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Basil Bunting and the Challenges of Literary Translation from Persian into English: A Case of Rūdhakī

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to analyze Basil Bunting's literary translation. It turns to the theories of translation by Steiner, Benjamin, and Eco, among others, to study Bunting's translation of Rūdhakī's 'Dandaniyyeh' poem, a 10th century qaṣīdah replete with mesmerizing musicality and with a form galvanized in its originating language, time, and locale. A deep contrastive analysis of its translation into English by the poet, Bunting, shows the difficulties that can arise from literal translations of classical Persian poetry.

Keywords: Basil Bunting, Iran, literary translation, Rūdhakī, George Steiner, Walter Benjamin.

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1. Introduction

“The translator,” writes Eleonora Federici, is first and foremost “a traveller, a curious wanderer into a new and unknown world, who follows many hints and finds new routes in an unexplored textual map. ... he travels with a consistent literary and cultural baggage” (Federici, 2007: 147). Such is the case with Basil Bunting (1900-1985), a prominent modernist poet, *Times* correspondent, British spy, and avid translator of Persian classical poetry. He called his translations “overdrafts” in order to show, out of respect for his Persian masters, that they were merely notes to the original texts. However, some of these translations are troublingly inaccurate, as Bunting sometimes put his poetic skill and political agenda before his aspirations as a literary translator. He saw Persia as “one of the pleasantest exotic places in the world” (Share, *Bunting’s Persia* xii), and he was not averse to casting drops of vague, incoherent mystery in his own poems that deal with Iran. Despite these shortcomings, he also produced work that show a mastery of literary translation. Since Bunting remained relatively obscure until late in life, it is not surprising that his works of poetic translation have remained largely unnoticed by scholars. While twenty of Bunting’s translations have been published, it is beyond the scope of this article to engage directly with all of them. Instead, I decided to focus on analyzing one of his translated works: the rendering into English of a poem “Dandaniyyeh” [‘elegy on rotten teeth’] by tenth-century poet, Rūdhakī.

This particular poem has been chosen because it shows two main problems in literary translation: first, to explore the problematic of the cultural-linguistic barrier that exists between two diverse languages (English and Persian); and second, to trace the overt, covert, or non-existent motivations of the translator. Of course, by motivations, the writer means to dissect the texts and to confront them comparatively with the original; the differences that arise as a result of this comparativism can shed light on the possible reasons for the confusion, and the semantic choices made by the translator which led to those confusions.

Bunting lived in Iran on and off for over a decade and was eventually convicted as a spy and dismissed from his job by Iranian prime minister, Mohammad Mosaddegh, in 1952. As politically charged as his oeuvre was, Bunting's selection of the Persian poems provides an 'other' site to which he could freely escape. His attempts at literary translation therefore need to be discussed in the light of the aesthetic agenda that informed his poetics; moreover, his endeavours, framed within a colonialist and modernist discourse, to reconcile the two cultures in question require a separate case study.

Bunting is said to have produced some of the greatest translations of classical Persian poetry.¹ They might seem fitting for the English context and audience, but they are obviously problematic when compared to the original Persian. This disjunction occurs partly because of the linguistic and cultural problems endemic to the translation of literary texts into markedly different contexts, and partly because Bunting believed translation functioned as a means to escape from his political mission as 'Chief of Political Intelligence.' But there is another problem: as a court martial interpreter for prisoners, he was self-conscious about his knowledge of Farsi. He once told fellow poet Jonathan Williams that having mastered Hafiz and Rūdhakī's verse, he was commissioned to solve the tribal disputes in western Iran, in vain: "it was as if someone came along in England speaking a Chaucerian mode" (Burton, 2013: 277). But he nonetheless struggled to remain in Iran, to tend to both his literary and political missions. Working in "neutral" Iran after the 1943 Tehran Conference (Eureka),² and then during the Cold War, Bunting thought that "the West could not progress without an acquaintance with the cultures of Islamic countries." He was not only prophetic regarding "the global economic crisis" characteristic of the last decade, but crucial for understanding "the vast importance of Middle Eastern culture to ours"

1 See for instance: Bunting, Basil, and Carroll F. Terrell. *Basil Bunting: Man and Poet* 315.

2 A 1943 meeting that took place in Tehran between Winston Churchill, Franklin Roosevelt and Joseph Stalin, after the Anglo-Soviet invasion of Iran.

through his translations of Persian texts (Share, 2012: xvi). Such statements from fellow poets and translators call for a thorough examination of the translations, from a variety of perspectives.

