of translation.⁵ It is not that Apter advocates against engaging texts from non-Anglophone literary traditions, as the title of her book might suggest; rather she advocates for better engagement with those texts in ways that are more attentive to the cultures and modes of thought in which they were composed, circulated, and enjoyed.

One of Apter’s key interlocutors in *Against World Literature* is Barbara Cassin, the principal editor of *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies: Dictionnaire des intraduisibles*, translated as the *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, an encyclopedia of literary, philosophical, and political terms that defy clear-cut translations in French and English.⁶ The untranslatable does not stand for what is impossible to translate, it is rather the “sign of the way in which, from one language to another, neither the words nor the conceptual networks can simply be superimposed.”⁷ Cassin did not wish to produce yet another encyclopedia of philosophy, instead she

¹Robinson, *Poetry & Translation*, 82.

²Ibid., 52.

³Ibid., 88.

⁴Apter, *Against World Literature*, 347; 2.

⁵Ibid., 347.

⁶Cassin et al., *Dictionary of Untranslatables*.

⁷Ibid., xvii.

and her cohort set out to produce a dictionary “which starts from words situated within the measurable differences among languages.”⁸ For Cassin, the untranslatable therefore does not derive from the idea of absolute incommensurability linked to the translation of sacred scripture—and its tired metaphor of translation as an act of betrayal—instead she defines the untranslatable as “what one keeps on (not) translating,” words that belong to different philosophical traditions or conceptual networks.⁹

In the works I have mentioned, untranslatability does not appear as a free-standing idea, it is in fact grounded in a set of well-thought-out criteria intended to highlight all the ways in which translation continues to play a critical role in our world today. That said, there is still very little critical awareness toward the discursive implications of using untranslatability as a conceptual framework for the process of identifying and analyzing linguistic and cultural difference. Inadvertently, the said scholarly works stabilize—if not also validate—untranslatability as a normative conceptual opening for debates centered on the ways in which philosophy, comparative and world literature may cultivate the methodological tools necessary to meaningfully disrupt ontological nationalism and Euro-centrism.

This article does not aim to offer an alternative to the rubric of untranslatability. Rebecca Gould has recently offered such an alternative, a notion she calls “hard translation,” in an article that also examines Shafi‘i’s views on poetic translation.¹⁰ Instead, I will introduce and analyze an essay by Mohammad Rezā Shafi‘i-Kadkani, the distinguished Persian-language poet and literary scholar, on the idea of poetic untranslatability. For the purpose of introducing it, a full translation of Shafi‘i’s essay is appended to this article. I recommend reading it first before returning to my analysis. I have chosen to focus on Shafi‘i’s “Dar tarjomeh nāpaziri-ye she‘r” or “On Poetic Untranslatability” for the following reason: it represents a very rare effort, in the Persian language, to raise translation as a cultural and theoretical question. Iran has an active and growing community of translators wherein also a quality translation studies journal, *Motarjem*, is published. That said, it is still uncommon for Iranian translators to theorize translation. This is one of the reasons why Shafi‘i’s essay has been widely published and read.¹¹

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Gould, “Hard Translation.”

¹¹Shafi‘i-Kadkani, “Dar tarjomeh nāpaziri-ye she‘r.” It was republished in the same year: *Iran Shenāsi* 56 (2002): 743–9. Four years later, it was included in Shafi‘i-Kadkani’s collected essays on Hāfez: *In kimiya-ye hasti*, 125–33. A longer version of the essay was published in *Bokhārā* 80 (Farvardin–Ordibehesht 1390/April–May 2011): 82–8. The essay has appeared in many Persian-language blogs online. The popularity of untranslatability as a paradigm goes well beyond Shafi‘i-Kadkani in Iran. In December 2019, the Center for the Study of Hāfez in Tehran hosted a colloquium titled “The *Ghazals* of Hāfez and the Question of Untranslatability: Based on Translations from the German,” featuring professors Farideh Purgiv (Professor of English, University of Shiraz) and Hasan Nekuruh (Professor of German and translation, University of Shiraz).

In “On Poetic Untranslatability,” Shafi‘i poses the following question: how could one translate into a European language with any degree of success a metaphor so culturally and aesthetically embedded as the one used in the following hemistich by Hāfez: *Beh may sajjādeh rangin kon garat pīr-e moghān guyad*. He argues that European languages are culturally too distant from Persian, rendering Hāfez’s hemistich fundamentally untranslatable. However, Shafi‘i contends, modern Persian poetry, with a few exceptions, is easily translatable into European languages because it has primarily derived from those literary traditions. Therefore, Shafi‘i posits untranslatability less as a function of language and primarily as a function of cultural affinity. The central questions of my critical engagement with “On Poetic Untranslatability” are as follows: what set of assumptions does Shafi‘i make and take for granted by placing the question of linguistic and cultural difference within the conceptual framework of untranslatability? What questions does the notion of untranslatability prohibit Shafi‘i from formulating? In four different vignettes, this article will address those central questions.

A Perso-Arabic Translation Theory

Shafi‘i begins his essay with a famous quote from al-Jāhiz (d. 868), invoking the Arabic-language littérateur and polemicist as a representative from the Islamic tradition and its position on the translation of poetry. In *Kitāb al-Hayawān*, al-Jāhiz writes that:

Poetry [*shi‘r*] cannot be translated; it cannot be transferred from one language into another. Translation breaks its metrical arrangements [*naẓim*] and spoils the rhythm [*wazn*], ruins its aesthetics [*ḥusn*], and flattens the element of wonder [*mawḍi‘ al-ta‘ajjub*]. Translation turns poetry into prose, and prose originally written as such is preferred over what has been turned into prose as a result of translating verse.¹²

Having explicitly validated al-Jāhiz’s view, Shafi‘i also invokes in a footnote the Qur’anic exegete al-Zamakhshari (d. 1144), who had argued against the translation of the Qur’an. Then he quotes Seamus Heaney (d. 2013) and Robert Frost (d. 1963) as two twentieth-century representatives of the discourse of poetic untranslatability. Shafi‘i writes,

In an interview in October 1995, [Heaney] said “Poets belong to the language, not to the world.” In the long period between al-Jāhiz and Seamus Heaney, many have deemed poetry untranslatable while others have even defined poetry as something

¹²al-Jāhiz, *Kitāb al-Hayawān*, 75. The quote appears as uncited in “Dar tarjomeh nāpaziri-ye she‘r,” *Bokhārā* (2006): 82.

that cannot be translated, as Robert Frost's (d. 1963) oft-quoted epigram goes: "poetry is what is lost in translation; it is also what is lost in interpretation."¹³

Having established that poetry cannot be translated, Shafi'i sets out to "complete and revise" al-Jāhiz's opinion through specific examples. Before analyzing his examples, it is necessary to critique the way in which Shafi'i presented poetic untranslatability as a transhistorical question.

al-Jāhiz's view regarding the untranslatability of poetry appears under a section titled "History of Arabic Poetry" in book one of *al-Hayawān*. Right before the part quoted by Shafi'i, al-Jāhiz writes, "He says: the art of poetry is restricted to the Arabs and those who speak the language of Arabs."¹⁴ In *Thou Shalt Not Speak My Language*, Abdelfattah Kilito demonstrates how, due to the dialogical nature of al-Jāhiz's work whereby he recounts different—at times contradicting—views, it would be highly uncritical to attribute this specific statement about the literary supremacy of Arabs or the untranslatability of poetry to al-Jāhiz.¹⁵ The larger context in which al-Jāhiz expresses this viewpoint through the device *qāla* (he says) concerns the merits of Arabic poetry vis-à-vis Greek philosophy. As Kilito shows, the persona who sided with Greek philosophy in *al-Hayawān* is the one that deemed poetry untranslatable. The fact that Arabic poetry, framed as "young" in *al-Hayawān*, was discussed in contradistinction—or even opposition to—Greek philosophy, celebrated as "age-old," offers an important contingency that neither Shafi'i nor Apter found necessary to address.¹⁶ They both took al-Jāhiz out of context to forge a transhistorical notion of untranslatability.

Alexander Key has recently highlighted the dearth of critical knowledge with respect to our understanding of classical Perso-Arabic translation culture. In "Translation of Poetry from Persian to Arabic: 'Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī and Others," Key argues that classical Arabic views on literary translation were far more variegated and full of historical and epistemological contingencies than has yet been acknowledged.¹⁷ In this article, Key focuses on two Arabic-language scholars, Abū Hilāl al-'Askarī (d. 1010) and 'Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī (d. 1081), with quite different views on translation. al-'Askarī maintained that translation, specifically of proverbs, was perfectly possible since "the Persians and Arabs are equal in rhetoric. Whoever learns rhetoric in one of the languages and then turns to the other language can use his expertise there as well as in the first."¹⁸

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴al-Jāhiz, *Kitāb al-Hayawān*, 74-75.

¹⁵Kilito, *Thou Shalt Not Speak My Language*, 23-34. One reason it would be uncritical to attribute such definitive statements to al-Jāhiz is because, unlike Shafi'i in his essay, al-Jāhiz does not explicitly take sides when expressing different viewpoints.

¹⁶al-Jāhiz, *Kitāb al-Hayawān*, 74-5.

¹⁷Key, "Translation of Poetry from Persian to Arabic."

