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Inimitability Versus Translatability: The Structure of Literary Meaning in Arabo-Persian Poetics

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REBECCA GOULD

Division of Humanities, Yale-NUS College, Singapore

Abstract. *Building on the multivalent meanings of the Arabo-Persian tarjama ('to interpret', 'to translate', 'to narrate in writing'), this essay examines the doctrine of Qur'ānic inimitability (ʿiʿjāz) across Arabic and Persian literary cultures as a way of exploring the contemporary relevance of Islamic rhetoric. Treating the relation between Arabic and Persian as a case study for a theory of translation specific to Islamic literary culture, it argues that the translation of Arabic rhetorical theory (ʿilm al-balāgha) into Persian marks a turning point in the history of Islamic rhetoric. While examining the implications of Qur'ānic hermeneutics for translation theory, it considers how the inimitability concept impacts on translatability. ʿAbd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī's reflections on naẓm (structure) enrich and refine Walter Benjamin's argument for translatability as a condition of literary language. Viewing Islamic literary aesthetics from the perspective of Benjaminian thinking about language can infuse contemporary translation theory with a richer sense of the translatability of literary texts.*

Keywords. Translatability, Persian, Arabic, Poetry, Benjamin, Structure, *Naẓm*.

The historical relation between Arabic and Persian argues in favour of a theory of translation that emphasized translatability over incommensurability between texts in different languages. While tenth-century New Persian poets such as Rūdakī and Ferdowsī produced literary texts notable for their lack of Arabic vocabulary, it did not take long for Persian poets to turn to the Arabic language and literature for inspiration.¹ By the 12th century, the presence of Arabic in Persian texts was so pervasive that literacy in the latter presumed knowledge of the former. Translation was a fact of everyday life.

The bilingualism that permeated medieval Persian texts is particularly evident in *The Pith of Intellects* (*Lubāb al-Albāb*), the first Persian literary historiography, by Muḥammad ʿAwfī of Bukhārā (1171-1242). In the narration of the origins of poetry that opens this historiographic masterpiece, ʿAwfī tells

¹ For Ferdowsī's reduction of Arabic vocabulary in his Persian idiom, see Moīnfar (1970).

of how Adam came to be the first poet in world literary history.² Soon after his expulsion from paradise for partaking, along with Eve (Ḥawwā'), of the forbidden fruit, Adam discovers that his beloved son Abel (Hābīl) had been slaughtered by Cain (Qābīl). He thereupon improvises an elegy (ritha')

Changed are the lands and what is on them.
 Clouded is the earth's putrid face.
 Changed are all colors and tastes.
 Darkened is the morning's face.
 (ʿAwfī, *Lubāb al-Albāb*, 18)

This poem, which is extant only in Arabic, is frequently cited in classical Persian sources to explicate the origin of poetry. While the story of Cain and Abel has strong narrative appeal apart from its significance for literary history, it is also paradigmatic for translation theory.

While it was uncontroversially assumed that Adam spoke Arabic in paradise, Islamic commentators vacillated over whether Adam continued to speak Arabic after his expulsion, during which time the first poem was composed.³ Most medieval scholars assumed that Adam's language after expulsion was Syriac. Consequently, the language of Adam's lament for his dead son, and the first poem in literary history, was understood by Islamic scholars to have been written in a language other than Arabic. Although there is nothing extraordinary from a contemporary perspective in acknowledging the preeminence of a language other than one's own, classical Islamic theology laid such emphasis on the perfection of Arabic as a vehicle for sacred and profane discourse that any gesture towards a literary culture more ancient than Arabic was bound to introduce new complications.

No Islamic source purports to offer the original text of the Syriac poem. On Adam's command, the poem was preserved by his third son Shayth (Hebrew Seth), until, in order to safeguard its posterity, the text was translated by Yaʿrib bin Qaḥṭān, the mythical ancestor of the Yemenites.⁴ Although Adam's text shifted during its journey across different sources, the poem's status as a translation persisted across its many variations, from the rhetorical manual of Shams-i Qays (13th century) to the literary histories of Dawlatshāh (15th century) and Reḍā Qulī Khān Hedāyat (19th century).⁵ The centrality of the Cain and Abel narrative to the origins of poetry as narrated in these sources suggests

² For an insightful exegesis of this passage, see Keshavmurthy (2011:110).

³ See for example, al-Ḥalabī, *Sīra al-Ḥalabīyya*, 1:20. The Syriac writer Barhebraeus (*Chronicum Syriacum*, 5) however claims that Adam spoke Aramaic, not Syriac.

⁴ Al-Ṭabarī, *Biographies of the Prophet's Companions*, 130.

⁵ Shams-i Qays al-Rāzī, *Kitāb al-muʿjam*, Dawlatshāh al-Samarqandī, *Tazkirat al-shuʿarāʾ*, and Reḍā Qulī Khān-i Hedāyat, *Majmaʿ al-fuṣṣḥāʾ* (this list is only partial). See also Ranking (1885:27-28). Full bibliographic details for premodern texts are given in the References section, organized by author's last name.

at once the complexity and openness of a literary culture that could accept a translated text as its inaugural document. Just as their historical relations underwrite a theory of translation, so too do the literary and scriptural genealogies of Arabic and Persian have their mythological beginnings in translation. Arabic begins in a translation from Syriac, while, following its initial purgation of Arabic vocabulary, New Persian comes to be infused again with Arabic lexical forms. This back and forth movement between the two languages is already anticipated in the earlier oscillation between Arabic and Syriac that marked the Islamic world's earliest account of the birth of poetry.

ʿAwfi's genesis narrative for Arabic poetry recognizes the translational movement that marks both the Arabic and Persian literary traditions. Adam's Syriac poem was domesticated and assimilated into Arabic, ironically in order to assure its stability. Following its domestication into Arabic, the poem entered Persian literary history and captivated the imagination of Persian rhetoricians and critics even more profoundly than it did their Arabic predecessors. That all traces of the Syriac original have been erased did not prevent classical commentators from appropriating it into their accounts of the origins of poetry. On the contrary, the translation of Adam's poem preserved it for posterity. This assimilation of a foreign text to a local canon is but one example of classical Islamic culture's intimate involvement with translation, an involvement that ultimately shaped Islamic theories of literary meaning.

While the Arabic canon assimilated and domesticated foreign texts, the Persian canon had no such luxury with respect to Arabic. When Arabic texts were assimilated into Persian, their foreign origins could hardly be erased. Unable to absorb the alienness of Arabic into Persian, New Persian poets and critics were compelled to resort to translation. The rhetorical manuals that formalized specific literary genres also refined many other aspects of the Arabic rhetorical inheritance. Based on this rich archive, my aim in this essay is twofold. First, to show how Persian literary critics' pragmatic acceptance of translation as a condition for literary culture enriched their conception of the movement between languages. Second, to show how these premodern Islamic conceptualizations of the translingual movement between languages call on us to question the presumption that has animated much of European thinking on translation, namely, that "any passage between languages implies waste, corruption, and fundamental loss" (Barnstone 1993:43).