George Steiner in *After Babel* defines translation as a hermeneutic endeavour of the translator vis-à-vis his/her original text, which he describes as having four steps: trust, aggression, embodiment, and restitution (1975: 312-19). Studying Bunting's translations according to these steps will shed light on the degrees of Bunting's adherence or divergence from the main text. Whereas some poems appear to be a free translation at first reading, on a deeper level, it is crucial to demonstrate how Bunting incorporates his autobiographical self, disavowing his political and historical views accrued during his peregrinations as a spy. The latter, Bunting's incorporation of his "self" into his translations, calls for a separate study, which will be conducted in another article.

2. The Hermeneutic Motion

In *After Babel*, Steiner regards translation as a process, and it is the nuances of this process that, he thinks, a translator should delve deeply into, in order to produce a good translation. He distances himself from theorists of translation for whom the act of translation consists merely in a linguistic analysis that reflects either an adherence to or a digression from the source or target language. Indeed, Steiner insists that there is more than meets the eye in linguistics; namely, a language is a perennially mutable living thing—"unstable and dialectical" (Steiner, 1975: 129)—and in order to be able to take into account both the diachronic and the synchronic aspects of a language, one must see beyond linguistics as merely a form of utterance. To this end, Steiner likes to think that translation, *Übersetzung*, does not do justice to the act of translation. Rather, he regards it as *Übertragung*, meaning, 'to carry over.' As metaphor also literally means 'to carry across,' it is important to highlight the fact that, for Steiner, translation is the process of bridging gaps between two languages/cultures.

Just like travelling, the act of translation is the removal and relocation of an utterance, set in a specific space and time, to a whole new context with its own cultural nuances and specificities. This act, however, does not mean that one should be content with the mere relocation of meaning from one language into another. It requires other meanings to be taken into consideration, as there are not only things that are untranslatable, such as the comma and other forms of punctuation, but also, necessarily, elements of the target language exist that do not fit into the cultural context of its host language. Therefore, Steiner embeds his theory of translation within hermeneutics and interpretation; translation is, for him, perforce an ongoing process.

Moreover, the problems involved in translations and their analyses are to a large degree of an ethical nature (Goodwin, 2010: 19-20). To Steiner, translation is an inherently violent act as it demonstrates a ‘betrayal,’ a sense of plunder, a ravaging of an ‘other’ territory. Steiner proposes four key steps towards translation of texts, which he calls ‘the hermeneutic motion.’ These four steps—which essentially call upon translators to be meticulous about the nature of such act—are trust, aggression, incorporation, and restitution. It is also an attempt by Steiner to disentangle translation studies from its triadic mode (literalism, paraphrase, and free imitation), a theory that is as old as its known history. I will now turn to an analysis of each of these steps.

2.1. Trust: A Leap of Faith

In this step, the translator finds a ‘serious’ subject matter that they deem worthy of their trust. Phenomenologically, this leap of faith is initiated by an inherent agreement that the world is coherent, that culturally different texts and varying semantic entities require attention, and that “analogy and parallel” are valid phenomenological tools at any discerning individual’s disposal. “The radical generosity of the translator, ... his trust in the ‘other’, as yet untried, unmapped

alternity of statement, concentrates to a philosophically dramatic degree the human bias towards seeing the world as symbolic, as constituted of relations in which ‘this’ can stand for ‘that’” (Steiner, 1975: 312). This is an obvious, inevitable, proposition so long as the existence of meaning and structure are believed to be present at a given context. However, trust does not come without its challenges; there are, especially in translations of a literary nature, figures of speech, rhymes, punctuations (or lack thereof) that simply cannot be rendered or that are too insignificant or elusive to translate. Other difficulties involve the translator’s consciousness of a text either not having been translated previously, or the monadistic conjecture that nothing can disintegrate the organic unity of the original, forcing the translator to leave the lapidary text altogether (Steiner, 1975: 313). This “radical generosity,” therefore, is not blind faith. The translator constantly grapples with intra and extratextual elements that either make or break the translation’s validity.

2.2. Aggression: Incursion and Extraction

The second step, Steiner believes, is both “incursive and extractive” (Steiner, 1975: 313). The translator violently penetrates an alien territory and tries to steal and extract as much as they can from the source. Drawing from Heidegger and Ricoeur, that all forms of understanding and cognition are inherently appropriative and violent, Steiner sees this second step as an inevitable dimension of deeming any text to be as authentic, comprehensible, and hence translatable. This procedure, to Steiner, is like that of doctors treating patients: they examine and lay bare the text in order to understand it. Of course, the act of understanding is also the task of the general reader. But beyond simply understanding, translators should come to a deeper analysis of what they want to “bring home” (Steiner, 1975: 314), and, how they have come to an impression worthy of translation. Aggression is an important level of the fourfold hermeneutic motion, as it sets the stage ready for the translator to import, incorporate, and embody.