¹⁸Original: Abū Hilāl al-'Askarī, *Dīwān* 436: 1-3: *Al-'ajamu wa-l-'arabu fil-balāghati sawā'un fa-man ta'allama l-balāghata bi-lughatin min l-lughāti thumma ntaqala ilā lughatin ukbrā amkanahu*

Whereas for al-‘Askarī rhetoric was the key component in translation, al-Jurjānī placed importance on syntax and *ma‘nī*, the latter translated by Key as “mental content” for the lack of an English equivalent. al-Jurjānī, Key argues, offers a “more confident set of assumptions about how poetry can be successfully translated.”¹⁹ al-Jurjānī’s view of translation was part of a broader set of epistemological assumptions that he and many of his contemporaries like Ibn Sinā (d. 1037) had made about the nature of language. For them, “language is composed solely of vocal forms (*alfāz*), mental contents (*ma‘ānī*), and the connections speakers make between them.”²⁰ Therefore, the success of translation for al-Jurjānī depended on ensuring that the logical relationship between “bundles of mental content” or *ma‘ānī* in syntax would remain unchanged in the target language; otherwise translation of poetry “ceases to be a translation and instead becomes a new poem” once that logical relationship changes.²¹

It is difficult to understand how the concept and practice of translation functioned in al-Jurjānī’s world because a “European conceptual vocabulary of form, content, sign, or reference,” operative in the fields of comparative literature and translation studies, “cannot be mapped onto this Classical Arabic epistemology without confusion.”²² The take-away here is that classical Arabic attitudes toward translation varied on many different levels and were by no means limited to a solitary al-Jāhīz dismissing all and any translation of poetry in *al-Hayawān*. It is even more vital to understand that translation was not an independent question upon which al-Jurjānī or his contemporaries pondered. Key writes, “For al-Jurjānī, translation was a linguistic practice that existed in his speech community. It was available for him to reference in arguments about how language worked and how it should be theorized.”²³ In other words, translation did not rise to the level of a central fixture for al-Jurjānī; it was discussed primarily in relation to the way language functioned.

Translation meant something radically different for the two twentieth-century figures that Shafī‘ī’s essay invokes. Frost has famously said that “poetry is what is lost in translation.” Many like Shafī‘ī have quoted Frost without paying any attention to its original context. Robinson places Frost’s oft-cited quip “in the spirit of the Cold War” and argues that his view is informed by a “linguistically essentialist” understanding of languages.²⁴ In “Message to the Poets of Korea,” quoted by Robinson in *Poetry & Translation*, Frost writes,

fibā min šan‘ati l-kalāmi mā amkanahu fi l-ūlā. Quoted in and translated by Zakeri, “Some Early Persian Aphorisms,” 295f. In Key’s article, this quote appears on page 147.

¹⁹Key, “Translation of Poetry from Persian to Arabic,” 148; Gould, “Inimitability versus Translatability: The Structure of Literary Meaning in Arabo-Persian Poetics.”

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ibid., 152.

²²Ibid., 149.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Robinson, *Poetry & Translation*, 25.

Poetry and the other arts are for me what a country chiefly lives by. They mark national characters better than anything else. And they bring peoples together in spirit the more apparently that they separate them in language. The language barrier has so much to do with individuality and originality that we wouldn't want to see it removed. We must content ourselves with seeing it more or less got over by interpretation and translation. We must remember that one may be national without being poetical, but one can't be poetical without being national.²⁵

The idea that poetry has a decidedly national character crystallizes the cold war politics from which Frost's views on translation may not be divorced. In fact, Robinson argues that "what Frost and Perloff appear to defend when they emphasize the untranslatable nature of the 'poetry' is the access granted to mother tongue speakers."²⁶ Simply put, for Frost, poetry is the expression of a national essence and its success depends on its insistence upon moving across other national boundaries.

By the late twentieth century, many languages had been transformed into an identitarian fixture of romantic nationalism. During the past 150 years, a great deal of intellectual labor has gone into institutionalizing different literary traditions—including Persian—as salient cultural elements of nation-states. As a result of and in response to this monumental social and political transformation, "multilingualism" and "transnationalism" have become prevalent concepts in literary and cultural studies, particularly in the twenty-first century. In a world still battling bellicose nationalism, translation is rightly seen as a mechanism capable of cutting through nationally policed linguistic boundaries and bridging distant literary traditions.²⁷ There is a growing list of publishers such as Words without Borders that set out to fulfill this very objective.²⁸

It is in the political and cultural context of the twenty-first century that Shafī'i's conceptualization of untranslatability meets Apter's. Both scholars curiously cite al-Jāhīz in their work (for Apter, via Kilito) while they posit untranslatability as a function of culture (though Apter also examines political and religious factors). There are clear differences between them as well. Shafī'i's insistence on an undefined and taken-for-granted entity called "all Persian readers" in contradistinction with "all Western readers" borders on cultural chauvinism. For Apter, untranslatability means, among other approaches, valuing—as opposed to outright erasing—the idea of linguistic and cultural difference through "generic critical lexicons that presume universal translatability or global applicability."²⁹ Apter's own insistence on the idea of untranslat-

²⁵Ibid., 25. Originally extracted from Frost, "Message to the Poets of Korea," 182–3.

²⁶Robinson, *Poetry & Translation*, 66.

²⁷For an edited volume that examines the implications of ethnonationalism on historically contiguous literary cultures, see Yaşın, *Step-Mother Tongue*.

²⁸See Mason, Felman, and Schnee, *Literature from the "Axis of Evil"*; Aslan, *Tablet & Pen*.

²⁹Apter, "Untranslatables," 581. More recently, Apter has defended her adherence to the rubric of untranslatability in *Unexceptional Politics*, see in particular the chapter entitled "Interference."

ability—however academically defined—to an extent reinforces that “generic critical lexicon” that it wishes to undermine or replace.

The notion of untranslatability itself, I argue, uncritically accepts the core logic of romantic nationalism in which monolingualism poses as the default mode of cultural production and interaction and translation is framed as the sole mechanism of crossing linguistic and cultural difference. In that vein, a work of translation is seen as the final—if not also an authoritative—version of the original, or as Venuti has characterized it, translation as the “reproduction of a source-text invariant.”³⁰ Instead, translation should be viewed as a resolution of an always ongoing process of interpretation and rewriting. The idea of untranslatability cannot replace the “generic critical lexicon” of world literature because it belongs to that very category itself as an unwelcome residue of ontological nationalism obsessed with cultural purity. Untranslatability was not part of the conceptual vocabulary of al-Jāhīz or al-Jurjānī operating respectively in the ninth and eleventh century. It is a byproduct of romantic nationalism obsessed with languages appearing as bounded and fixed.

Again, consider Cassin’s *Dictionary of Untranslatables*. The idea of highlighting the ways in which the conceptual domain and genealogies of political, philosophical, and literary lexicon in different languages differ and overlap is useful and even admirable. But why should such a project be framed by the rubric of translatability by default?³¹ Take the entry on “The Spanish Singularity: The Pair of *Ser* and *Estar*,” which elucidates in detail the linguistic and philosophical valences of the two Spanish verbs related to the Latin *esse*.³² Here, are we being asked to assume that all native speakers of Spanish today understand the nuances outlined in the *Dictionary of Untranslatables* and can automatically summon them?

The idea of untranslatability is indifferent to so many key variables when it comes to translation, the question of audience is perhaps the most salient one. The rubric of untranslatability necessarily relies on an undifferentiated source audience that supposedly has unmediated access to all the literary lore and philosophical nuances of their native language.³³ This problematic assumption runs counter to the core ethos of not only translation but also humanistic inquiry: both are fruits of intellectual and empathic labor, not the inevitable outcome of a nebulous category called the source-text audience or native speakers; the latter is so often unfettered to carefully defined contingencies or meaningful qualifications. Revealingly, “untranslatability” as a philosophical idea was itself not featured as an entry in the *Dictionary of Untranslatables*. This omission provides yet another strong indication that this term is a very recent addition to our conceptual vocabulary about linguistic and cultural difference.

³⁰Venuti, *Contra Instrumentalism*, 8.

³¹In order to further foreground the rubric of untranslatability, Apter turned the French subtitle (*Vocabulaire européen des philosophies: Dictionnaire des intraduisibles*) into the main title of the English version: *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*.

³²Cassin et al., *Dictionary of Untranslatables*, 1025–30.

³³Venuti has attributed the idea that translation is to provide unmediated access to the source text to an “instrumentalist” conceptualization of translation. See *Contra Instrumentalism*.

Alternatively, translation has been viewed as a never-ending mechanism of exegetical rewriting in classical Judeo-Islamic literary cultures.³⁴ In *Translation, Rewriting, and the Manipulation of Literary Fame*, André Lefevere has shown that translation cannot be theorized separately from other forms of intertextual rewriting such as anthologization.³¹ But we also need to pay equal attention to other forms of radical rewriting like parody, allusion, and contra-fiction (*mu'aradah* in Arabic, *esteqbāl* or “welcoming” in Persian).³² Understanding translation in that context necessarily renders untranslatability a moot problem, for translation is not conceptualized as *the* resolution of linguistic and cultural difference, but one solution in a never-ending process of reading and rewriting.³⁵ In the way Shafi'i and Apter use untranslatability as a transhistorical and normative conceptual framework, they inevitably find themselves on the flip side of the same coin. Their methodological differences notwithstanding, both scholars insist, though in different ways, on cultural singularity. Through the rubric of untranslatability, both scholars are responding to modern anxieties about politics and poetics of translation in the age of neoliberal nationalism. Admittedly, this article also responds to modern anxieties, but it does so by rethinking the dominant framework within which translation is conceptualized today.