Because the Persian turn to translation was less a conscious choice than a necessary response to external changes, it was driven less by theoretical ambition than by pragmatic local conditions that made the mandate to translate even more pressing than the mandate to justify translation theoretically. That Adam's first poem was in Syriac did not impede its canonization in Arabic. By contrast, the Persian reader wishing to access the first poem in world history could only approach this text in a foreign language (Arabic) and through a double translation, first from Syriac into Arabic and then from Arabic into

Persian. Constrained by their literature's dependency on a foreign language, and forced to confront the problem of translation, Persian poets and critics were continuously called on to confront linguistic difference.

Having traced an influential genealogy of poetry that begins and ends in translation, the remainder of this essay engages diachronically with specific contributions to Arabo-Persian literary theory, with a view to clarifying the attitudes towards translation presupposed by a culture that inaugurated its literary history in and through translation.

1. *Tarjama*, translation, interpretation

Preeminent among classical Arabic terms for translation was *tarjama*, a term that originated in ancient Mesopotamia, the home of writing itself, where, as Dimitri Gutas states, translation had “been going on ever since the second millennium BC and the translation of Sumerian documents into Akkadian” (Gutas 1998:20). As translator David Bellos observes, both in terms of its spatial reach and temporal longevity, the geographic dissemination of the word *tarjama* attests to the concept's reach across a range of premodern literary cultures (Bellos 2011:124). *Tarjama*'s Aramaic roots are reflected in the *Targum*, the Aramaic commentaries on the Hebrew scriptures that combine translation and interpretation into a single word.⁶ Aramaic Targums “were not translations of the Hebrew Bible ... but interpolations aiming at explanation and commentary” (Holmberg 2006:151, n27). In ancient Semitic as in classical Arabic, *tarjama* means to give a title to a work, to interpret, and finally, to translate. In the late medieval period, *tarjama* came to signify a text that narrates a life in brief.⁷ In most standard usages these three acts – naming, interpreting, and translating – are so inflected with each other that their identities merge.

Tarjama retained its multiplicity of meanings, reaching beyond translation *per se* and into intersubjective realms, well into the 20th century. The term's resonance is discernable in the words of the twentieth-century Iranian poet Rashīd Yāsāmī, who singles out the prison poetry of the Lahore poet Mas'ūd Sa'd (d. 1121) for its “genuine translation [*tarjumān*] of poetry into feelings” (*Dīwān-i Mas'ūd Sa'd Salmān*, 63). To elucidate how poetry ‘translates’ feelings, Yāsāmī draws on *tarjama*'s polyvalence. He shows how the conveyance of literary discourse (*sukhan*) in the form of emotion (*ekhseāt*) itself constitutes an act of translation. Indeed, it is through this ‘translation’, Yāsāmī continues, that the prison poem – the genre that Mas'ūd Sa'd is credited with inventing – brought about a new configuration of literary genres. “The delicacy

⁶ See Fāzali and Taqieh (1379) for the claim that *tarjama* is Persian rather than Semitic in origin. According to Lane (1863 1:302), the verb *tarjama* is common to Arabic, Ethiopic and Chaldean.

⁷ *Tarjama* in the sense of a biographical narrative is most frequent in the post-classical period. See Reynolds and Brustad (2001:38-48).

of meanings and eloquence of [Masʿūd Saʿd's] invisible pain", Yāsamī writes, "helped the poet bring the qasīda [panegyric ode] to the level of the ghazal", the preeminent genre for portraying love (*Dīwān-i Masʿūd Saʿd Salmān*, 63). Even when poets in premodern Islamic literary culture did not transpose texts from one language into another, they translated at multiple levels: from everyday experience to poetic discourse, from material sovereignty to poetic power, from the language of the court to the languages of the prison cell, the ascetic's refuge, the wine glass, and, finally, from the panegyric form to the genres of the prison poem (*ḥabsīyyāt*), the wine poem (*khamrīyyāt*), and the ascetic poem (*zuhdīyyāt*).⁸

Beyond and before the Islamic dispensation, similarly flexible understandings of translation as a mode of interpretation animated many premodern literatures. Rendering the Pali Buddhist Tripitaka into Chinese, Buddhist scholar Seng-yu (445-518 CE) anticipated medieval Islamic understandings of translation as a subspecies of interpretation. "Distinct comprehension of the Indic languages leans on clarity in translation", Seng-yu wrote in Chinese; "Translation is interpretation", he concluded, "therefore, if in the joint interpretation of the words of the two countries there are errors, then the concepts will, indeed, be perverted" (Link 1961:288). The integrity of a text's meaning for Seng-yu was a consequence of the precision of its translation.

Like ancient China, premodern South and Southeast Asian literatures possessed no ready terminological equivalent for what is meant by translation today. While the Baghdad-based Greco-Arabic translation movement was sponsored and funded by the ʿAbbāsīd Empire, and obviously foundational to the development of Islamic civilization, no extant Arabic manifesto specifically adumbrates a methodology for translation. Analogously, according to Ronit Ricci, among the Southeast Asian literary traditions of Tamil, Malay and Javanese "translation was not necessarily viewed as a separate literary endeavor or a distinct undertaking worthy of mention" (Ricci 2011:42). Extrapolating on the basis of this crosscultural ambiguity inhering in the practice of translation, Fawcett and Munday note that "the very words and metaphors for 'translation' used in India (*rupantar* = change of form; *anuvad* = 'speaking after', 'following'), in the Arab world (*tarjama* = 'biography') and China (*fan yi* = 'turning over')" indicate that translation within these literary cultures did not place a high premium on "lexical fidelity to an original" (Fawcett and Munday 2009:140). So commonplace was translation as a reading practice and interpretative hermeneutic that it did not require specific delineation.

Having considered translation as an activity that ramified beyond the transposition of texts across multiple languages and literary traditions, the remainder of this essay returns to the Arabo-Persian encounter to explore the

⁸ On these genres, see Zafarī (1364/1985), Gould (2011), Kennedy (1997) and al-Zabīdī (1959).

relation between translation as it is broadly conceived in premodern sources and the way in which, in modernity, translation has come to be more narrowly defined as the literal rendering of a text from one language into another. I pursue this comparison by examining the mutual relations of what are arguably the two core concepts of Islamic literary theory: *nāẓm* and *ījāz*, structure and inimitability.

2. Structure and inimitability

Qur'ānic hermeneutics was initially stimulated by the school of the Mu'tazila, who flourished in ninth-tenth century Iraq, and which stressed the perfect unity of God and the createdness of the Qur'ān. The Mu'tazilī-influenced perception that the Qur'ānic miracle resided in the text's message rather than its language was soon transmuted to other domains of textual exegesis, such as poetry. Even when Islamic scholars reached conclusions that were diametrically opposed to the beliefs held by the Mu'tazilīs, the terms of the conversation were set by this theological school. As Arabist Geert Jan van Gelder has noted, early Arabic literary criticism "did not yet amount to a theory of the inimitability of the Qur'ān" (Gelder 1982:5). But even in the absence of a formal theory of Qur'ānic hermeneutics that would soon become one of the pillars of Islamic education, "the interrelated developments of philology, jurisprudence, and theology" together confronted the challenge of "maintaining the sacred status of Arabic as a vehicle of eternal speech whose manifest linguistic form was, nonetheless, temporal" (Zadeh 2012:216). The complexity of this interpretive transposition was exacerbated by the belief that "meaning was inseparable from form", which in turn meant that the Qur'ānic miracle could not be reproduced in a different genre or in another language.