2.3. Incorporation: Infection and Domestication

After the translator has plundered the source text and extracted meaning from it, it is now time for them to incorporate and embody those meanings into a new mold. In this step, the translator chooses whether to translate literally, phrase by phrase, or narrative by narrative. Here, the translator decides whether to find a match that resembles the meaning in its foreignness—keeping its strangeness intact in the translation (“permanent strangeness”)—or, to give it a new shape more in line with the target language, that is, “complete domestication” (Steiner, 1975: 314). The dilemma confronting the translator is that the semantic field is already brimming with different words and meanings. The translator either enriches the source language through a “sacramental intake,” or by repairing to linguistic “infection,” acquainting the target language with meanings only distantly relatable and tangible (Steiner, 1975: 315). Whether the word choice is sacramental or infectious, the constant grappling with language necessarily creates an imbalance in the act of translation. The second and third steps (aggression and incorporation), as we have seen, are generally meant to benefit the target language; this imbalance is why Steiner proposes a fourth step: restitution.

2.4. Restitution: Giving Back

Now that the translator has ‘infected’ the target language, and by doing so, unsettled it with incomplete translation or else infused it with fresh nuances from the lexicon of the target language, Steiner argues that it is time to bring the translation into balance, to give back what it has plucked from the original. Of course, this is not to say that the original is inevitably weakened. There is, Steiner says, a “dialectically enigmatic residue” that is not bad altogether. The original is indeed tilted off balance, but what must also be taken into account is the residue, which is always positive, and which makes the original text ‘inflated,’ ‘magnified,’ even enriched, expanded. But

what of the imbalance produced? As I mentioned, the translator has taken either too much—over-read, over-interpreted, and misunderstood—or taken too little—has blotted out, elided, or ignored some elements altogether. A genuine translation seeks to mediate between the opposing forces that threaten to unbalance the work of the translator, moving towards visualizing the virtues of the source text, while adding imagery to dimensions of the text that seem oblique from the context opened up in the source language. And since no exact copy exists in an act of translation, the translated text—Steiner insists, invoking Friedrich Schleiermacher and Paul Celan—seeks to find equity in acknowledging ‘potentialities’ that were kept unsaid in the original. This is what Steiner asks from a translated text to show: “a demand for equity” (Steiner, 1975: 318).

In line with Steiner’s fourth step, Susan Bassnett believes that in translating poetry, one should disassemble the original text from its raw material, and then reorganize the most important elements of the poem (i.e., its signs) into a new mold. This way, the result is not merely a (vain) copy of the original, but a text that both resembles it and is a window towards new possibilities in its new context (Bassnett, 1998: 57-75). As opposed to a slavish rendering of the old signs and in perpetual dilemma between two different sets of signs, Bassnett hopes to find a better way for translators to produce a text that is free from its original signs and images, and towards one that is open to the infusion of new possibilities and image-making (Bassnett, 1998: 74). This fusion in the poem is crucial in understanding Steiner’s fourth step, restitution. Translation, he says, is both ethical and economic. Since “the arrows of psychological and cultural benefaction point both ways” (Steiner, 1975: 317), translators need to make sure that their text leads us back to the original, even if it simply means piquing the readers’ curiosity as to how the source text has expressed the thoughts they have reconstructed. However the means, a genuine translation should consciously harken back—in the attempt to “restore the equilibrium between itself and the original” (Steiner, 1975: 415)—and complete its “hermeneutic of trust” (Steiner, 1975: 318), enhancing

the source as much as it unspools and expands itself upon the target culture with new signs and meanings. Steiner's philosophical outlook serves as a suitable guideline for translation studies, as its concerns are related to more general and broader questions that constitute the act of translation, in different disciplines and genres. I will now turn to an analysis of 'Dandaniyyeh,' a poem by Rūdhakī, and of its translation by Bunting.

3. Rūdhakī's 'Dandaniyyeh'

Abū 'Abd Allāh Ja'far ibn Muḥammad al-Rūdhakī (c. 859 – 941 A.D), a Persian poet, a pioneer of the Khorassani style and elegiac verse, is known as the father of Persian poetry. He was a poet laureate of the Samani kings who ruled over parts of what is now Iran's Khorasan province, northern Afghanistan, southern Turkmenistan, and parts of Central Asia. His blindness¹ and his skills at playing the harp accompanied by his own verse gave him a bardic status. Rūdhakī was a prolific writer and is said to have written nearly one million and three hundred thousand verses, including a translation of Kalila and Demna² in verse, of which—after the 17-18th century Mughal invasions—only a divān is extant. While very simple in language, the 'Dandanyyeh' poem—one of his best-known pieces³, supposedly written towards the end of his life—is an elegy upon the poet's senility and poverty. It shows Rūdhakī's mastery at infusing musicality into his verse, incorporating it with both grief and acceptance of fate.