Over-Metaphorizing Translation

In order to demonstrate the ways in which Hāfez's poetry is embedded in Persian literary culture, Shafi'i introduces a metaphor: translation as architectural transference. He writes, “if we accept that poetry is verbal architecture, then translation is similar to moving an architectural monument from one place to another.”³⁶ It might be possible to successfully move an ordinary monument, he suggests, but transferring an architectural masterpiece would be impossible. Shafi'i invoked Isfahan's Shaykh Lotfollah Mosque as such an example. Certain parts of the Safavid-era mosque may seem more transferable than others. He writes: “the windows easily fit the new structure, but is it all that simple? Onto what landscape will the windows open? ... we can place the windows anywhere we please, but we have no control over the landscape that they will overlook [for] it may be confining, overcast, and depressing.”³⁷

Unlike its windows, Shafi'i maintains, it would be extremely difficult to move the tiles of the Shaykh Lotfollah Mosque without damaging them in the process, for they are “an expression, reference or piece of wisdom from Islamic theology, itself rooted in the theological labyrinth of Manichaeism and Zoroastrianism.”³⁸ Overall, Shafi'i argues that the task of transferring a monument so deeply anchored in its native

³⁴I am indebted to my mentor Chana Kronfeld for generously sharing her wealth of knowledge on translation, particularly in the context of Jewish literary cultures. Please see Kronfeld, *Full Severity of Compassion*; Zadeh, *The Vernacular Qur'an*.

³⁵Lefevere, *Translation, Rewriting*. For a case of radical rewriting in Persian, see Losensky, “The Creative Compiler.”

³⁶Shafi'i-Kadkani, “Dar tarjomeh nāpaziri-ye she'r,” *Bokhārā*, 83.

³⁷Ibid., 85.

³⁸Ibid.

culture will pose insurmountable challenges even for a masterful architect-translator. Similar to the mosque, the highly allusive poetry of Hāfez (d. 1390) is all but untranslatable. Even if one manages to bring Hāfez's poetry, or the mosque for that matter, to European or American readers, Shafi'i asserts, they would not be able to enjoy and understand it as intimately and deeply as an undifferentiated entity called "Iranians."

to move Hāfez's imagery into English or French would be to open the windows of the Shaykh Lotfollah Mosque onto London's overcast and foggy ambiance rather than Isfahan's blue and heavenly skies ... How will a foreigner decode this knowledge? Let us assume that he did, how much of its meaning will he grasp? We will also assume that he did understand its surface meaning—how will he discern the vastly profound field of knowledge on which it lies? In place of a tile, we must imagine all the references, allusions and codes of Persian poetry.³⁹

The Shaykh Lotfollah Mosque was commissioned by Shah 'Abbās (r. 1588–1629) in the early seventeenth century. It stands in the eastern corner of Isfahan's Naqsh-e Jahān square. While Shafi'i focuses on the process of moving and reassembling this monument to capture the challenges inherent in literary translation, he takes for granted the process of mediation that is socially and historically embedded in building the mosque. Shafi'i rightly argues that moving the mosque from its original locale transforms its value and reception, but overlooks the fact that it is the sum of already recycled and transformed parts. For instance, the mosque was named after a Shi'i scholar who moved to Safavid Iran from the Levant. Shaykh Lotfollah was incorporated into the Safavid patronage system and later became the father-in-law of Shah 'Abbās. As such, the mosque is a pantheon of the patronage system that co-opted non-local figures like Shaykh Lotfollah into the Safavid political institution, a fact not necessarily known to uninitiated Iranian visitors today. Initially meant as a private passage for the royal harem, the mosque was closed to the general public for most of its history. The question of accessibility, lying at the core of reception, has undergone historic changes and does not exist in a timeless vacuum. The mosque's place as a symbolic monument in the source culture is far from fixed; it has been and will always be subject to efforts that animate or mute its aesthetic and historical features for particular social and political agendas.

Given that the mosque does not exist in an unmediated form in its cultural context, the metaphorical translator becomes yet another reader who has to navigate layers of previous readings, mediated by critical factors like the mosque's history of patronage, reception and complex intercultural design. My analysis here is informed by Finbarr Flood's insightful reading of Indo-Ghorid architecture in South Asia in *Objects of Translation*.⁴⁰ In his study of Ghorid mosques, Flood adopts a model of bilateral cultural exchange that stresses agency rather than mandating a one-directional notion of influence. Although the Safavid milieu is distinct from Ghorid north India, Flood's

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Flood, *Objects of Translation*.

model remains useful for the way it uses translation as “an explanatory metaphor and a dynamic practice through which the circulation, mediation, reception, and transformation of distinct cultural forms is effected.”⁴¹

The construction of the Shaykh Lotfollah Mosque required different modes of translation: discussion between patrons, architects, supervisors, craftsmen, artists and calligraphers who used different regional dialects and registers of Persian, Turkic, and possibly other intermediate languages. These discussions would have concerned a wide range of issues: the patrons’ political vision, approaches to construction, the mosque’s stylistic continuity and discontinuity with monuments built locally and transregionally, and the negotiation between architectural concepts and their execution. The process of construction points in the direction of what Flood calls an “economy of translation,” a chain of visions, conventions and commands that have relied on successful (at times also unsuccessful) linguistic communication across vernaculars and registers.⁴²

An intersemiotic mode of translation is also seen in the mosque’s appropriation of different artistic media. As outlined by Roman Jakobson, intersemiotic translation, in contradistinction to intralingual and interlingual translational modes, deals with the question of interpreting between linguistic and non-linguistic sign systems.⁴³ The dome, with its dark blue, azure and white arabesque-patterned tiles curving across the structure’s roof, evokes the design of ‘Abbasi-styled Persian carpets. The Mosque’s Qur’anic inscriptions speak to different facets of Safavid political imaginary to which contemporary Iranians will not necessarily have access. This is yet another Judeo-Islamic literary practice called *shibutz* (שיבוץ) in Hebrew, a term that refers to embedding sacred texts in a new text or monument through allusion or inscription—yet another form of radical rewriting.

Also inaccessible to a majority of the mosque’s visitors today is the architectural idiom of Safavids and their transregional program to reinforce their religious and political credentials vis-à-vis their Ottoman and Uzbek rivals, not to mention its chain of reception in later times. These modes of translation and appropriation at the hands of Safavid patrons and architects clearly demonstrate that the Shaykh Lotfollah Mosque, as a previously translated monument, has meant different things to different visitors, Iranian or otherwise.

For Shafi’i, the mosque is inseparable from its natural landscape in Isfahan and its unique aesthetic features. London and Paris will render the mosque a standalone monument and will separate it from its historical context. “Embedded in each tile,” Shafi’i writes, “is an expression, reference or piece of wisdom from Islamic theology.”⁴⁴ But the practice of writing Qur’anic scripture on Islamicate monuments transcends any specific time or locale. These intertextual relations and links with a transregionally transmitted canon give the mosque parts of its meaning. This characteristic is quite similar to the poetry of Hāfēz and how he recasts the poetic form of *ghazal* through opening an intertextual relationship with his poetic predecessors and contem-

⁴¹Ibid., 8.

⁴²Ibid., 183.

⁴³Jakobson, “On Linguistic Aspects of Translation,” 232–9.

⁴⁴Shafi’i-Kadkani, “Dar tarjomeh nāpaziri-ye she’r,” *Bokhārā*, 85.

poraries.⁴⁵ The mosque does not exist in a vacuum; it is shaped by previous artistic modes found in the Islamicate ecumene.

For Shafi‘i, the Shaykh Lotfollah Mosque is untranslatable because it stands as an expression of a Perso-Islamic essence. Once a monument or a text is celebrated for its imagined essence, then its success will depend on the extent to which it resists translation into cultures flagged as fundamentally different. In the process of classifying London and Paris as fundamentally different than Isfahan, Shafi‘i renders non-fundamental any differences between Isfahan and other Islamic cities. Would the mosque be the same if its windows opened onto the skyline of Cairo or even the Iranian city of Bushehr? Shafi‘i’s insistence on fundamental difference between Isfahan and European cities leads him to collapse architectural distinctions among Islamic urban centers.

In “Against Historicist Fundamentalism,” Eric Hayot analyzes similar nativist impulses prevalent in the field of literary studies; he writes that “fundamentalist thinking collapses certain forms of ambiguity in its conceptual field to magnify conceptual differentiation outside it.”⁴⁶ For Hayot, “all arguments concerning similarity and difference are susceptible to critiques that alter the normative field or scale of analysis.”⁴⁷ Shafi‘i resorts to metaphorization of translation to build his argument. This section primarily illustrated the ways in which Shafi‘i takes for granted the historical significance of culturally prized monuments like Shaykh Lotfollah and treats as a given their identitarian function. It is unsurprising that Shafi‘i uses a metaphor to explain his view on translation given the popularity of translation metaphors. Translation metaphors can be creatively insightful in certain contexts, but they also risk uninvited meanings, and more importantly, over-extending the core definition of translation as textual transference from one language into another.