That aspect of a text that most resisted translation came to be associated with its *nāẓm*, the structure or arrangement of its words.⁹ Morphologically signifying the act of stringing pearls and beads on a necklace, *nāẓm* acquired the meaning of versification in the early ʿAbbāsīd period (Gelder 2004:668, Heinrichs 1998:585). Sometimes translated as concinnity, *nāẓm* is the order that binds together all the elements that comprise a literary text. Due to its balance of conceptual content and language, *nāẓm* is situated at the foundation of Arabo-Persian poetics as well as of Qur'ānic exegesis. Departing from its original association with the order of pearls on a necklace, it came to refer in the early centuries of Islam to the order of words (*alḥāẓ*) that comprise a linguistic unit.

Beyond specifically theoretical formulations, more general usages of *nāẓm* in the sense of "to give order to" also attest to its aesthetic dimensions. In terms of prosody, *nāẓm* can also simply mean verse in contrast to prose (*nāṭh*), as in the title of al-Thaʿālibī's *Kitāb nāṭh al-nāẓm wa-ḥall al-ʿiqd* (*Book of Prose and Poetry and the Unbinding of Its Knot*). *Nāẓm* in these last two senses is

⁹ For this rendering of the controversial and polysemic term *nāẓm*, I follow Martin (2006).

used by ʿAwfī to describe Yaʿrib bin Qaḥṭān’s transposition of the first poem in world history into Arabic.¹⁰ Most significantly for the present discussion, the transposition of *naẓm* from one language into another is used by thirteenth-century Persian rhetorical theorists (specifically al-Waṭwāt, discussed below) to define the process now called translation.

The definition of *naẓm* as an ordered linguistic unit was the term’s primary meaning when ninth-century Arabic prose writer al-Jāḥiẓ (780-869) composed his lost *Book on the Structure of the Qurʾān* (*Kitāb Naẓm al-Qurʾān*). Although al-Jāḥiẓ’s treatise on the Qurʾān’s *naẓm* is no longer extant, certain of his views on this subject can be reconstructed from his other writings. One area in which al-Jāḥiẓ’s views improve on those current in his milieu is the stress he placed on the priority of words over content; this was the closest any literary critic at that time approximated to questions of form. Al-Jāḥiẓ asserted that just as it was impossible for God to teach Adam “the signifier [*al-dalala*] and not establish the signified [*al-madlūl ʿalayh*]”, so too was it impossible that Adam could be taught “the name and put aside the meaning [*maʿnā*]” (al-Jāḥiẓ, *Rasāʾil al-Jāḥiẓ*, 1:262). “The name without a meaning is a useless word, like an empty vessel”, al-Jāḥiẓ explained, for a word (*lafẓ*) “cannot be a name unless it comprises a meaning [*maʿnā*]”. In his *Book of Animals* (*Kitāb al-Ḥayawān*), al-Jāḥiẓ asserted that whenever poetry is converted into another language “its *naẓm* is broken, its meter is rendered defunct, and its beauty disappears” (*Kitāb al-Ḥayawān*, 1:75). While in al-Jāḥiẓ’s text, “*naẓm* seems to be only one among other aspects of the text, not given any special significance or technical meaning”, the term was eventually picked up by later scholars and its meaning was amplified, as we shall shortly see.¹¹ Even in this restricted usage, al-Jāḥiẓ implies that *naẓm* can only be sustained in a monolingual text. Once language and meaning multiply, the integral balance between meaning (*maʿnā*) and utterance (*lafẓ*) comes under threat. On this account, far from facilitating translation, poetry, more than any other discourse, impedes the movement of texts across languages (*Kitāb al-Ḥayawān*, 75).

Among the virtues of al-Jāḥiẓ’s approach is his insistence on the interdependency of word and meaning. When it came to establishing the specificity of Qurʾānic miracle, al-Jāḥiẓ’s Muʿtazilī teacher al-Nazzām (775-846) openly privileged content over form. Much more recently, Nasr Abu Zayd (d. 2010), who considered himself a Neo-Muʿtazilī in the tradition of

¹⁰ ʿAwfī describes Yaʿrib Bin Qaḥṭān’s transformation of Adam’s poem as follows: “be zaban suriyani ba nīzam ‘arabi tarjumeḥ kard” (from the Syriac language he translated it into the *nīzam* of Arabic; *Lubāb al-albāb*, 19).

¹¹ I cite here from an anonymous reviewer, who suggests that I may be attributing too much significance to al-Jāḥiẓ’s usage of *naẓm*. While *naẓm* was merely one among many aspects of the poetic text for al-Jāḥiẓ, the main and less controversial thrust of my argument is that al-Jurjānī – with whom the concept of *naẓm* is primarily associated – draws on and transforms al-Jāḥiẓ’s engagement with *naẓm*, in the ways discussed below.

al-Nazzam, paraphrased his predecessor's position with respect to the Qur'ān as the conviction that "there is nothing peculiar about it as a text" and that "its supremacy is due to the information contained in it, whether about the unknown past or about future events" (Abu-Zayd 2003:11).¹² Even as al-Nazzam's view that there was nothing specifically unique or beautiful about the Qur'ān as a text productively loosened theological orthodoxies, it also worked to impoverish literary studies. The Mu'tazilī's theologically flexible hermeneutics conceived of Qur'ānic perfection in terms of its message rather than in terms of the manner of its expression.¹³ Making theology the arbiter of aesthetics, and in focusing on message over language, early Mu'tazilī thought implicitly denied the translatability of the sacred text, even as it pragmatically endorsed a more figurative understanding of Qur'ānic signification. As will be seen, this early tendency within Mu'tazilī thought contrasts with its later variants. The history of the internal shift within Mu'tazilī thinking shows that translatability requires a consummate focus on language over message.

From the perspective of literary studies, al-Jāḥiẓ's attention to form alongside content, and to their mutual interdependency, represented an advance over the Mu'tazilī denial of the Qur'ān's aesthetic uniqueness. However, al-Jāḥiẓ's insights into *naẓm* introduced new problems. Among these was the view, implicitly assumed, that words "in and of themselves" functioned as "the indicator of stylistic excellence" (Larkin 1982:77). Following in al-Jāḥiẓ's footsteps but also moving beyond his atomistic focus, the Arabophone critic and scholar ʿAbd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī (d. 1078), from the Persian speaking region of Jurjān (known in Persian as Gurgānj, then Gūrgān, and, most recently, Asterābād) and a student of the Mu'tazilī thinker ʿAbd al-Jabbār (d. 1024), took issue with his predecessor's exclusive emphasis on wording (*lafẓ*) over idea (*maʿnā*).¹⁴ Like al-Jāḥiẓ, al-Jurjānī's work was informed by Mu'tazilī theology, but he carried the implications of Mu'tazilī thinking further. More powerfully than his predecessors, al-Jurjānī also found a means of thinking beyond the form/meaning binary. Al-Jurjānī reinterpreted the relation between the two such that wording (*lafẓ*) ceased to be merely "a 'garment' for a 'naked' *maʿnā*" (Heinrichs 2004:669). The result of the subtlety al-Jurjānī infused into the study of the relation between language and meaning is a new,

¹² While Abu Zayd appears in this article to discern a limitation to the Mu'tazilī approach to Qur'ānic exegesis, throughout most of his oeuvre he assumes the superiority of Mu'tazilī hermeneutics over other approaches to the Quranic text. See, for example, Abu Zayd (1998:194).