1 Amir Hossein Moeini finds textual references that suggest Rūdhakī's eyesight, including in the poem studied here, challenging the prevailing idea that he was blind. See for instance, Moeini, *Understanding Rudaki's Divān* 78.

2 A collection of fables in Sanskrit, which was translated into Pahlavi (Old Persian) in the sixth century. Rūdhakī's verse translation has had an immense impact on subsequent Arabic translations, through which the book gained international recognition. The intertextuality of these texts calls for a separate study. Although, it is important to note here that their confluence and intertextuality makes translating them an even more challenging task. See Taghi Vahidian Kamyar, "Has Rudaki Versified all of Kalila and Demna?" 27-32.

3 Ahad Pishgar studies the influence that this poem alone had on several subsequent Persian poets. See "Poets and their Imitation of Roodaki's Ode on Teeth" 29-33.

Bunting translated this poem in 1948.¹ His version exemplifies several of the problems that confront the translator: the incorporation of personal judgment, the question of editorial preference, and most importantly, the linguistic-cultural misunderstandings that can arise in the act of translation. In order to analyze Bunting's translation based on Steiner's fourfold hermeneutic motion, it seems fit to mention the practical method of overlooking a translator's work, as laid out by Peter Krings. Krings analyzed the thinking strategies of professional and amateur translators to find out their differences, through his 'think-aloud' protocol (Snell-Hornby, 2006: 123-4). He concluded that professional translators use holistic strategies after reading and re-reading the text; whereas amateur translators have a linear strategy, translating as they go, and are concerned mainly with rendering smaller aspects of the text, that is, words and phrases. In other words, professional translators use their wide-ranging knowledge and experience in their work, while amateurs base their work on emphasizing the meaning of words and the representational aspects of the original. This is not to say Bunting falls under either of those categories. However, Steiner's hermeneutic motion is a process-oriented method, meaning that translation is an on-going process in which the translator is in constant dialogue with the original. The translator keeps going back and forth between the original and the target texts, incorporating not only the elemental features and meaning of words and phrases, but also the more nuanced aspects such as social, endomorphic, and exomorphic features of the source, their cultural significance and relevance in the target language, and finally, their symbiosis and overall balance (Pym, 2009: 6). Thus, it would be wise to see Krings's experiment in tandem with a process-oriented method that deems meaning to be dynamic; in doing so, we see more clearly that Translation Studies is a rigorous field, and that in performing such a task (i.e., analyzing a work of translation), the study

¹ Bunting's translation can be found here: Don Share, *The Poems of Basil Bunting* 143-144.

of both micro- and macro-linguistics are a must. For the first hermeneutic step, trust, we need to analyze Bunting's translation from a bottom-up approach. I will first start with analyzing the surface meaning of the translated text.

The poem relates the life story of an old poet, Rūdhakī himself. Speaking to a beloved, Rūdhakī first describes his declining present state and then revisits his life through a series of flashbacks: his days of youth and beauty, his capricious adventures, and his creativity in writing poetry. He speaks of his years of bliss, success, and fame, his artistic peregrinations, and of the vast resources and rewards he was given by the Samani Dynasty. Finally, descending from the lofty style of memories of his past, he finishes the poem with a humble one-liner describing again, with unflinching clarity, his current state of poverty and senility.

At best, Bunting's translation can be regarded as literal. A literal translation is based on the translator's assumption that stressing on the meaning of words and phrases in isolation is the best way to convey the meaning of a poem as a whole. This, however, is not a false assumption insofar as the translator, at least in hindsight, reflects upon and strives towards achieving an integrity with the help of those literal renditions, as constituents of an organic whole. Achieving integrity necessitates a critical understanding of the connotative meaning of words and phrases; otherwise, in Willis Barnstone's words, "it should be measured as a verbal science rather than a literary art" (1993: 33). The lines of the original poem represent a continuous stream of thoughts and images, using enjambment and the paratactical arrangement of sentences. But this integrity is not always retained in Bunting's rendition, as several misunderstandings of the stream of thought in the original text, so it seems, has led to semantic shortfalls. For instance, lines 18-19 of the translation reads: "You tickle him with your curls / but never knew the time when he had curls." The original says, crudely put, something like this: "You brag about your polo-stick curls with him [your lover] / but never knew the time when he had curls like a polo-stick." Leaving out the allusions to the famous sport

