

Roger Sedarat

adjacent pineapple one

Elemental Translation

(Performative Renderings in Theory and Praxis)—Excerpt of Water

“Poetry is a performance, not a record of a performance.”

--Robert Lowell

Prelude for the Performance of a Postmodern Translation

“Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchers of
the fathers.”

--Ralph Waldo Emerson

From my tradition of Persian literature, new renderings allow readers to access the verse of Rumi and Hafez in their own contemporary English. The idea of retrospectively channeling the earlier and excessively florid Victorian translations seems dated and unnecessary, much like trying to re-translate the King James Bible in our time.

The rose itself, however, as primal symbol in such Sufi poetry, remains representatively sacrosanct, both as “گل سرخ” and “rose.” This long after Gertrude Stein’s definitively modern sentence, “A rose is a rose is a rose...” so aptly demonstrated the loss of power following such

clichéd figural redundancies. This too in our current age of the hyperreal, wherein the technological simulation of nature can appear more natural than the “real thing.”

This project posits a radical interpretative aesthetic to reclaim the source text by going even closer to the source, beyond the writing and back to the essential subject that language first sought to capture. Such a return attempts to “de-code” the contemporary technological sepulchers as well as the literature that precedes it. Far from a manifesto for all writers and translators to abandon their traditional work, the following examples of “living texts” derived from a survey of well-known world literatures dramatizes the possibility of reclaiming an essential trans-lingual experience of the poem.

Of course all translation resists a unifying theory, insofar as source and target texts remain contingent of individual linguistic and cultural signifiers. To experience a real frog jumping into actual water as depicted in Bashō’s famous haiku will still be understood differently by disparate audiences. Nevertheless, humans tend to share a similar sensory exploration, living ultimately in one world, despite their seemingly infinite differences.

To this end, this collection focuses upon reducing all primary texts to the four elements of water, air, earth, and fire. “Elemental” renderings de-create/de-figure the subject of nature by erasing discursive limitations placed upon it. Paradoxically, of course, it becomes impossible to explain such a process without reverting to more text. Just as Emerson ultimately had to record his spiritual transformation into a transparent eyeball while standing in Boston Common, the actual live performances upon which this book has been based must get recollected on the page. A few videos on Youtube depict their first staging, yet here too this project reproduces the original problem it seeks to overcome, this time re-inscribing nature into the world of the

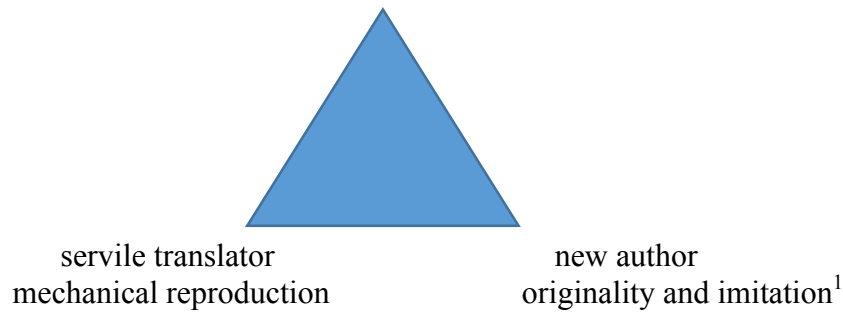
Internet. Instead of debunking the intentions of the poetics and translation of the real, it all the more confirms the necessity of such an endeavor.

This approach must to a certain extent involve tracking of the translator/performer's subjective experience of these renderings. Much debate as to how invisible the translator should remain has taken place in the field of translation, and it will no doubt continue. Dramatically foregrounding the hand of the translator in Brechtian honesty proves necessary for this kind of interpretation. If it unsettles the reader and even embarrasses or shames the interpreter, so much the better. Exposing personal breakthroughs and frustrating blocks in arguably the most reductive of translations ever taken proves well worth the risk.

Though much more a survey of practical translation performances, at times this collection references some theory and criticism to better contextualize the process. Walter Benjamin's ever perplexing "Task of the Translator" underpins each of the elemental interpretative renderings. His metaphorical conception of the original text dying then undergoing "afterlife" in translation positions the process of carrying over style and meaning in the Platonic if not the spiritual/religious realm.

Students of translation studies rhetoric will typically find analysis of the target texts along a spectrum from strict equivalence to creative interpretation, both related back to the source text of origin. Willis Barnstone aptly represents the three key points as a triangle:

source author
originality



In addition to typical horizontal to vertical relations of process, *Elemental Translation: Performative Renderings in Theory and Praxis* attempts a trans-lingual transcendence toward the final literal source above the literary one. While such idealized intentions must of course fail, such a radical interrogation offers a new and creative way to think about the literature we write and translate.

In translating, as in parody, critical and creative activity converge. The fullest reading of a poem gets realized moment by moment in the writing of a poem. So translation presents not merely a paradigm, but the utmost case of engaged literary interpretation.

--John Felstiner

WATER

I.