¹³ For further details on Mu'tazilī hermeneutics, including the important debate over the created nature of the Qur'ān, see Campanini (2012) and Saeed (2008:203). I should clarify that while the Mu'tazilīs lucidly debate the question of the inimitability in the Qur'ān, they do not explicitly discuss the question of translation. The latter is my modern extrapolation.

¹⁴ For al-Jurjānī's engagement with his teacher, see his *Dalā'il al-Fjāz*, 63-64. Future references to this text – discussed in detail in the following section – are given parenthetically. The influence of ʿAbd al-Jabbār on ʿAbd al-Qāhir is documented extensively in Larkin (1995). For a recent study specifically of ʿAbd al-Jabbār's hermeneutics, see Reynolds (2004).

revitalized conceptualization of *naẓm*, that combined the best of the Muʿtazilīs and their opponents into a single teaching. Invoking the legacy of one of the most influential theorists of Qurʾānic inimitability, the Ashʿarī scholar Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī (d. 1013), Mustansir Mir has aptly noted that while for the earlier theologian *naẓm* is one among many proofs of Qurʾānic inimitability, for al-Jurjānī *naẓm* is “the only proof, or at least the primary or fundamental proof” (Mir 1986:14).

More intensely than the *naẓm* of al-Khaṭṭābī, al-Rummānī and al-Bāqillānī, al-Jurjānī’s *naẓm* anticipates the distinction between signified and signifier propounded by Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. While this contrast has come to emblemize twentieth-century linguistic theory, it has also had an incalculable impact on literary thinking about translation (figure 1).¹⁵

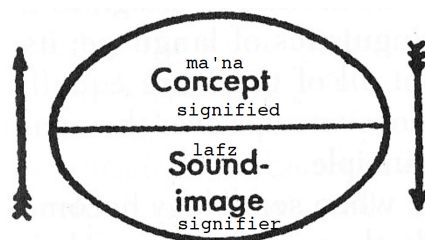


Figure 1. *Naẓm* in terms of Saussurean semiology

Taking inspiration from the Arabic hermeneutical tradition, the Syrian modernist poet Adūnīs (b. 1930) stated in his *Introduction to Arabic Poetics* (1971) that the new French criticism – by which he meant above all Saussurean-inspired structuralism – opened his eyes to “the newness of al-Jurjānī’s critical vision” (Adūnīs 1990:81).¹⁶ There is however at least one area in which Saussure’s structuralism parts ways with al-Jurjānī’s *naẓm*. Whereas, in their endeavour to “build a bridge between the divine word and human reason”, the Muʿtazilīs maintained that “the relation between the signifier and the signified exists only by human convention” (Abu Zayd 1998:194), al-Jurjānī discerned intrinsic and divinely sanctioned meaningfulness in *naẓm*’s mediation of word and meaning. Far from being arbitrary, the dialectic between word and meaning that was condensed into *naẓm* proves the miracle of the Qurʾān, and more broadly, attests to God’s presence in the world.

In order for the revitalization of *naẓm* to take place, it had to pass through a prism not encompassed within al-Jāḥiẓ’s emphasis on discrete words as bearers of inimitability (*ʿijāz*). The inimitability of the Qurʾān had to be extended beyond

¹⁵ For a thorough discussion of the relation between al-Jurjānī and Saussurean theories of linguistically constructed meaning, see Rachad’s introduction to his edition and French translation of al-Jurjānī’s *Dalāʾil al-ʿijāz* (2006).

¹⁶ I have altered Cobham’s translation of the title from ‘Arab’ to ‘Arabic’. Technically, both readings are accurate, but Adūnīs was elucidating a literary language, not an ethnicity.

the single morphological unit. It had to engage the relation between meaning and sound, which meant that it had to address the question of translation, although this was not the way the problem was conceived at the time. Simply stated, the *ʿijāz* of the Qurʾān meant not only that its beauty could not be reproduced by human speech, but that its discourse was superior to all human discourse, including poetry. While the Qurʾān explicitly lays claim to inimitability in the famous ‘challenge’ (*tahaddī*) verses (Q 2:23-24 and 10:38) that argue for the impossibility of producing anything like the Qurʾān through human effort, the *ʿijāz* teaching was developed over the course of many centuries. It was not until the middle of the 10th century, over a century after the death of al-Jāhīz, that scholars such as al-Khaṭṭābī (931-998), al-Rummānī (908-994) and al-Bāqillānī – all three of whom were based in or affiliated with Baghdad – began to give life to the idea of *ʿijāz* for the purposes of literary criticism. Prior to this period, *ʿijāz* had been conceived by al-Nazzām and his fellow Muʿtazilīs as a quality residing in the text’s message rather than in its language.

One result of scholars’ efforts to explicate the *ʿijāz* of the Qurʾān was the establishment of the discipline of Islamic rhetoric, *ʿilm al-balāgha*. In the context of rhetoric, literary language was understood to consist of words (*alfāz*), meanings (*maʿānī*), and a binding structure (*naẓm*). Comparing the *naẓm* that gives coherence to the *ʿijāz* of the Qurʾān to utterance (*lafẓ*) and meaning (*maʿnā*), al-Khaṭṭābī determined that *nuzūm* (the plural of *naẓm*) was the most important of the three elements of rhetoric. *Nuzūm for al-Khaṭṭābī* “hold words and meanings together, and it is by virtue of them that the parts of an utterance become knit together” (al-Khaṭṭābī, *al-Bayān fī ʿijāz al-Qurʾān*, 36). Al-Khaṭṭābī further specified that any alteration to the Qurʾānic text would damage either its meaning (*fasād al-kalām*) or its style (*dhahāb al-rawnaq*) (*al-Bayān fī ʿijāz*, 29). On the question of why the Qurʾān was not narrated in any thematically consistent or chronological fashion, al-Khaṭṭābī explained that “God wished to test his servants and to try their obedience and their willingness to toil at gathering its scattered [*mutafarriq*] parts together” (*al-Bayān fī ʿijāz*, 54). According to al-Khaṭṭābī, the task of reordering the Qurʾān in a way that could seem sensible to human readers constituted an act of *ijtihād* (reinterpretation) (Hamori 1984:44).