aside, the crux of the error seems to lie in a misunderstanding of the word ‘*nazesh*,’ meaning ‘to boast and brag’ (Moeini 80). Bunting took the word to be ‘*nazash*’: ‘*naz*’ meaning ‘to tickle’ or to ‘caress,’ and ‘*ash*’ being a third person singular pronoun, making the word mean ‘tickle him.’ The translation is thus bereft of the simplicity and beauty of the original, making it more like a rushed interpretation that stems from misunderstanding a word. Likewise, in line 23, immediately after the poet has spoken of the beautiful face and jet-black hair of his youth (lines 20-21), Bunting translates: “Likewise, comeliness of guests and friends was dear / but one dear guest will never return” (lines 22-23). In the original text, the “dear guest” that does not return is ‘Youth’ itself, and this metaphor is apparent considering the musical flow and speedy pace of the lines: the procession of the author’s life from youth to senility is set to such a musical and rhythmic tone that any knowledgeable reader would recognize what the ‘dear guest’ is referring to. However, since the format of the text has been unsettled and the flow thwarted by Bunting, his rendition has failed to take that meaning into account. Instead, it gives the impression that “one dear guest,” as any other ‘dear guests,’ will simply not come, without adducing a positive word to associate it with youth and compensating for the lack of flow in the translation.

More conspicuously, in the next few lines, a couple of blunders appear, since the translator seems to be confused as to which point of view the narrator has chosen to speak from. In classical Persian poetry, there is a figure of speech called ‘*eltefat*’ (’التفات’). Literally meaning ‘to look at’ or ‘to turn one’s back to see someone or something,’ the figure is used when the writer chooses to change the narrator’s point of view for giving the story a fresh look, or, to produce a distancing effect. In other words, the poet abruptly shifts the narrative focus, vacillating between first person and third person. In his comprehensive article on tenses in classical Persian literature, “A Generic Analysis of Temporal Conflicts within Tenses in Ancient Narratives,” Mahmoud Barati studies the stylistic effect of ‘*eltefat*’

and its significance in meaning making. Barati believes that a poem using *eltefat* “is not meant to be read merely as an ornament or figure of speech; rather, we should acknowledge that often the context and the word choices necessitate” such changes in focal perspective (40). In this sense, understanding *eltefat* as part and parcel of the text’s compound of meaning is crucial. Lines 24-25 of Bunting’s translation read: “Many a beauty may you have marvelled at / but I was always marvelling at *her* beauty” (my emphasis). What the original means is: “Many a beauty may *he* [the poet-speaker in third person] have marvelled at, and those beauties would marvel at him [the poet-speaker] in awe as well.” The confusion produced by the genderless pronoun ‘*ou*’ (‘او’ [‘him/her/them’]), has obviously caused a problem for the rendition. Likewise, the next lines in the translation read: “The days are past when she was glad and gay / and overflowing with mirth and I was afraid of losing her” (26-27). Bunting uses the feminine pronoun as if (or to add to the story) a third lover was once involved in the narrator’s life, but that she is now gone. Moreover, the blunder becomes more obvious as in the same lines, Bunting has mistaken the meaning of ‘*Noghsan*’ (‘نقصان’ [‘shortage’]) with ‘loss.’ Therefore, whereas the poem is saying: “the days of youth are past when *he* (the poet in third person) was in joyful bliss, and when sadness (‘غم’; *gham*) was at its minimum (shortage of sadness, literally),” the translation makes the puzzling assumption that the narrator was afraid he might ‘lose’ this third lover. In this poem, Rūdhakī shifts the focus of narration six times. Bunting’s rendition in the other four instances uses the masculine pronoun; therefore, there is a lack of consistency in his use of the feminine pronoun that reinforces the previous assumption that he in fact did not ‘mean’ to introduce a third lover into the story.

Another textual mishap in the rendition occurs with respect to word choice. For example, his use of the word ‘husband’ in line 32 (“for dread of the husband and the jail”) is questionable, since the narrator