[Insert picture of communion cups covered with lines of Rumi text—forthcoming]

Musicians (drummer and *nai* player) on stage as volunteer pours water in cups covered from the outside with Rumi poem, so readers experience the immersion of text by his beloved teacher,

¹ Barnstone, Willis. *The Poetics of Translation: History, Theory, Practice*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1995, 94

Shams, who insures the words remain mysteriously dry.

ای جان و جهان جان و جهان گم کردم
ای ماه زمین و آسمان گم کردم
می بر کف من منزه بنده بر دهنم
کز مستی تو راه دهان گم کردم

[Cue background music]

Introductory reading (I play both Rumi and Shams, using Sufi necklace to signify the latter):

Mid-November, 1244. A man in a black suit from head to toe arrives at the well-known Inn of the Sugar Merchants in Konya. He is called Shams-from Tabriz and claims he's a traveling merchant. Rumor has it he's searching for something that he knows he will find in Konya.

Rumi sits reading a large stack of books. Shams approaches and asks, "What are you doing?" Rumi condescendingly replies, "Something you would not understand." Upon hearing this, Shams throws Rumi's books into a nearby pool of water [drumming to emphasize my throwing books in pool]. Rumi rushes to save the books (in those days books cost a lot to make and were cherished possessions). When Rumi pulls them from the water, he discovers they're dry. He asks Shams, "What have you done?" Shams replies, "Something you would not understand." So now do we drink from the communal cup of mystery—drowning in the semblance of spirit beyond letter. (I raise a glass for communion)

[Cue change in music intensity]

Shams arrives so far along the path of *Salook*—the nearness to God—achieved by sufi mystics by submitting the ego—the *nafs*—so completely that it begins to mirror the depths of divine reflection. Rumi, before his dying to the idea of himself as Rumi, first saw himself as

limited construct: famed jurist, schooled in religious teachings. How fragile the miniature Persian self-portrait. [holding mirror as frame]. Shams left and broke Rumi into the ocean of love [take out hammer]. One *crack* of the hammer sent Rumi spinning through the bazaar [spin and break mirror]. One *crack* of the hammer sent Rumi spinning through the bazaar [spin and break mirror]. One *crack* of the hammer sent Rumi spinning Rumi spinning....(final spin and break mirror)

[next significant change in music here—elevation]

Would you possess Rumi? Then embrace your own brokenness, let the fragments of your self [engage broken mirror] cut through your own heart. Deconstruct your own text, and at the gap around which meaning coheres, take a breath like the infant inhaling the world for the first time

[pause]

And if love makes you thirst there is wine. (I repeat 3X)

[I sing the following]

Call: *Koja-y-Shamz, Koja-y-Shamz, Koja-y-Shamz, Koja-y-Shamz (2X)*

Response: *Bar man dar-e-vasl, basteh-mi dorad dust (2X)*

Don't insist on knowing
where you think you need to go.
Just ask the way to the spring.

Call: *Koja-y-Shamz, Koja-y-Shamz, Koja-y-Shamz, Koja-y-Shamz (2X)*

Response: *Bar man dar-e-vasl, basteh-mi dorad dust (2X)*

Live from the soul and you feel
A river flowing through you.
Wallow in the limitations of self
And you drown in still water.

[Sung]:

Del ra beh ana, shekasteḥ mi dorad dust
Del ra beh ana, shekasteḥ mi dorad dust

In the hands of the one
Who touches God
Iron turns to wine

Free from the bondage
Of literal chains
My words run wild
Like a flame

[sung]

The sun shines on both rocks and gold
The earth is rich and yours to hold 2X

[also sung, more drawn out]

Call: *Ba-za keh tah, beh-khod/niya zam-bini*
Response: *Bida-ri ye/hab-ha-ye/dera-zam bini*

When the caravan's gone
And the fire dies
Cling to the hem of his robe,
The one who lives within me
When I'm without a home

Call: *Koja-y-Shamz, Koja-Shamz, Koja-Shamz, Koja-Shamz (2X)*
Response: *Bar man dar-e-vasl, basteh-mi dorad dust (2X)*

[raising cup—sad, despairing: reading of poem in translation]

I've lost it all my life all lost—
the sky the earth, dear moon, all lost.
Don't hand me wine. Pour it in my mouth.
(I've even lost the way to my mouth).

Del ra beh ana, shekasteḥ mi dorad dust
Del ra beh ana, shekasteḥ mi dorad dust

[sublime, ethereal playing of *nai*]

Nothing but a stranger...traveling through this...world alone
Nothing but a stranger...traveling through this world alone
[some vocal improvisation here in vein of melody of line above]

[sung to melody of Blondie's Heart of Glass]

Oghat-hoshi ba-dust/separi-kardam
Ta-inke-shekast/del-e-sheshiam
Fekr-mikardam del-am ra-be kasi/ dadam/ke ashek ghame
Vali nadunestam// ke fagot-yek-eshke-gin

Koja-hastam, dar vaham-e-ziba//
Va Nemitunm,/
peduct konam Man-ke shoma// dust dadan
Man-ra tark, nam-i konoad//

[Repeat 2 verses above]

Blondie's "oooo, ohhh" 3x