Even more in contrast to al-Jāhīz’s insistence on a singular relation between word and meaning, al-Rummānī claimed that discourse (*al-bayān*) that is beautiful (*hasan*) is that which “the spirit can approach in all manner of ways” (al-Rummānī, *al-nukat fī ʿijāz al-Qurʾān*, 107). Closest in time to al-Jurjānī, al-Bāqillānī enumerated as proof of the Qurʾān’s inimitability ten aspects of its *naẓm*, including its length, its homogeneity across different sections, and the gracefulness of its transitions from section to section. Al-Bāqillānī made no effort to clarify the relation among the three components that al-Khaṭṭābī had specified as comprising the substance of Islamic rhetoric (*balāgha*): word (*lafẓ*), meaning (*maʿnā*) and structure (*naẓm*). Rather than probing the mutually constitutive relations of content and form, al-Bāqillānī listed static

properties that could be explicated through stylistic analysis (al-Bāqillānī, *ʿġjāz al-Qurʾān*, 35-48).

Although *nāẓm* was important to the early Qurʾānic exegetes, namely, al-Khaṭṭābī, al-Rummānī and al-Bāqillānī, each of whom importantly contributed to the theorization of Qurʾānic *ʿġjāz*, none of these exegetes penetrated as deeply as did al-Jurjānī in his quest to understand the sources of literary eloquence and aesthetic beauty. Al-Jurjānī raised the discussion concerning *ʿġjāz* to a level that was at once more sophisticated and richer with metaphysical possibilities than Qurʾānic hermeneutics had yet seen. Alone among those who undertook to demonstrate Qurʾānic inimitability, al-Jurjānī rendered *nāẓm* usable in making inimitability compatible with translatability. The following section turns to al-Jurjānī's foundational contribution to our understanding of translation.

3. *Nāẓm* and translation theory

In his first masterpiece, the *Grounds of Inimitability* (*Dalāʾil al-ʿġjāz*), which stands as Arabic literary exegesis' crowning contribution to Qurʾānic hermeneutics, al-Jurjānī showed that words (*alḥāẓ*) alone "do not rival each other in merit" (*Dalāʾil al-ʿġjāz*, 44).¹⁷ Instead of establishing the excellence of discourse with reference to the superiority of specific words, as al-Jāḥiẓ had done in his attempt to displace the message-oriented approach of al-Nazzām, al-Jurjānī offered a more complex hypothesis, rich with possibilities for contemporary translation theory. Ironically, given that his exegesis is bent on proving the discursive specificity of the Arabic Qurʾān, al-Jurjānī opens the chapter in *Grounds of Inimitability* he terms "definitive" (*ibid.*:53) by alluding to his own complex linguistic origins. "If we wanted to compare two languages like Arabic and Persian", al-Jurjānī asks, "would it be possible for us to deem the word 'man' (*raġul*) more expressive of a man than its Persian counterpart?" Clearly the correct answer is in the negative. "Can one entertain the erroneous idea", al-Jurjānī continues, "that two individual words [*luġhatayn*], without reference to the position they occupy vis-à-vis composition [*taʿlīf*] and structure [*nāẓm*], rival each other for precedence?" (*ibid.*:44). Taken by themselves, words in al-Jurjānī's estimation possess no intrinsic aesthetic merit; in this respect, al-Jurjānī is drawing on the Muʿtazilī argument with respect to the Qurʾān. Al-Jāḥiẓ was persuaded that aesthetic merit resided in the word itself, and that the best words bore within themselves the fewest meanings. Unlike al-Jāḥiẓ, and more like Saussure, al-Jurjānī maintained that a given word's value was entirely a function of the role it played within a broad linguistic structure comprised of *laḥẓ*, *maʿnā* and *nāẓm*.

Al-Jurjānī's question sheds light on the limits and possibilities of arguments about linguistic difference in the eleventh-century Islamic world. While fully

¹⁷ For the translation of al-Jurjānī's text given in this section, I am indebted to, but do not always follow, the translation in Larkin (1982).

upholding the *iʿjāz* of the Qurʾān, the Arabophone theorist declares his opposition to those who claim intrinsic superiority for Arabic on the grounds that it is the language of Qurʾān. Pre-Jurjānī accounts of Qurʾānic inimitability that assumed either fixity of meaning in a single word (*lafẓ*), as with al-Jāḥiẓ, or the irrelevance of stylistic questions entirely, as with al-Nazzām, assumed that inimitability cancelled out translatability (though this was not their term, and the inference is mine). On both accounts, texts were singular in terms of their form as well as in terms of their meaning. They were untranslatable because new words carried new meanings that bore no dialectical relation to the meanings in the source text.

Al-Jurjānī's explication of inimitability refines the concept in a different way. It creates a framework for translation even as it underwrites the Qurʾān's discursive and aesthetic superiority. For al-Jurjānī, unlike his predecessors, there is no inherent conflict between translatability and inimitability, because inimitability is grounded not in words as such but rather in the balance between word and meaning, which al-Jurjānī calls *nāẓm*. *Nāẓm* is at once the proof (*dalīl*) of Qurʾānic inimitability and of the possibility of translation across languages.

Al-Jāḥiẓ, who remains the best-known writer to inaugurate the discussion about *nāẓm* in relation to *iʿjāz* and translatability, also maintained that the most beautiful discourse is that which is situated "on the tip of the tongue", meaning that its discursive content is apparent from its linguistic surface (al-Jāḥiẓ, *Kitāb al-Bayān*, 1:79). Both this statement and al-Jāḥiẓ's famous restriction of poetry to the Arabs suggest that his poetic lexicon could not easily encompass multiple signification.¹⁸ This is where al-Jurjānī breaks with a prior tradition of reflection on structure (*nāẓm*) and inimitability (*iʿjāz*) even while paying homage to it.¹⁹ Far from denying the capacity of words to yield multiple readings, al-Jurjānī introduces polysemy – whereby "you encounter a word that pleases you and puts you at ease in one place, while the very same word is weighty and oppressive to you in another place" (*Dalāʾil al-iʿjāz*, 46) – as proof of his theory that a text's inimitability resides neither in its words (*alfāẓ*), nor in its meaning (*maʿnā*), but in its *nāẓm*, which encompasses both *alfāẓ* and *maʿnā*.

Extrapolating *nāẓm*'s hermeneutic potential even further, al-Jurjānī notes that the theory that *nāẓm* is grounded more in words than in "the arrangement of the meanings in the mind [*naḥs*]" mistakenly assumes that two different persons' assessments of what constitutes good composition and what does not "could not differ, since the two perceive the same verbal sequence ... and neither knows anything concerning it that the other does not" (*ibid.*:51). The same sequence of words ought to yield the same results in different interpretations, so this logic runs. By contrast, *nāẓm* teaches that no two utterances will ever be understood in the same way by different auditors. Al-Jurjānī's

¹⁸ For a highly nuanced treatment of this issue, focusing on the ambivalence of al-Jāḥiẓ's statements, see Kiliṭū (2002:27-46).

¹⁹ For al-Jurjānī's engagements with al-Jāḥiẓ in this text, see *Dalāʾil* 'il, 15, 78, 97, 169, 251, 255, 256, 676, 389, 398, 482, 508, 511, 586, 590, 600, 606. See also Abu Deeb (1979:48, n107).



concept of *iʿjāz* is thereby grounded in his conceptualization of *naẓm*, which comprises the essence of *iʿjāz* while also making translanguag movement possible. Rather than opposing translatability to inimitability as his predecessors had done, al-Jurjānī argues for their mutual constitution.