is obviously referring to the time when girls (mistresses) were at hand for him wherever he went. Whereas ‘*kanizak*’ (‘کنیزک’) means a maidservant (Moeini 83), the use of the word ‘husband’ reinforces the implication of adultery, something that obviously gives such a simple poem a more exotic outlook. Another questionable word choice occurs in line 43: “neither household, wife, child nor a patron.” The term ‘*maounat*’ (‘مئونت’) is an Arabic word which means ‘living expense.’ Whereas the poem here implies that the poet laureate (Rūdhakī) never needed to spend a thing, since he had indeed enjoyed the generosity of many patrons among kings and princes (as also seen in the final lines of the poem), the translation chooses to disregard this factual information and uses the word ‘patron’ instead. Historically, according to *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, kings and rulers in Iran would support authors, artists, and scientists in order to boast of their cultural elitism, but also to safeguard for themselves the intellectuals’ support, thereby ‘legitimizing’ their authority (“Ibn Sina [Avicenna]”). As such, patronage as a political tool would mean that as soon as those intellectuals fell out of the people’s favour, their benefactors would more often than not stop supporting them, which would often lead to their divān’s falling out of favor. While consistency is something lacking in Bunting’s rendition and supposed innovations—as a result of what I conclude to be simply linguistic mistakes—there is certainly a consistency to be found in the translator’s misunderstanding of the Persian text. Another example can be found in lines 47-48: “Never saw him when he used to go about / singing his songs as though he had a thousand.” A literal translation would be: “[You] never saw him during the times when he wondered around the world / singing, as if he were a nightingale.” The error becomes apparent when one breaks down the word ‘*hezar dastan*’ (‘هزار داستان’ = nightingale): ‘*hezar*’ in Persian means ‘a thousand’ and ‘*dastan*’ is an old Persian root word for ‘melody.’ Even if Bunting did not have the means and proficiency to do research on the etymological

root of the word, the two words together form a poetic but also commonly used term for the bird that sings a thousand melodies. The translator, more likely, unknowingly shattered the metaphor, took the more comprehensible half of the word, and gave the meaning a banal inflection, that, for instance, the narrator had a thousand songs to sing wherever he went. Moreover, a couplet is missing altogether, after line 50. I will offer a literal translation of the missing couplet¹: “His verse has always been in the *divân* [collection of poetry by a single poet gathered by kings and princes in valuable printing] of kings / his verse will always be in the *divân* of kings.” The importance of this missing couplet seems unnoticeable, due to another misunderstanding in the immediate couplet following the missing one. Bunting translates: “the days are past when all *wrote down* his verses, / the days are past when he was the Poet of Khorassan” (lines 51-2; emphasis mine). ‘*Benevesht*’² (‘بنوشت’ = wrote down) and ‘*Banavasht*’ (‘بنوشت’ = travelled; paced) are two different words, and all manuscripts and subsequent printed versions place the alliteration to specify what meaning (= his poetry travelled the world) was intended. However, since Bunting read the word as meaning ‘wrote,’ he chose to leave out the previous couplet as he perhaps tried to avoid repetition, deeming it unnecessary to bring together three consecutive lines concerned with verse and writing. Indeed, and contradictorily so, the travelling writer here mistook travelling for writing. Mistreating and glossing over the meaning of salient words and the assorted energies released by a poem as such certainly requires a doubly interpretative and

1 This is called a *bait*, and is not actually a couplet (as in two lines). A bait can be defined as a line that is divided by two symmetrical *half-lines*, often containing inner rhymes but also end rhymes, depending on the poem’s form. See Loloi and Pursglove, “Persian Overdrafts,” p. 343.

2 B (ب) is a derivational prefix that has two functions in poetry.: (1) ornamentation (figure of speech); and (2) emphasis. Amir Hossein Moeini believes that Rūdhakī here is using the prefix in the second sense. *Banavasht*, in this bait, therefore, would mean: “It would *indeed/verily* travel the world.” See Moeini, p. 87.

creative authorship that would compensate what the original has been robbed of.

But what of the initial step of trust that must be taken in the translation of the ‘Dandaniyyeh’ poem? Steiner’s first hermeneutic step stipulates that the author should approach the text with a ‘radical generosity,’ with deep trust that there is a ‘presence’ in the text worth investigating. In a letter to Louis Zukofsky on August 28, 1948, Bunting praises Rūdhakī and connects his work with music: “Rūdhakī’s qasidas have given me great delight, especially the wonderful one about all his teeth falling out. One must certainly add his name to the list of the world’s very great poets, even though the remains are so few and fragmentary. I will perhaps send you a prose translation if I ever finish it. I have taken a great liking also to Persian classical music and wish I could get some records of it” (qtd. in Forde, 1991: 124).

It would seem that the initial trust is there, and he already has a private audience for his translation. Far from blind faith, Bunting sees in the musicality of Rūdhakī’s verse a ‘presence’ worth his while to give over to. This trust, however, is walking on thin ice. According to Steiner, at this step, there is a huge dilemma ahead for the translator. On the one hand, he might be ‘betrayed by nonsense,’ learning that “there is nothing there” to interpret (Steiner, 1975: 312). This aspect of the dilemma has everything to do with both non-translatables (glossolalia, rhyme scheme, punctuation, etc.) and the degree of language proficiency; one must evince a practical level of confidence and a ‘radical generosity’ stemming from seeing the world as symbolic—that one thing can stand for another thing—and that, however difficult the task, ‘I can (at least partially) do it.’ On the other hand, there is always the risk of ‘overdoing it’; meaning, the translator, rather Kabalistically (here, Steiner invokes Walter Benjamin), thinks that someone will eventually do it, so ‘Why not me?’ He gives himself over to the task: the speculation, that one and only one true translation can exist, gives the translator the energy to make a stab at it. This prompts the act of translation to be overdone; oftentimes the final