Shafi‘i’s Hāfez

Shafi‘i mainly bases his argument of poetic untranslatability on a single *beyt* from Hāfez: *Beh may sajjādeh rangin kon garat pir-e moghān guyad / keh sālek bikhabar nabvad ze rāb-o-rasm-e manzelhā*, which I translate as follows: *dye the prayer-rug with wine if the Magian Pir asks you / for the Wayfarer should be in tune with the routes and rules of each stage* (metrical pattern: u - - - / u - - - / u - - - / u - - -).⁴⁸ *Beyt* has no equivalent in English prosody and may be imprecisely translated as a distich. Shafi‘i delves into the reasons why this *beyt* is untranslatable in European languages:

First, the Western reader must know the importance of such religious concepts as *najēs* (impure) and *ṭāher* (pure) in Perso-Islamic culture ... Once he understands

⁴⁵See Brookshaw, *Hafiz and His Contemporaries*.

⁴⁶Hayot, “Against Historicist Fundamentalism,” 1416.

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸Khānlari, *Divān-e Khājeḥ Shams ol-Din Mohammad Hāfez*, 18.

these concepts, more or less as Muslims do, we still have to explain how wine is impure and if it splatters on clothes or a place of prayer, it needs to be washed away. Cemented within the long history of Christianity, wine symbolizes the Blood of Christ and is deemed sacred for Westerners. How could this sacred wine be considered impure? I will not even delve into the concept of the prayer rug for it requires too much preliminary knowledge. Let us not even bother with the paradoxical articulation of a poet [Hāfez] who asks his Muslim fellows to dye their prayer rug or, essentially, suspend their Islamic rites and rituals in order to reach a mystical and more genuine level of religiosity.

How intricate is this expression alone: *dye your prayer rug with wine!* It evokes the association of Persian carpets with the color of wine in Persian poetry while “wine,” “prayer rug” and “dye” in English do not evoke such imagery. Can we really translate *beh may sajjādeh rangin kon* as “dye (or color or tint) the prayer rug with wine?” There would be nothing in this world more pathetic than that! ...

For argument’s sake, let us say that we informed the Western reader (one who has also taken the right preliminary steps) of the meanings of *may* (wine), *sajjādeh* (prayer rug), and *rangin kardan* (making colorful), there are still many other missing links that stand between the reader and aesthetic gratification which is derived from an automatic understanding of these expressions. If he has not learned [the meaning of] *pir-e moghān* and *sālek* according to their mystical cultural teachings, he will not understand that in the *solūk* [the spiritual path a Sufi wayfarer follows], a *pir*’s station is such that even if he were to order one to suspend their adherence to *shari‘a* [legal teachings], one must unconditionally obey him for he knows “the way” of “higher stages.” Such an understanding takes many lifetimes of preparation and cultural familiarity.⁴⁹

The poetic tropes of Hāfez’s *beyt*, according to Shafi‘i, may be linguistically transferable, but culturally they will not survive the process of literary translation into European languages. Given his argument, it is curious that Shafi‘i does not examine a single published English translation of Hāfez. Here, I will analyze three English translations of the same *beyt* to show how each translator has been attentive to Hāfez’s tropes and has adopted different tools to highlight them in English.

Since Sir William Jones (d. 1794) introduced Hāfez to English, Latin, and French-language readers in 1771, many translators from European, Iranian, and South Asian backgrounds have undertaken the feat.⁵⁰ Published in Calcutta in 1891, Wilberforce-Clarke’s *The Divān* offers perhaps the best-annotated translation of Hāfez. Given the depth and breadth of his insights on the poetics of Hāfez, it is unsurprising that Clarke’s translations have served as an intermediary for popular translators with no

⁴⁹Shafi‘i-Kadkani, “Dar tarjomeh nāpaziri-ye she‘r,” *Bokhārā*, 86–7.

⁵⁰See Loloi, *Hāfiz, Master of Persian Poetry*.

or limited reading knowledge of Persian. Clarke's main readership primarily lies in scholarly settings today. His translation of the *beyt* is as follows:

With wine, becolour the prayer-mat—if the Pīr of the magians (the perfect murshid) bid thee;
 For of the way and usage of the stages (to God) not without the knowledge is the holy traveler (the perfect murshid)

Clarke has bent the target language to reflect Persian syntax and lexicon. For instance, his coined imperative, “becolour” (*rangin kon*) is the only English translation that attains the interplay between the color of wine and carpet weaving to which Shafī‘i alludes in his essay. Clarke’s parenthetical insertions (the perfect *murshid*, to God) act as interpretive reinforcement, guiding the reader toward his preferred reading of the *beyt*. Overall, contemporary readers will see his translations as densely academic while they will retain their enduring appeal among scholars and students of classical Persian poetry.

In an essay titled “On Not Translating Hafez,” Dick Davis captured the difficulties of translating the fourteenth-century poet, locating his untranslatability on a linguistic—and not cultural—level.⁵¹ Nonetheless, several years later Davis decided to undertake the feat himself, which led to the publication of *Faces of Love*, a collection of poems by Hāfez, Jahān Malek Khātun, and ‘Obayd Zākāni.⁵² The decision to place Hāfez among his contemporaries is itself a form of radical rewriting given the fact that he has been largely framed as a standalone poet.⁵³ The contemporary register of Davis’ translations has contributed to his wide appeal among non-academic readers. His translation is as follows:

And if the wine-seller says wine
 Should dye your prayer-mat . . .dye it!
 Pilgrims should show each stage’s rule
 And seek to satisfy it.⁵⁴

Davis’ version departs from the mono-rhyme of Hāfez’s *ghazal*, and has developed its own rhyme at the end of each even hemistich. The *beyt* has also been expanded to four lines. Hāfez’s characters, *pir* and *sālek*, have given way to “the wine seller” and “pilgrim.” Davis has opted for “dye” which renders permanent the act of washing the prayer-rug with wine. Davis does not guide the reader toward any single reading of the commandment, whether it is a celebratory or defiant act. The associations of “pilgrim,” “stage’s rule,” and “seek” may convey a mystical reading of the *beyt*, which, according to Shafī‘i, would necessarily get lost in English translation.

⁵¹Davis, “On Not Translating Hafez.”

⁵²Davis, *Faces of Love*.

⁵³See Brookshaw, *Hafiz and His Contemporaries*.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 10.

Geoffrey Squires, one of the more recent translators of Hāfez, brands himself as an “Irish poet who happens to know Persian.”⁵⁵ Squires has arranged the poems in ten thematic categories, an attempt to disrupt certain scholarly tendencies that seek coherence or organic unity in Hāfez. Unlike most translations of Hāfez, Squires has opted not to relegate the explanation of ideas and words to endnotes. Instead, his notes (or as he calls them: commentary, explanation, foil, dialogue, and reflection) appear on separate pages in an appealing font and format which is more likely to engage readers otherwise reluctant to read footnotes. He has translated the said *beyt* as follows:

stain your prayer-carpet with wine
if the Master tells you to
for the pilgrim should observe the customs of the way.⁵⁶

The most striking word choice is undoubtedly “stain,” which paints the act as necessarily contradictory and defiant, closely mirroring Shafi‘i’s preferred reading of the *beyt*. “Stain” further invokes wine as a contaminating element, and undermines Shafi‘i’s effort to place epistemological restrictions on English poetry. The fact that wine means the Blood of Christ in a certain religious context does not mean it cannot carry any other meaning. In Hāfez’s oeuvre, as with Persian poetry more broadly, wine can invoke a number of different meanings. In other words, semantic multiplicity is not only found among languages, but also within the same literary tradition, its many time periods and stylistic variations. In Squires’ translation, the term “prayer-carpet” retains both aspects of *sajjādeb*: devotion *and* artistry. Similar to Davis, Squires’ diction is modern yet its register is formal enough (its lack of contractions for instance) to encourage a mystical reading favored by Shafi‘i.

Clarke, Davis, and Squires have forged distinct approaches, with each translation animating and muting different features of the *beyt* under discussion.⁵⁷ Each English version has addressed the poetic features of Hāfez’s poem in a different manner. Clarke, primarily a scholar, has focused on expanding the components of English to accommodate the idiolect of Hāfez. Davis places Hāfez in the company of two of his contemporaries, ‘Obayd Zākāni and Jahān Malek Khātun. Well acquainted with the lyric genre in both English and Persian, Davis’ translations seek to find a balance between highly readable English and the particularities of Hāfez’s form and meter. Squires is less concerned than Davis with the poem’s social and historical context. Overall, he is not restrained by scholarly debates on the structure of Hāfez’s ghazals. Squires’ experimental translations creatively employ typographical devices such as indent, bold font, lowercase letters, and italicization to animate different aspects of Hāfez’s poems in English translation.⁵⁸ Together,

⁵⁵Squires, *Hafez*, 423.

⁵⁶Ibid., 7.

⁵⁷Michael Hillmann has recently analyzed English translations of Hāfez’s poetry by focusing on Anglo-American poetics. Hillmann, “Translatability of Hāfizian Love Ghazals.”

⁵⁸It must be noted that Squires is aware of these academic debates and references them in his notes and bibliography at the end of the collection.

these translations form a part of the reception history of Hāfez on the one hand and reflect the different poetics of translation across literary styles and time periods on the other. Their translations, more than anything, undermine the zero-sum mentality of Shafi‘i, whereby there either exists absolute access to and therefore total understanding of a poem, or its lack thereof. In reality, the process of reading poetry—or any work of literature—is never final, it is often full of contingencies and mediations.