Even more than with Sausurrean structuralism, al-Jurjānī's hermeneutics makes his theories kindred to the reader-response approaches elaborated by Wolfgang Iser (1980) and grounded in reception studies by Hans-Robert Jauss (1982) and Hans-Georg Gadamer (2004). These theorists stress the historicity and variability of textual interpretation across space and time. No literary text can be read the same way in each of its iterations, because literary discourse is acutely contingent with respect to the circumstances of its utterance and varies greatly according to its reader/auditor. If the quality of a literary text is determined by the extent to which it generates multiple readings, it follows that (a) a text's status as a miracle is unstable and cannot reside in any single signification, no matter how grandiose or true such signification may appear, and (b) multiple signification is inherently translatable and opens us to a broader world of cognitive difference. Because *naẓm* of itself generates multiple meanings, it follows that translation extends the reading process by enabling us to live, cognitively, with and within difference.

4. Translatability and multiple meanings

Beginning with al-Jurjānī and culminating in twelfth-century Persian rhetoric's turn to translation, poets used *naẓm* to critically engage their predecessors' visions of literature and to argue out the powers specific to literary discourse. In contemporary terms, appropriating the Jurjānīan concept of *naẓm* as a model for translation calls into question the claim that it is the translator's task to release into his or her own language 'a pure language', particularly when Walter Benjamin's intellectual genealogy suggests that the pure language he had in mind when he introduced the term corresponds to the one spoken by Adam in paradise, before the fall.²⁰ 'The Task of the Translator' (1923), Walter Benjamin's preface to his translation of Baudelaire's *Tableaux Parisiens* (1861), is animated by the semi-Kabbalistic belief that translation helps a work enter "the predestined, inaccessible realm of the reconciliation and fulfillment of languages" that is itself figured as beyond language (Benjamin 1991:15). Whereas Benjamin maintains that the translator should strive to "liberate the language imprisoned in a work" (*ibid.*:19), an approach to translation that embraces post-Babelian linguistic multiplicity would not regard the polysemy of language as a problem to be overcome. Instead of looking to translation to resolve the solipsism embedded in linguistic multiplicity, translation theory can adopt and adapt

²⁰ Samuel Weber (2005:74) specifically contests the view that Benjamin's pure language corresponds to the language before the fall, but he does not substantiate his argument with evidence.

the vision of translation as an interpretive technique, which resonates from the Chinese Buddhist Seng-yu to al-Jurjānī, and which, far from overcoming polylingualism, makes it legible. To state the issue in terms of Islamic literary theory, inimitability can facilitate translatability, and translatability can serve as evidence of the Qur'ānic miracle that is *irjāz* (inimitability).

Far from representing a specific prejudice concerning language, Benjamin's aspiration is rooted in a mythography of linguistic origins shared by Islam, Judaism and Christianity, even though each tradition developed this narrative in radically different ways. While the differences among the Abrahamic traditions are in many cases more noteworthy than their similarities, their diverse habits of mind find common ground in the realm of translation theory. The explanation each of these traditions offers for why humans need translation to communicate with each other converges in the story of the tower that was built as a monument to human hubris and later crushed by God (Genesis 11:1-9; Qur'ān 28:38 and 40:36-37). Although its name and location changed as it migrated across traditions and texts, in both the Hebrew Bible and the Qur'ān the Tower of Babel signifies a paradigmatic fall from linguistic singularity into a condition of problematic multiplicity.²¹

This fall was already implicitly present in the event that spurred Adam's mourning poem. That Adam composed the first literary text in a language other than Arabic *after* he had spoken Arabic as his native language in paradise reveals the translational imperative as part of the linguistic contingency of the human condition. If, as Benjamin maintains, a translation issues less from the life of a literary work than from its afterlife, then the impulse to translate is coterminous with being created and therefore being mortal. Across these Islamic, Christian and Jewish narratives, translation begins, like poetry, with the expulsion from Eden, the discovery of mortality, and with the impulse to mourn the dead. Within these literary systems, poetry – and analogously translation – must present itself to the world as a form of knowledge that begins with longing for what is irremediably lost.

From the perspective of Persian poetics, Benjamin's most lasting contribution is his contestation of the view, commonplace in al-Jāhīz's milieu and still influential today, that the most difficult works are most resistant to translation, while the most transparent texts are most easily rendered in another tongue. While Kabbalistic metaphysics leads Benjamin to long for the purity of a singular language, poetics leads him to create a framework for translation that hinges on a multiplicity of meanings similar to that which al-Rummānī perceived in the Qur'ān. While inimitability and translatability are not exactly symbiotic for Benjamin, they clearly coexist. The history of Islamic literary theory teaches us that this coexistence is more salient than their fundamental differences.

Contesting the conventional view, voiced by, among others, al-Jāhīz, that

²¹ For the variations on the Tower of Babel story in the Islamic commentarial tradition, see Wheeler (2002:189).

polysemous texts are the most resistant to translation, Benjamin postulates, as al-Jurjānī had done a millennium earlier, that the texts that signify in the most ways are those that are most translatable. Carrying this statement to its logical conclusion means seeing poetry as more rather than less translatable than prose. Additionally, it clarifies how al-Jurjānī's dialectical concept of *naẓm* as a counterpart to inimitability anticipates Benjamin's concept of translatability. For Benjamin, a text's translatability is directly proportional to the diversity of readings it can generate. Whereas the early Mu'tazilīs denied Qur'ānic inimitability on the grounds that the Qur'ān had been created by human beings,²² al-Jurjānī's *naẓm* read in light of Benjaminian translatability suggests that the Qur'ān is translatable precisely because of miraculousness and multi-layered meanings. Needless to say, this interpretation reads al-Jurjānī against the grain of his own tradition, and possibly as well against the grain of his own intentions, and additionally risks simplifying the arguments of his predecessors, but in doing so it makes apparent the Arabic theorist's relevance to contemporary translation theory.

Benjamin's rendering of translatability usefully preserves the dense constellations of meanings and ideas specific to any literary text, which Arabic and Persian critics alike referred to as *naẓm*. Rather than flatten out the literariness of a text as a preliminary step to rendering it translatable, Benjamin considers how those qualities of a text that appear to most resist translation actually contribute to a text's translatability. "The lower the quality and distinction of [a text's] language", stipulates Benjamin, "the more it is information [*Mitteilung*], the less it is amenable to translation, until an utter preponderance of meaning [*Sinn*] renders it untranslatable" (1991:20). When it is entirely controvertible with its content, Benjamin maintains against the grain of conventional wisdom, mere information cannot be translated. Texts that, whether through their language (*lafẓ*), their content (*ma'nā*) or both, bear singular meanings, are merely the sum of their parts, and can only live in their original language, if at all. In contrast to informational texts that boast of one-to-one correspondences between word and meaning, literary texts attain their richest afterlives in incommensurable but eminently possible translations.