translation is lettered with faults and errors. However, Bunting is obviously not Kabbalistic, as we shall see. That there can only exist one pure translation is what I refer to here as ‘Kabbalistic’. As Barnstone writes, Kabbalists “ask one to read the original or demand a translation so “faithful” that not only the words but the letters must be translated with order and fidelity. To them, letters are as important as words, as evidenced by their pictorial representations derived from holy Scripture that show trees with letters, rather than leaves, hanging from the branches” (Barnstone, 1993: 36).

Similarly, Walter Benjamin, in his article “The Task of the Translator,” talks of a gnostic and Kabbalist approach to language: a pure realm. In his view, each language is merely a small piece of a vessel of that pure language, and the prophetic role of the translator is to piece together—with a mystical and magical import—from the various fragments of the target and the source, striving for a messianic *lingua franca*. I will discuss this matter in relation to Steiner’s theory and Bunting’s practice later.

That said, the two mentioned sides (forces really) of the dilemma, according to Steiner, inevitably leave the translator vulnerable all the same (Steiner, 1975: 312). For now, we can say that for the first step, the translator is in danger of falling prone to a semantic field that is far from his native tongue, not just by the measures of language, but also by measures of time: since languages change over time, and, for instance, Bunting translates a late Middle Persian poem from the tenth century—a language different from modern Persian—into modern English. Therefore, we can say that Bunting passes the first level of ‘initiative trust’ by exposing himself, by surpassing the dilemma of untranslatability and translatability.

However, Bunting’s literalism, his endeavour in transcribing Rūdhakī, in using virtually a word-for-word style in his rendition, is half-hearted. Steiner differentiates between two types of literalism: the first is a “naïve, facile” mode of translation (Steiner, 1975: 313), which stems from the idea of being submissive to the original text: that one need only give in to the plenitude of the source, and that words

translated without authorial intervention suffice in eliciting a desirable meaning close to the original; in this mode, the translation exceeds no further than *èlancement* (trust), rendering the translator into a mere transcriber. The second form of literalism is governed by an intra-lingua mode; that is, the translator seeks to find a space in between, to meet the text halfway via using a shared language that seeks to both express the style and tone of the source, while at the same time concocting the words and their syntax in a way that results in a cohesive text, one that is graspable for the target culture. The second form of literalism leaves the translation in limbo, but if the task is done by someone conscious of the nuances of both languages and the history behind the succession of these texts, their previous translations, interpretations, and so on, then, masterpieces do appear. Steiner gives the example of Chateaubriand's translation of Milton's *Paradise Lost* (Steiner, 1975: 333). Which type does Bunting's practice follow? I argue that, if any, it is of a naïve kind. I will come back to this kind of literalism shortly.

Comprehension, according to Steiner, is an aggressive, even violent act. It constitutes of both cognition and recognition. In the vein of Hegel, Steiner stipulates that cognition is aggressive since it is "an inroad on the world" (Steiner, 1975: 297). The dialectical contradiction that arises between the opposing forces, those between the target and source languages, necessarily leads to a destabilization of meaning, of its 'sublation' from the concept (here, the source language) to its opposite (here, the target language). As Julie Maybee posits, in Hegelian dialectics, cognition's "one-sidedness or restrictedness ... destabilizes its definition and leads it to pass into its opposite."¹

Recognition, too, is violent. Invoking Heidegger, Steiner suggests: "It is Heidegger's contribution to have shown that understanding, recognition, interpretation are a compacted, unavoidable mode of

1 Maybee, Julie E., "Hegel's Dialectics", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2019 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/hegel-dialectics/>>.