Similarity Posing as Sameness: Hāfez in Arabic Translation

Shafi‘i’s notion of a monolith called “all Persian readers” or “all Muslim readers” who carry in their veins the literary lore of their poetic tradition may be enchanting, but it is nebulous and unquantifiable at best, and culturally chauvinistic at worst. One of the questions at the core of Shafi‘i’s formulation is access, which relies on two equally nebulous analytical categories: proximity and distance. For Shafi‘i, Arabic offers Hāfez absolute cultural proximity while European languages are fundamentally too distant to convey his poetic idiolect. This idea is so self-evident for Shafi‘i that he did not feel the need to analyze a single Arabic translation of Hāfez. I do not wish to undermine the historic interplay of Arabic and Persian here. It was primarily through contact with Arabic literary culture that New Persian borrowed and appropriated its aesthetic norms, prosodic system, and poetic forms. As Per Otnes reminds us, no contact is pure and every exchange is necessarily bilateral.⁵⁹ An Arabic-language translator of Persian poetry will face challenges just as Hāfez’s English translators have faced elsewhere. To fully demonstrate the nature of such challenges, I will analyze a twentieth century Arabic translation of Hāfez.

Translated by Ibrāhīm Amin al-Shawāribī and prefaced by Tāhā Husayn, *Aghānī Shīrāz wa Ghazaliyāt Hāfez al-Shīrāzī* or *Songs of Shiraz: The Ghazals of Hāfez of Shiraz* is an Arabic-language selection of Hāfez’s poetry. The collection is divided into three parts: (1) an annotated bibliography of eastern and western editions of the Divān; (2) a bibliography of European translations and Turkish-language commentary; (3) the Arabic translations of the *ghazals*. By referencing previous outworks on Hāfez, al-Shawāribī places his Arabic translation squarely within the corpus of Hāfez’s multilingual reception: textological variations, organization of poems, commentaries, and previous translations. The term “outwork” here refers to the Persian editions, Turkish commentary and European translations of Hāfez. Although Shafi‘i views English as culturally distant, English now has a history of scholarly and translational engagement with Hāfez’s poetry that dates back to the writings of Sir William Jones in the mid-eighteenth century. As *Aghānī Shīrāz* shows, no translator of Hāfez today, in any language, can ignore the wealth of scholarship and translation that exists on his poetry in English. It is worth repeating that translation is not the only form of engagement with other literary cultures. In fact, al-Shawāribī’s reading and translations of Hāfez are mediated by the multilingual and transnational

⁵⁹Otnes, *Other-Wise: Alterity, Materiality, Mediation*, 38.

corpus of critical editions, commentary, and translation that he had researched to read and include in *Aghānī Shīrāz*.

The following is al-Shawāribī's translation of Hāfez:

wa shaykhī 'ārif yadrī rusūm ad-dāri, fat-tabī 'ni
*wa khudh sajjādat at-taqwā bimā' al-karmi, faghsilhā.*⁶⁰

My word-by-word translation:

My shaykh is knowledgeable, knowing the rules of (each) stage, follow me!
 and take the rug of piety and dye it with wine [water of vine].

Al-Shawāribī has opted not to introduce the Hāfezian concepts of *pīr-e moghān* and *sālek* into his Arabic translation, as evidenced by his choice of *shaykhī* and the omission of *sālek* (wayfarer). What is particularly curious is that in the prose translation of the same *beyt*, which appears under the versified translation, the translator has retained all the concepts unique to Hāfez's Persian poetry, particularly *shaykh al-majūs* or the magian shaykh. There is even an Arabic footnote that further foregrounds the idea of *pīr-e moghan*. In the versified translation, al-Shawāribī has rendered *rangin kon* or "make colorful" as *faghsilhā* or "wash it," which animates the religious connotations of *ghusl*, the ritual of ablution. The association of *faghsilhā* and *sajjādah* (prayer-rug) invites the reader to interpret the *beyt* as a call to suspend a certain religious rite or custom. However, in the prose translation, al-Shawāribī retains Hāfez's unique imagery: *falawwin as-sajjādah bil-khamri* (color the prayer-rug with wine). *Sajjādah* in the prose translation is placed in quotation marks lest the reader miss the connection between prayer rug and wine, and in the versified *beyt*, the term *taqwā* or piety functions as a form of emphasis. And if the translation itself does not provide the reader with clear interpretive guidelines, the *ghazal* is followed by extensive commentary in Arabic.

In both translations, al-Shawāribī adopts different interpretive tools to guide the reader toward a mystical reading of the *beyt*, one also favored by Shafī'i. He has perceived the prose translation as a format that affords him more freedom to bring the imagery and concepts of Hāfez's Persian poetry into Arabic. But in the versified version, these elements are rather domesticated, internalized within the world of classical Arabic poetry. To return to the question of proximity and distance, one may ask: has the Persian *beyt* afforded the Arabic translator "access" due to Persian-Arabic cultural proximity? As evident in al-Shawāribī's translation choices, any question of absolute access must be displaced by critical examinations that consider different forms of mediation embedded in the reading of any given text. Shafī'i implies that translating Hāfez into Arabic would render non-fundamental any differences there may exist between Persian and Arabic poetry due to the similarity of these literary traditions. If that were the case, would al-Shawāribī have used so many interpretive tools to guide Arabic-language readers toward an understanding of Hāfez's central metaphor?

⁶⁰Hāfez, *Aghānī Shīrāz*, 1–4.

In fact, I argue that al-Shawāribī demonstrates the same level of linguistic labor as the English-language translators of Hāfez in his efforts to articulate Hāfez's poetic idiolect. The broader methodological implication here directly concerns linguistic and cultural difference, an often taken-for-granted rubric.

What is particularly curious about *Aghānī Shīrāz*, published in 1944, is the publisher and translator's claim that this is the first direct Arabic translation from Hāfez's Persian.⁶¹ In his brief preface, Tāhā Husayn praised the translation projects undertaken by the professors and students of the Faculty of Literature at Cairo University (or Fu'ad al-Awwal as it was first called).⁶² Then, he directly addressed skeptics who question the necessity of literary translations into Arabic. Husayn then invited readers to learn from other literary cultures and their history and insisted that translating Hāfez's *Divān*, Ferdowsi's *Shāhnāmeḥ*, and works from other foreign literatures (*al-ādāb al-'ajnabīya*), only adds to the wealth of "our own Arabic literature" (*'adabnā al-'arabī*).⁶³ In the twentieth century, the impetus to begin translating Hāfez into Arabic was informed by the rise of literature as a discourse of nation-building, as embodied by the growth of literary institutions such as Cairo University's Faculty of Literature. In this vein, it is irrelevant whether *Aghānī Shīrāz* is in fact the first direct translation from Persian, the claim evinces changing cultural dynamics between Arabic and Persian literary traditions and undermines Shafi'i's framework, within which Persian and Arabic are locked in a transhistorical similarity.⁶⁴

The translator, the text, and the context are never random. al-Shawāribī was a student of 'Abd al-Wahhāb 'Azzām (d. 1959), an influential Egyptian scholar and translator. Al-Shawāribī studied Persian and Turkish in cities like London in 1933, where he also briefly studied with E. G. Browne (d. 1926), the eminent British Iranologist and one of the pioneers of Persian literary history as a new model of historiographical production.⁶⁵ Among his publications, al-Shawāribī translated into Arabic Browne's *A Literary History of Persia: From Firdawsi to Sa'di*. But why did Hāfez have to wait more than five hundred years to find an Arabic translator? One possible answer is that the premodern milieu in which Hāfez's poetry was circulated and read were decidedly multilingual. The *Catalogue of the Persian, Turkish, Hindūstānī, and Pushtū Manuscripts in the Bodleian Library* lists an Arabic-language commentary on Hāfez.⁶⁶ There are many such understudied commentaries in Arabic, Ottoman

⁶¹The cover reads *tarjamahā li-awwal marrāh min aṣṣūl al-Fārisī* (translation from the original Persian for the first time).

⁶²In his preface, Tāhā Husayn also mentions Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* and works from ancient Greek and contemporary European literature. Hāfez, *Aghānī Shīrāz*, 2.

⁶³*Ibid.*, 1–2.

⁶⁴As far as I was able to verify, al-Shawāribī is the first and only Arabic translator to have translated Hāfez's collected works from the Persian. His other translated volume from Hāfez is *Hāfez al-Shīrāzī: shā'ir al-ghinā' wa-al-ghazal fī Irān* (Cairo, 1944, republished in Beirut in 1989).

⁶⁵Jabbari, "Making of Modernity."

⁶⁶Sachau, Hermann & Bodleian Library. *Catalogue*. Cat. # 1988 [Ms. Arab. d. 12]. For an analysis of a Ottoman Turkish-language commentary on Hāfez, see Selim, Kuru and Inan, "Reintroducing Hafez to Readers in Rum: Sudi's Introduction to His Commentary on Hafez's Poetry Collection." For a critical

Turkish, and other languages. In the premodern world, translation competed with other forms of interpretation and rewriting, like commentary.

In the twentieth century, the monolingual ethos of romantic nationalism asserted itself as literary institutions like Cairo University set out to forge an Arabic literary canon in relation to other national literary canons such as Persian.⁶⁷ In that context, Husayn and al-Shawāribī were eager to introduce Hāfez to an emerging Arabic reading public not because he was all too familiar, but mainly because the concept of literature required making a repository of works from other (read different) literary traditions. The institutional settings and modes of reading through which Hāfez was read and commented on for decades in Arabic-speaking lands had not shifted to print capitalism and nation-state politics which required a different form of radical rewriting to bolster its ethos: translation. Arabic and Persian had now entered the age of literature. The larger methodological point here is that the historic interplay of Arabic and Persian has always been mediated by different factors. The idea of unmediated cultural proximity between Arabic and Persian, predicated on undefined rubrics of proximity and distance, is as mythical as it is enchanting.