Benjamin's views on the translatability of poetry as a function of its complexity bear comparison with those of Rashīd al-Dīn Waṭwāt (d. 1182), a Persian literary critic, polymath and student of the Mu'tazilī theologian al-Zamakhsharī.²³ Striving to assimilate the trope of translation (*al-tarjama*) to the repertoire of Persian rhetorical theory in his treatise *Magic Gardens* (*Ḥadā'iq al-sihr*), Waṭwāt

²² This suggestion that Qur'ānic inimitability arose as a response to the Mu'tazilī concept of the createdness of the Qur'ān (*khalq al-Qur'ān*) and is far from settled; I am assuming it here for the sake of argument. For more detailed discussion of this problem, see Bouman (1959) and Larkin (1988).

²³ For Waṭwāt's interactions with al-Zamakhsharī, see *Majmū'at Rasā'il Rashīd al-Dīn Waṭwāt*, 2:87 and 2:59; Yāqūt, *Mu'jam al-udabā'*, 7:91, no. 51; Kurd 'Alī (1946:378-81); and Lane (2006:262).

defined translation as “a device whereby the poet arranges [nizām konad] the conceptual content [*maʿnī*] of an Arabic couplet in the Persian language or a Persian couplet in Arabic” (*Ḥadāʾiq al-sihr*, 302). Like al-Jāḥiẓ before him, Waṭwāt conceived of translation as the reproduction of *naẓm* in a new language. In contrast to al-Jāḥiẓ, the Persian theorist, writing three centuries later, regarded translation not only as feasible and inevitable but as laudable. This is not surprising in view of the linguistic conditions under which Waṭwāt elaborated his theory of translation. Bilingualism was a fact of everyday life in the Persianate (Ghaznavid, Saljūq and Shirwānshāh) empires that shaped new literary genres as they generated new literary rhetorics. Arabo-Persian bilingualism also characterized the linguistic texture of *Magic Gardens*.

Roughly a century before Waṭwāt, the Central Asian Muḥammad b. Umar Rādūyānī, concerning whose biography nothing is known, was one of the first theorists in the Islamic world to turn to Persian to elaborate a poetics that was at once indebted to and different from Arabic precedents. In his treatise, *The Interpreter of Rhetoric* (*Tarjumān al-Balāgha*), Rādūyānī describes translation as a rhetorical device (*yekī az balāghat*) that, when it is most successful, transfers the conceptual content completely and in a beautifully worded utterance (*maʿnī ra tamām naql konad va lafzi muʿjaz-i baligh*; *Tarjumān al-Balāgha*, 210). For Rādūyānī, as for Shams-i Qays who followed him, translation counted among the ways in which poets can legitimately appropriate and borrow from each other. The transfer (*naql*) of meaning (*maʿnī*) was more than merely possible: it constituted the very goal of poetic expression. Drawing on the multiple significations of *tarjama*, Rādūyānī made translation analogous to the discourse of poetry (*sukhan*), which strives to encompass as many meanings (*maʿānī*) as possible within a single utterance (*lafẓ*).

In contrast to al-Jāḥiẓ’s insistence on the need for one-to-one correspondences between signifiers and signifieds, Persian literary criticism, following al-Jurjānī’s lead, emphasized sematic multiplicity as a stimulus to translation. Persian literary theory’s most sustained contribution to translation theory is however found not in the eleventh-century treatise of Rādūyānī or in Waṭwāt’s twelfth-century response, but in the thirteenth-century compilation of Shams-i Qays, a literary critic and rhetorician from Rayy (near modern Tehran).²⁴ According to his own account, Shams-i Qays had originally composed his masterpiece, called simply *The Compendium* (*al-Muʿjam*), in Arabic. Shams-i Qays regarded *naql*, a more technical term for translation than *tarjama*, as the ideal form of literary appropriation (*al-Muʿjam*, 469-498).

Translation for Persian literary theorists referred specifically to the rendering of Arabic into Persian and vice-versa rather than to a generalized process across multiple languages. Like Waṭwāt, Rādūyānī conceptualized translation as an exchange between two specific languages, Arabic and Persian. It did not

²⁴ The most recent scholarship on Shams-i Qays is found in the unpublished theses of Landau (2002) and Diebler (1997).

occur to him to conceive of translation outside the Arabo-Persian context. The unfixed movement between an infinite number of languages that describes the translational process today would have appeared so hypothetical as to be deemed irrelevant. And yet this linguistic demarcation caused the trope of 'translation' (*al-tarjama*) to enter the rhetorical canon through the treatises of Rādūyānī, Waṭwāt and Shams-i Qays, guaranteeing that Arabic and Persian poetics would always be mutually constitutive, at least on the Persian side. At the same time as Persian poets crafted new literary genres such as prison poetry on Arabic foundations, their fellow critics were busy translating an Arabic discipline, rhetoric (*balāgha*), into a Persian environment.

Translation is reductive in that as many meanings as possible must be condensed into the space of a single semantic utterance. But this very compression can generate an expansion of meaning through the medium of language. Under the influence of Arabic and Persian engagements with Qur'ānic *icjāz* from the tenth to the twelfth centuries, *nāzm* came to signify an exchange between language and meaning. In contradistinction to its original signification as ordered verse, *nāzm* in the sense of structure was consciously crafted to reconcile literary language with sacred hermeneutics. Cognizing the implications of the Persianization of Arabic rhetoric means recognizing the work done by *nāzm* in facilitating the literary translation, even though the account of *nāzm* that has been given here in terms of Saussure and Benjamin requires us to read al-Jāhīz, al-Jurjānī, Waṭwāt, Rādūyānī and Shams-i Qays against the grain.

According to Benjamin, only those texts that function as mere receptacles for information are untranslatable. Similarly, from the perspective of the later Arabophone and Persephone Muṭazilīs, poetry (*nāzm*) is *more* translatable than prose (*nathr*), and double meanings are *more* translatable than singular significations. A signifier with many signifieds – such as *tarjama*, renderable both as translation and interpretation – thereby extends the range of meanings latent in the target language. Translation from this vantage point resembles less the displacement of meaning from one language into another than the reconstitution of *nāzm*-as-structure in a new linguistic milieu. The translational process entails creativity even as it presumes fidelity. Instead of striving to reproduce either the idea or expression of a given literary work, a translation that comes into being in a literary culture animated by polysemic literary figuration and which has even devised tropes to express felicitous polysemy (Arabic *tawriya*; Persian *īhām*) strives to reactivate – though not necessarily to reproduce – the relation between form and content that obtains in the original.

When he asserts that "the higher [*höher*] the level of a work, the more translatable it is" (1991:20), Benjamin aligns his theory of translatability to that of his Islamic predecessors. Specifically, Benjamin's concept of translatability is kindred to al-Rummānī's view that the more ways there are for the spirit to approach a text, the more beautiful it is. Because translation is itself a creative process for both thinkers, translatability is the handmaiden of semantic

multiplicity, not its enemy. So, while metaphysically Benjamin is susceptible to a nostalgic yearning for a pre-Babelian state of linguistic wholeness and transparency, his view that translatability is characteristic of the densest texts and of translation as transcreation opens up a cognitive space for translation as a distinctive condition for poetic language. Benjamin's and al-Jurjānī's adumbrations of translatability confound modern monolingual ideals as well as the 'fear of entropy' that follows from the destruction of the Tower of Babel as they fashion robust poetics from translation's multiplicity.