Shafi 'i's Rhetoric of Poetic Untranslatability

In addition to being a distinguished scholar of Persian literature, Shafi 'i is also a leading modernist poet (pen name: M. Sereshk). This final section asks: what function does the idea of poetic untranslatability serve for Shafi 'i as a poet? He has also been a major theorist of poetic modernism in Persian.⁶⁸ He views poetic modernism as a literary byproduct of engagement with European poetry. For Shafi 'i, modern Persian poetry maintains more cultural proximity to European poetic norms than it does to the Persian classical canon.⁶⁹ He writes:

Even the most inept and talentless translator will be able to undertake the translation of the majority of “poems” published in Tehran’s literary journals today; the translation will probably either approximate the original or read even more beautifully than the original. However, the poetry of Sa‘di and Hāfez, our classics, or a contemporary poet such as Mahdi Akhavān-Sāles requires a creative and gifted translator, otherwise their poems will appear as uninspiring and mediocre. It will be the equivalent of reducing the Shaykh Lotfollah Mosque to bricks and tiles and trusting that an average bricklayer will reassemble them together—obviously the

examination of another work of Persian literature —Sa‘di’s *Golestān*— within this multilingual context, see Rastegar, “The Gulistan: Sublimity and the Colonial Credo of Translatability.”

⁶⁷See Allan, *Shadow of World Literature*.

⁶⁸See his collected essays on poetic modernism, Shafi 'i-Kadkani, *Bā cheraḡh va āyeneh*.

⁶⁹In *Zamīneh-yi ejtemā'ī-ye she'ir-e fārsi* [The social context of Persian poetry], he writes: “Critiquing our modern literary works [based on Western theory] is easier for these works resemble Western works. One can match the ideas of Western critics on their own literature with these [modern Iranian] works.” See the chapter “Anva‘ adabi va sh‘ir-i fārsi,” 11.

outcome will be laughable! The task is quite different from the transference of a slipshod house to another place while not damaging its original worth (since moving it may even increase its worth).⁷⁰

In this vein, poetic translatability for Shafi‘i serves as a yardstick to model good poetry by negation: if a poem moves into another language with ease, then it means that it is not as anchored in the source culture as is the poetry of Hāfez or the architecture of the Shaykh Lotfollah Mosque. In other words, only “true” poets compose the untranslatable. Shafi‘i’s own modern poetry is itself marked by many allusions to the canon of classical Persian poetry. His rhetoric of poetic untranslatability crystallizes his ongoing anxiety as a poet-scholar to critically outline the ways in which late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Persian poetry appropriated from the world of European poetry on the one hand and recast the conventions of the Persian classical canon on the other.⁷¹ The broader problem here is that the boundaries of producing scholarly analysis and writing poetry are far less stable in Iran than they are in North American academia. For that reason, it is hard to methodologically distinguish Shafi‘i the modernist poet from Shafi‘i the scholar of Persian literature.

For Shafi‘i, as both scholar and poet, Hāfez stands as the prime example of poetic untranslatability. The number of poets, musicians, and exegetes who have composed their work inspired by and in response to Hāfez’s oeuvre is staggering. That is to say that the literary merits and historical influence of Hāfez are not in question. That said, in the early part of the twentieth century, as part of the early Pahlavi dynasty’s efforts to institutionalize Persian literature as the most salient feature of a rising nation-state, Hāfez was framed as a prophet-like figure who embodies the essence and taste of the Iranian nation.⁷² The efforts to enshrine Hāfez as a national poet did not take place only in writing. In 1935, ‘Ali Asghar Hekmat, the first president of the University of Tehran and a pioneer of educational reform, supervised the construction of a new monument at the site of Hāfez’s tomb in Shiraz, which now operates as a site of national memory.⁷³ The nation in early Pahlavi Iran sought to differentiate itself on the basis of not only territory, but also linguistic and cultural identity. The reception of Hāfez in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries cannot be divorced from those transformational efforts.

⁷⁰Shafi‘i-Kadkani, “Dar tarjomeh nāpaziri-ye she‘r,” *Bokhārā*, 85–6

⁷¹Karimi-Hakkak, *Recasting Persian Poetry*.

⁷²See Ferdowsi, “Emblem of the Manifestation of the Iranian Spirit.” Ferdowsi examines the genealogy of the prevalent modern assertion that Hāfez embodies the essence and taste of the Iranian nation.

⁷³The new monument at Hāfeziyeh was designed by André Godard, ‘Ali Riazi, and ‘Ali Sami. Godard is the same architect who later designed the campus of the University of Tehran. Carried out by the Society for National Monuments, embellished monuments were simultaneously erected at the tombs of many other poets and scholars in Iran. The 1930s witnessed the foundation of a number of highly consequential institutions of literature that appropriated and monumentalized Persian as Iran’s national literary and cultural heritage. These institutions include University of Tehran’s Faculty of Literature and Human Sciences, the Academy of Persian Language and Literature, and the National Library of Iran. See Grigor, *Building Iran*; Marashi, “Imagining Hāfez.”; Fani, “Becoming Literature.”

Shafi‘i is an emeritus professor at the University of Tehran’s Faculty of Letters. He studied with pioneers of university education in Iran who created Persian literature as an academic discipline in the late 1930s and 1940s.⁷⁴ Shafi‘i’s rhetoric of untranslatability is a litmus test for the extent to which the “national spirit” and its enshrined texts and monuments are taken for granted within the most elite circles of Iranian academia today.⁷⁵ In this vein, Shafi‘i ventriloquizes the dominant politics and poetics of canon formation in contemporary Iran. If the field of world literature is to resist “nationally and ethnically branded ‘differences,’” in the words of Apter, then it must continue to critically analyze the historical processes through which literary traditions are mythologized within national institutions.⁷⁶ In order to do so, it should carefully dissect the rhetoric of untranslatability and go well beyond its confining framework.

Conclusion: Beyond Untranslatability

Whether done in the name of cultural recognition or cultural chauvinism, the notion of untranslatability carries with itself a set of problematic assumptions about linguistic and cultural difference outlined in this article. It especially places unnecessary restrictions on the types of questions we may ask when discussing less commonly translated literary traditions like Arabic and Persian. In “Is Arabic Untranslatable?,” Robyn Creswell argues that the impulse to translate any text involves a difficult-to-distinguish combination of poetics and politics. He unpacks a set of factors that informs a translator’s decision to even approach a text and afford it “initiative trust,” the latter borrowed from George Steiner.⁷⁷ Creswell observes that any Arabic translator’s decision to undertake translation is directly informed by “the estrangement of English and Arabic [as] a brute historical fact.”⁷⁸ In other words, he asks us to pay critical attention not only to the Arabic literary text, but also to the cultural context into which it is being translated. For those reasons, Creswell views untranslatability as a “false problem.”⁷⁹ Albeit indirectly, Shafi‘i raises a similar point in “On Poetic Untranslatability.”

Given his argument that English is fundamentally different from Persian, it is unexpected that Shafi‘i alludes to Edward Fitzgerald (d. 1883) and Coleman Barks (b. 1937) as “successful translators” in the same essay.⁸⁰ Both translators are widely cred-

⁷⁴This generation includes Mohammad Taqi Bahār, Jalāl ol-Din Homā‘i, Qāri ‘Abdollah, ‘Abdol Haqq Bitāb, Lotf ‘Ali Suratgar, Mohammad Mo‘in, and others. See Fani, “Becoming Literature.”

⁷⁵Shafi‘i’s sentiments regarding Hāfēz are echoed both by his predecessors and contemporaries. Among these figures are ‘Abdol Hosayn Hazhir, ‘Ali Asghar Hekmat, ‘Abdol Rahim Khalkhāli, Seyyed Hasan Taqizādeh, Mohammad Qazvini, Ahmad Shāmlu, and Dariush Shayegan. For instance, see Shayegan, *Panj eq̄lim-e hozur*.

⁷⁶Apter, *Against World Literature*, 2.

⁷⁷Creswell, “Is Arabic Untranslatable?”; Steiner, *After Babel*, 311.

⁷⁸Creswell, “Is Arabic Untranslatable?” 453.

⁷⁹Ibid., 449.

⁸⁰Shafi‘i-Kadkani, “Dar tarjomeh nāpaziri-ye she‘r,” *Bokhārā*, 87.

ited for popularizing the poetry of, respectively, ‘Omar Khayyām and Rumi in English-speaking countries. When discussing the state of modern Persian poetry in English translation, Shafi‘i bemoans that there are very few books out there, most of which are consumed only in Area Studies. In this seemingly contradictory assessment, Shafi‘i is able to acknowledge that, with a few exceptions, Persian literature remains unknown to audiences in Anglophone North America and Europe. He mentions their success not because they dissolved what Shafi‘i perceives as fundamental differences between Persian and English, but because they managed to capture the imagination of English-language readers in spite of them.

The field of translation studies has had a radically different assessment of Edward Fitzgerald.⁸¹ He is widely framed as an anti-translator, turned into an archetype and maligned for his imperialist attitude toward Persian literature. For instance, Willis Barnstone writes, “old and modern Edward Fitzgeralds look imperiously on a source text as a specimen of inferior culture, a pretext not a text, in need of improvement to enter the dignity of the English language.”⁸² Susan Bassnett criticizes Fitzgerald’s “patronizing attitude” and “form of elitism.”⁸³ Chana Kronfeld calls Fitzgerald’s *Rubā‘iyyāt* “infamously colonial.”⁸⁴ The basis of this assessment is not a bilingual analysis of Fitzgerald’s translations of the *Rubā‘iyyāt* (1858), but solely based on Fitzgerald’s correspondence with Edward Cowell wherein he proclaims to have taken “what liberties I like with these Persians.”⁸⁵

There is a mismatch between how scholars of translation studies have framed Fitzgerald and what Shafi‘i regards in him. What does Shafi‘i see that they don’t? Fitzgerald’s imperious attitude notwithstanding, his translations, which reflect the dominant poetics of his time, have introduced millions of readers—well beyond English—to Persian poetry, helping to bring about what Steiner calls “the radical generosity of the translator.”⁸⁶ It is clear that Shafi‘i appreciates how Fitzgerald and, in our time, Coleman Barks have made Persian more relatable by producing translations that are widely read beyond scholarly circles.⁸⁷ In addition to posing as transhistorical and universal, the notion of untranslatability, as utilized by Apter, is indifferent to

⁸¹Coleman Barks has not fared much better in terms of receiving a critical assessment from scholars of translation studies and cultural critics. For instance, see Azadibougar and Patton, “Coleman Barks’ Versions of Rumi in the USA”; Ali, “The Erasure of Islam from the Poetry of Rumi”; Thornton, “Rumi for the New-Age Soul.”

⁸²Barnstone, *Poetics of Translation*, 12.

⁸³Bassnett, *Translation Studies*, 76.

⁸⁴Kronfeld, *Full Severity of Compassion*, 176

⁸⁵Fitzgerald, “Letter to E. B. Cowell.” For a very different assessment of Fitzgerald’s translations, see Taher-Kermani, “FitzGerald’s Anglo-Persian *Rubā‘iyyāt*.” Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak reexamines the translations of Sir William Jones and Coleman Barks in a similar vein and concludes that “Contrary to widespread impression that literal translation means close translation, translators who go beyond lexical equivalence at times achieve proximity with their original texts, they also stand a better chance of attracting attention among general readers of poetry.” Karimi-Hakkak, “Beyond Translation,” 36.

⁸⁶Steiner, *After Babel*, 311.

⁸⁷Laetitia Nanquette argues against the vague rubrics of “foreignization” and “domestication” as translation strategies used by Lawrence Venuti and calls on translators to make Persian language novels more

the distinct histories of translation and ironically the unequal power dynamics that inform them.

This article outlined the unchecked and problematic assumptions embedded within the concept of untranslatability as a rubric; it did not necessarily offer an alternative framework for the examination of cultural and linguistic difference in works of translation. And perhaps there does not need to be a single alternative. First, we need to raise a critical awareness of the fact that untranslatability is part of a conceptual vocabulary that has lingered on since the rise of romantic nationalism. The monolingual ethos of romantic nationalism—the idea of one country, one language—has assigned to translation the task of reifying and policing linguistic boundaries ever more aggressively. In that vein, untranslatability will best serve as a historiographical fixture that can help us draw the contours of a translation culture rooted in the age of nationalism and print capitalism as the field of translation studies grapples with the most productive ways to move beyond it.⁸⁸

Defying any framing of translation as a standalone act, this article argues that translation must be understood as one form of radical rewriting amongst others.⁸⁹ In the case of Hāfēz, those forms of rewriting include not just translations of his verse but also approaches to reading, enjoying, scanning, anthologizing, disseminating, (re)arranging, quoting, parodying, putting to song, making allusions to, making critical editions of, commenting on, and welcoming his Divān or collected poems.⁹⁰ These forms of rewriting collectively form part of the never-ending practices of commentary that mark the Judeo-Islamic culture of translation. Hāfēz will continue to be translated and his future translators will inevitably recast his reception and rub shoulders with past rewriters in Persian, English, Arabic, and beyond. Ultimately, what is at stake for my analysis here goes well beyond the poetry of Hāfēz and even the

readable for American and European readers. Nanquette, “Translations of Modern Persian Literature,” 44.

⁸⁸*Early Modern Cultures of Translation* convincingly shows that our normative understanding of translation and its cultural role was built upon an ahistorical and inaccurate reading of the Renaissance movement. This edited volume characterizes the milieu in which early modern culture of translation developed as distinctly multilingual and collaborative. The “current preoccupations with fidelity, accuracy, authorship, and proprietary rights were alien to this moment [pre-modern] formative for the production of the vernaculars in which we speak and write today.” Tylus and Newman, *Early Modern Cultures of Translation*, 2. Also see Louie, “Repatriating Romance.”

⁸⁹For a similar argument, see Venuti, *Contra Instrumentalism*. In it, Venuti offers an alternative model of translation that finds a particularly clear definition in this passage: “This model, defining translation as an interpretive act that varies the source text, generates the concept of mediation, namely, that the linguistic and cultural differences constituting that text are not immediately accessible in a translation but always reworked to be comprehended and affective in the translating culture” (8).

⁹⁰For instance, Abbas Kiarostami has produced a collection of standalone hemistichs by Hāfēz with the objective of shifting the readers’ attention away from the melodic quality of the poems and toward their imagery. Hivā Masih’s own selection of poems by Hāfēz argues that for such an effort to succeed, the poems will have to be correctly scanned based on their ‘*aruzi*’ meter, see Masih, *Sad ghazal-e enteḡādi-ye Hāfēz*. Both works represent never-ending rewritings of Hāfēz within the Persian literary tradition. Kiarostami, *Hāfēz beh Revāyat-e ‘Abbās Kiyārostami*. For a survey of some disagreements among Hāfēz scholars and commentators, see Hillmann, “Translatability of Hāfīzian Love Ghazals.”

Persian literary tradition that he represents: reading poetry is not only a function of scholarly imagination but also of empathy. By reading a poem, readers often place themselves in a world of aesthetic and cultural difference. To expand our imaginary and empathic range, it is vital to remember that experiencing aesthetic and cultural difference happens regularly when reading in one's native language just as it does when reading works of literature in languages that have been flagged as fundamentally different from our own.

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Appendix

On Poetic Untranslatability.

By Mohammad Rezā Shafi'i-Kadkani

Translated from the Persian by Aria Fani

Al-Jāhiz (d. 868) is the first in our own culture to argue that the translation of poetry is impossible. In *al-Hayawān*, he writes

Poetry [*shi'r*] cannot be translated; it cannot be transferred from one language into another. Translation breaks its metrical arrangements [*nāzim*] and spoils the rhythm [*wazn*], ruins its aesthetics [*hūsn*], and flattens the element of wonder [*mawḍi' al-ta'ajjub*]. Translation turns poetry into prose, and prose originally written as such is preferred over what has been turned into prose as a result of translating verse

I do not know whether or not his predecessors have argued along similar lines in the classical world [*donyā-e qadim*]. Among Muslim thinkers certainly no one has theorized poetic untranslatability as explicitly and insightfully as al-Jāhiz. The only figure who has put forth a similar theory is al-Zamakhshari (d. 1144), the leading Qur'anic commentator and the author of *Al-Kashshāf*. Al-Zamakhshari criticized Abu Hanifa, the distinguished jurist (d. 772), who had approved of reciting Qur'anic verses in Persian translation during prayer. Translation, al-Zamakhshari argued, destroys the style of the Qur'an and its aesthetic form and structure. The translation ceases being the Qur'an.

Even today, as the tree of translation theory has borne various fruits within different cultural traditions, one would be hard pressed to find anything on the discourse [of poetic translatability] beyond the essence of al-Jāhiz's idea. Perhaps the last figure to add to this discourse in the twentieth century was Seamus Heaney (d. 2013). In an interview in October 1995, he said "Poets belong to the language, not to the world." In the long period between al-Jāhiz and Seamus Heaney, many have deemed poetry untranslatable while others have even defined poetry as something that cannot be translated, as Robert Frost's (d. 1963) oft-quoted epigram goes: "poetry is what is lost in translation; it is also what is lost in interpretation."

I have previously examined al-Jāhiz's views on translation, but here I wish to use a simple point, or an allegory if you will, to complete and revise al-Jāhiz's theory. If we accept that poetry is a verbal art, or verbal architecture, then [literary] translation is similar to moving an architectural monument from one place to another. To move this entire monument with a crane would be like reciting the Robā'iyāt of 'Omar Khayyām to a French audience in the source language, which is not an act of translation. An architectural structure has simply been moved from one locale to another. You may say in haste, "how delightful, now the French will get to see it as well." But linguistic architecture, which is poetry, is unseeable. This type of architecture requires a different set of eyes which are embodied in parts of speech, music, semantics, the rhetoric of syntactic structure [*belāghat-e sākhṭārḥā-ye nahvi*], and allusions [*kenāyāt*]. In order to render this architecture visible, we must transform it into French words, as if to move piece by piece its pieces, bricks, doors, windows, and tiles. If we are dismantling an ordinary house to facilitate its transference (and reassembly), then any average bricklayer or construction worker (with minimal changes to the aesthetics of the house) will be able to reconstruct it in a new place. It is even possible for its parts to take on a more pleasant appearance in the new place.