If, as Sheldon Pollock has claimed, translation is simply "another mode of making sense of a text, and hence an ancillary form of philology" (in press), then the sense making facilitated by translation uses the original to intervene in the target language. The meanings that emerge from translational hermeneutics are distinct from, although related to, the meanings that emerge from methods more widely recognized as interpretive, such as exegesis, commentary and analysis. More than simply to understand, to translate in this capacious sense is to recreate the equilibrium between meaning and utterance that circumscribed the original text. 'Equilibrium' is intended here in contradistinction to stasis. Unlike words, equilibriums cannot be mechanically generated. Their translation therefore requires an extreme degree of creativity, openness to difference, and engagement with the otherness of the text.

Translational fidelity is commonly reduced to a choice between spirit and letter, as though it were possible to reproduce forms without content, and words (*alfāz*) without meanings (*ma'ānī*). The deployments of structure (*nāẓm*) by al-Jurjānī and Waṭwāt, of transference (*naql*) by Rādūyānī, and of translatability (*Übersetzbarkeit*) by Benjamin share in common the implication that the task of the translator is to generate tensions rather than to regurgitate fixed meanings. Looking beyond the spirit/letter dichotomy, these thinkers perceived a text's magic in its *nāẓm*, which by that point had come to signify internal structure as well as external arrangement. *Nāẓm* in turn merged interpretation and fabrication, criticism and creation. While these critics did not necessarily envision *nāẓm* as legitimating translation in the ways that have been proposed here, their ideas collectively challenge many of the limitations that continue to structure contemporary thinking about translation, including the fetish that a translated text should be entirely commensurate with its original and the perception of monolingualism as a normative condition.

In the world that gave birth to Arabo-Persian poetics, the transposition of meanings across cultures within the confines of a shared language was a more effective means of managing difference than the literal transposition of meaning from one language into another. The latter form of exchange dominated cultural encounters of an earlier era, including between ancient Greece and the medieval Islamic world (Pirce and Naeh 2009). The more distant the culture, the more imperative was the precise translation of its literary artifacts. The proximity of Arabic and Persian to each other created a space for creativity to

flourish. Persian poets were translators – of genres, of discourses, cultures, and ways of relating to the new forms of power introduced by shifts in the basis of Islamic governance.²⁵ Their translations of genres within Persian enabled later translations from Persian into other languages, including local vernaculars.

Given that, as Tsvetan Todorov has remarked, “the historical existence of genres is signaled by discourse on genres”, the distinctions among poetic genres that were articulated in Persian rhetorical manuals signal the birth of new literary forms (Todorov 1990:17). The same rhetorical manuals that presided over the advent of the prison poem (*ḥabsīyyāt*), the bacchic poem (*khamriyyāt*), and the ascetic poem (*zuhdīyyāt*) also helped to craft Persian conceptualizations of translation. Bacchic and ascetic poems were first composed in the ‘Abbāsīd period, preeminently by Abū Nūwās (756-814). While Abū Nūwās wrote in Arabic, he was born to a Persian mother, and his Arabic poems contain unprecedented admixtures of Persian words (Shakib 1982). Just as the prison poem was stimulated by the translation of Arabic rhetoric into Persian, so did Abū Nūwās’ poetic innovations inspire a new school of rhetorical criticism, launched when the poet-caliph Ibn al-Mu‘tazz (d. 908) composed his *Book of the New* (*Kitāb al-Badī‘*).

The confinement of rhetorical theory within a single language in early Arabic literature contrasts with the later fragmentation into multiple languages once New Persian became a major vehicle for literary expression. Significantly, this translation of an entire discipline from Arabic into Persian laid the groundwork for the re-Arabization of New Persian. For whereas Rādūyānī’s prose resembles Ferdowsī’s poetry in its aversion to an Arabic lexicon, the rhetorical treatises that followed from this work systematically juxtaposed Arabic to Persian examples of literary figuration, as if to suggest that nothing fundamental divided the two languages from each other.²⁶ Twelfth-century Persian created a space where poets could speak to each other, across space, race, creed and religion. In addition to the geographic range of the languages in which they wrote, Persian poetry was enriched by this exposure to cultural and linguistic difference. Ultimately, this internal differentiation within a single language yielded to a more lasting fragmentation across multiple vernaculars. The literary florescence of Ottoman Turkish and Urdu is at once a response to and reaction against cosmopolitan traditions of Arabic and Persian.

Translatability, which for these poets and critics was premised on multiple signification, was the primary criterion of excellence. While modern linguistics commonly understands language as a form of communication, neither al-Jurjānī’s *nazm* nor Rādūyānī’s *naql* deploy language for the purpose of communication. In Islamic literary culture, translation was available to make

²⁵ For a discussion of these shifts in relation to changes in literary genres, see chapter five of Gould (2011).

²⁶ For an introduction to the complex subject of the relation between Persian and Arabic rhetorical treatises, see Smyth (1989).



foreignness legible. Translation was an adornment, a subdivision of poetry, a means of intensifying the beauty of a text and multiplying its polysemy. It was admired less for its communicative functions than for its help in making poetry legible. Poets aimed less to produce works that would be translated than to write poetry that was translatable because it was infused with multiple meanings. In part because language has been instrumentalized in modernity, poets and critics have lost touch with this approach that conceives of translation, like poetry, as an end in itself.

The Persian tradition's non-instrumental relationship to literary language converges with Benjamin's vision of translation as a "provisional way of coming to terms with the foreignness of languages" (Benjamin 1991:14) and not, as in some branches of modern linguistics, as a means of communicating across languages. This view is also kindred to that of Deleuze and Guattari, who state that translation should be understood "[not] simply as the ability of one language to 'represent' in some way the givens of another language, but beyond that as language's ability" to represent cognitive forms that exceed language itself (Deleuze and Guattari 1987:62). On both Benjamin's and Deleuze and Guattari's accounts, the ultimate testimony to translatability is the ever-shifting relation between form and content that is *nāzm* in the sense of an internal structure. But whereas Benjamin located the foreignness of language outside and beyond human contingency, and opposed the reader's mortality to the immortality of scripture in ways that recall the early Islamic opposition between inimitability and translatability, and between the Islamic traditionalists who sought to sacralize Qur'ān and the Mu'tazilīs who sought to historicize the text, Persian translational practice has historically emphasized the foreignness that runs through language and which deepens rather than inhibits translation.

Before they are encompassed and surrounded by foreignness, languages, like people, are foreign to themselves. Building on this difference, on what Derrida would call the *différance* that inhabits every literary meaning and which constitutes the point of departure for translation as well as for speaking, medieval Islamic poets crafted a poetics of subjectivity through their respective genres. To translate, whether across languages, genres or cultures, is to come to terms with difference. With the help of classical Islamic literary theory, translation theory is now in an ideal position to clarify how we can use the differences residing within the text – differences that stimulated the often contradictory but always vibrant intellectual history of Qur'ānic exegesis – to elucidate, transform, and otherwise extend the differences residing in the world.

REBECCA GOULD

Division of Humanities, Yale-NUS College, 282 York Street, New Haven, CT 06511, Singapore. rebecca.gould@yale-nus.edu.sg

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