What if we are talking about Esfahān's Shaykh Lotfollah Mosque, an architectural masterpiece? Moving its parts to another place may be an easy task, but rebuilding it altogether is beyond the average construction worker. Such a task will necessarily require engineers and architects of the same stature as the monument's original architects. The translator of a poem is essentially its secondary architect. If the translator chooses an average work, it is likely that the poem's form and shape will seem even more beautiful in its new place (the target language) than they did in its source context. But if said poem is of artistic import, no average translator (or bricklayer) will be able to accomplish the task.

Even the most inept and talentless translator will be able to undertake the translation of the majority of “poems” published in Tehran’s literary journals today; the translation will probably either approximate the original or read even more beautifully than the original. However, the poetry of Sa‘di and Hāfez, our classics, or a contemporary poet such as Mahdi Akhavān-Sāles requires a creative and gifted translator, otherwise their poems will appear as uninspiring and mediocre. It will be the equivalent of reducing the Shaykh Lotfollah Mosque to bricks and tiles and trusting that an average bricklayer will reassemble them together—obviously the outcome will be laughable! The task is quite different from the transference of a slipshod house to another place while not damaging its original worth (since moving it may even increase its worth).

The task of translation is precisely the act of destroying a monument and transferring its constitutive materials to another locale; the task of the translator whose credibility relies on linguistic proficiency is to pick up and move these components. In this context, the translator’s physical strength (or the crane at their disposal) is their familiarity with grammar and lexicon. Having a stronger command of language is akin to being stronger. But when it comes to rebuilding the new monument, strength will not suffice. The translator’s physical strength (or crane) is indispensable in transferring the bricks, stones and tiles, the next stage requires different types of strength: creativity, artistic vision, and a knack for summoning words. A creative architect must be able to rearrange the transferred materials with both artistic vision and semantic harmony.

If in this process, a brick or tile breaks beyond repair (i.e. a metaphor or allusion unique to the source language proves untranslatable, similar to Hāfez’s *rend* and *pir-e moghān*), the secondary architect must use their creativity to compensate for the broken tile by seeking an alternative metaphor or allusion in the target language. The easiest source component to incorporate into the new [reassembled] monument are windows (i.e. use of imagery). The windows easily fit the new structure, but is it all that simple? Where do we place them? Onto what landscape will the windows open? A blue sky? A mountain range to the east or a garden of cypress trees? We can place the windows anywhere we please, but we have no control over the landscape that they will overlook. The landscape may be confining, overcast, and depressing. In this case, an architect-translator’s creativity will not make much of a difference.

Translating from French to German is easier than translating from French to Arabic or from Persian to English. European languages have a shared cultural background; the windows will open onto similar horizons. But to move Hāfez’s imagery into English or French would be to open the windows of the Shaykh Lotfollah Mosque onto London’s overcast and foggy ambiance rather than Esfahān’s blue and heavenly skies. We haven’t even gone past the simple problem of installing the windows, the most easily transferable component of this monument. Then, we will get to moving the tiles; embedded in each tile is an expression, reference, or piece of wisdom from Islamic theology, itself rooted in the theological labyrinth of Manichaeism and Zoroastrianism. The translator now has quite a mountain to climb! How will a foreigner decode this knowledge? Let us assume that they did, how much of its meaning will they grasp? We will also assume that they did understand

its surface meaning—how will they discern its vastly profound field of knowledge within which it lies? In place of a tile, we must imagine all the references, allusions and codes of classical Persian poetry.

The so-called poems published in Iran's periodicals can be translated by any translator since they are themselves childish half-translations of western poetry. The [translation of these] poems will not lack anything from the Persian original since they are in a way returning to their European origins. Such poems may even conjure up a certain pleasantness for western readers, meaning they may turn out better than the Persian original. But even if that were to happen, western readers have before their eyes more quality versions of such poems in their own press every day. For this reason, such poems do not capture the imagination of westerners, meaning it would be impossible for them to pay any amount of attention to them. Given the absence of creative translators and skilled architects, Europeans and Americans have not shown any interest in translating contemporary Persian poetry (e.g. Shāmlu, Nimā, Akhavān, etc.). The majority of these translations—which are quite limited—that go through a thousand or five hundred prints may be useful for Iranians who live abroad or students of Near Eastern Studies, but the millions of poetry readers in European languages have not paid an iota of attention to them. If you take a look at the bibliography [section] of translation review journals, you will see that there is nothing.

At Harvard, I devoted a few classes just to communicate the meaning of a single *beyt*:

beh may sajjādeh rangin kon garat pir-e moghān guyad
keh sālek bikhabar nabvad z-e rāh-o-rasm-e manzelhā.

[word-by-word translation not in the original essay]:

[with wine prayer-rug make colorful if the magian pir asks you
for the sālik unaware should not be of the way of stages].

I am certain that my audience at Harvard hardly understood the *beyt*'s meaning. One who does not understand the distinction between Iranian and western cultures might naively conclude that *may* in English is “wine” and *sajjādeh* is “prayer rug,” and this is how they will approach the other concepts in the *beyt* as well: *sajjādeh rangin kardan*, *pir-e moghān*, *sālek*, *rāh-o-rasm-e manzelhā*.

To demonstrate just how challenging the task of the translator is, I will briefly examine only one part of the *beyt*: *beh may sajjādeh rangin kardan* (making your prayer rug colorful with wine). First, the western reader must know the importance of such religious concepts as *najes* (impure) and *tāher* (pure) in Irano-Islamic culture. Westerners have no clue what constitutes *najes* or *tāher* for they deem whatever is free of dirt or germs “clean,” but cleanliness for us has a religiously sanctioned meaning which is hard for a westerner to grasp. It takes a long discussion to explain it! A westerner washes their dog in their own bathtub and dries it with their own towel while we would go through such trouble to purify ourselves even if a drop of water from a dog were to get on our body. Once they understand these concepts, more or

less as Muslims do, we still have to explain how wine is impure and if it sprays on clothes or a place of prayer, it needs to be washed away. Cemented within the long history of Christianity, wine symbolizes the blood of Christ and is deemed sacred for westerners. How could this sacred wine be considered impure? I will not even delve into the concept of the prayer rug for it requires too much preliminary knowledge. Let us not even bother with the paradoxical articulation of a poet [Hāfez] who asks his Muslim fellows to dye their prayer rug or, essentially, suspend their Islamic rites and rituals in order to reach a mystical and genuine level of Muslim religiosity.

How intricate is this expression alone: *dye your prayer rug with wine!* It evokes the association of Persian carpets with the color of wine in Persian poetry while “wine,” “prayer rug,” and “dye” in English do not evoke such imagery. Can we really translate *beh may sajjādeh rangin kon* as “dye (or color or tint) the prayer rug with wine?” There will hardly be anything in the world more pathetic than that! A clever and creative architect will give up on transferring all the components of Hāfez’s “edifice” to a foreign environment. If obligated [to translate it] for some reason, they would pick simple and transferable components according to their taste, crafting the design with those selected components. From Edward Fitzgerald to Coleman Barks, most successful translators have done just that. A reader competently proficient in English and with a strong command of Persian (one who can also recite *Divān-e Shams* and the *Robā’iyāt* of ‘Omar Khayyām by heart), will be able to tell, with some labor, to what *beyt* of Rumi or what hemistich of Khayyām any given translated line corresponds, and identify the rest as literary license taken by the translator.

Elsewhere, I have written about the cultural context of particular words in different languages and I will not rehash it here. Suffice it to say that even “water,” “fire,” “soil,” and “wind”—classical elements—possess sensory and material information. In different languages, these concepts have very different cultural connotations, now just imagine [the uniqueness] of terms with a cultural and emotional index.

For argument’s sake, let us say that we informed the western reader (one who has also taken the right preliminary steps) of the meanings of *may* (wine), *sajjādeh* (prayer rug), and *rangin kardan* (making colorful), there are still many other missing links that stand between the reader and the aesthetic gratification which is derived from an automatic understanding of these expressions. If the reader has not learned [the meaning of] *pir-e moghān* and *sālek* according to their mystical cultural teachings, they will not understand that in the *solūk* [the spiritual path a Sufi wayfarer follows], a *pir*’s station is such that even he if were to order one to suspend their adherence to *shari‘a*, one must unconditionally obey him for he knows “the way” of “higher stages.” Such an understanding takes many lifetimes of preparation and cultural familiarity.

Once more, we will overlook these challenges, and we will provide the western reader with all this information. The nature of knowing entails a process. There is a difference between attempting to recall a stored piece of information about Hercules or Siyāvash and having their characteristics reside in your subconscious. True aesthetic gratification is derived from both the conscious and the subconscious. When we enjoy a musical composition, a poem, or a painting, it is not just our conscious mind that is active, but rather it is the subconscious mind that works most laboriously. Siyāvash,

Rostam, and al-Ḥallāj reside in the subconscious of Iranians. But if an Iranian reader comes across a footnote about Hercules in a western poem, that information will not be as potent in [driving] aesthetic gratification as is knowledge of Siyāvash and Rostam in Persian poetry. The same is true for a western reader who encounters a footnote about Siyāvash or al-Ḥallāj [in a translated poem]. They may work hard to recall such references, but their subconscious will not play an active role in [shaping] the experience, and will be deprived of aesthetic gratification. These challenges provide obstacles for the enjoyment of all but one *beyt* of Hāfez; now imagine just how much preparation needs to go into reading his entire Divān.⁹¹

⁹¹“Dar tarjomeh nāpaziri-ye she‘r,” *Bokhārā*.