attack” (Steiner, 1975: 297). Additionally, it is both the general—Hegelian—dialectical idea of cognition, and the more specific violence attached to the Heideggerian notion of interpretation, that Steiner uses as the backbone of this second step. Translation in this sense is “meaning brought home captive by the translator” (Steiner, 1975: 313). This step is inevitably intrusive and extractive, as the translator needs to lay the text bare and understand the textual and contextual implications of the act of translation. But does Bunting bring home the meaning at all? In a later letter to Zukofsky, Bunting sends the draft of the poem, explaining the rhyme scheme and quantitative measures that “gives some idea of the way a Khorassani mind worked in 950 ad – I mean, in my English” (qtd. in Share, *Poems* 425). Bunting’s stance on how he sees poetry is clear. To him, music and poetry are inseparable. He consistently emphasized the importance of poetry spoken out loud, as, for him, it functions and communicates the same way as music does (Forde, 1991: 248-253). Given his interest in music and the intertwined characteristic of Persian classical poetry and music, it seems he has done extensive research on his subject. In the same letter, he explains Rūdhakī’s poem in detail: “Monorhyme—every second line—with a good deal of internal rhyming and alliteration. The vocabulary exceedingly simple, the main effects being got by the cross-beat of ictus and stress in an elaborate quantitative measure” (Forde, 1991: 124). Bunting re-adjusts the frame of the poem in a way that would be more welcome or recognizable to the modern reader. The obliteration of rhyme has given way to a more lucid iambic pentameter. Instead, for the sake of intensification of the meaning, he has added (“rotten” in line 2), repeated (“ill-luck” in line 6), left out the vehicle of the metaphor to give a simpler meaning of the tenor (‘moon-faced’ of line 16 is translated as “beauty”), and changed altogether (‘he,’ in line 27, translated as “your lover”).

But as the textual analysis of the translation at the beginning of this study revealed, it seems that he lacked enough competence in the Persian language (of the tenth century) to provide a comprehensive

understanding, and an interactive feedback of some very important aspects, of the text. Take, for instance, the example of ‘*hezardastan*’ that Bunting mistook for ‘a thousand songs’ (line 48). In the last example, had he known the bird imagery of the line, would he not have much to bring home to, given the vast range of birds and flight imagery in western literature,¹ and with the enormous variety of connotations at his disposal? The morphological dimensions of words and phrases can never fully be brought home if there are loopholes and gaps in the aggressive process of understanding and ‘making understood.’ It is true that a genuine translation would keep the traces of its original, as a lodestar, so that it would not get lost in the bewilderment of free adaptation. At the same time, the exact words and phrases are not to be followed subserviently, giving way to aspects that possibly could amplify the potential meanings further. In *Mouse or Rat?* Umberto Eco suggests that translators should retain their rendition close to the “referential equivalence” of the original (Eco, 2003: 9). By referential equivalence, Eco means to highlight the importance of words and meanings that matter in preserving the identity of the original text. However, Eco also acknowledges that some exceptions should be made, that is, there are instances where the translator should “disregard reference” and opt for a change in meaning that is more suitable to the comprehension of the target audience (Eco, 2003: 64). Of course, reducing the vast potentialities of creative translation—by ‘disregarding reference’—to mere “exceptions” can be rather restrictive. However, the strategy of not subserviently following the referential equivalents of the original text, provided that it is done correctly, gives the translation a latitude beyond its original. On the other hand, if it is not executed correctly, because of a misunderstanding of parts of the text, the amplified meanings expose grotesque qualities neither intended by the original nor envisioned by the translator. Therefore, in a sense, the

¹ See for instance, John Rowlett, “Ornithological Knowledge and Literary Understanding” 625-647.

aggressiveness—understanding in full, plundering the text, laying it bare, and extracting and bringing home—not only helps the translator to keep the text in check from overreading and parodistic grotesquerie, it also saves the original from becoming less than what it is. This second step, Steiner insists, is tough work, and not all translators have enough financial resources and time at their disposal, or, are capable of handling. Yet again, we can say that the second step, as with the first one, is one taken half-heartedly by Bunting, since if the translator does not show a full understanding of the linguistic aspects of the poem, ignores the ‘referential equivalences,’ and proceeds with a blurred vision, how can they be sure that the same ambiguities and indecisiveness are not translated in place of the text itself?

As you will recall, Steiner uses the term ‘infection’ in his third step. After bringing home and domesticating the original, they now need to infect the target culture with new colloquialisms, borrowed idioms, and a creative lexicon; otherwise, what is the point of a translation if it does not keep an element of surprise and wonder in the target language? Such a “benign infection,” to use Goodwin’s term (2010: 33), is necessary in thinking dialectically, in increasing the potentials, and in expanding the horizons of the original. While Steiner gave a very studious account of the pros and cons of literalism, he had categorically advised against it (Steiner, 1975: 248-292). The reason was, as I said, that he did not opt for an overarching structural theory of translation; he uses his hermeneutic strategy to refute the “sterile triadic model” of translation, marked by literalism, paraphrase, and free imitation (Steiner, 1975: 319). So, what has Bunting’s translation of Rūdhakī’s poem ‘incorporated’ in his native tongue? Given Bunting’s mostly literal translation, I would suggest that he has left not much room for an incorporative step to ‘embody’ what he brought home. As Victoria Forde claims about the poem’s translation, “Bunting proves his adeptness at handling the intricate interlockings” in the hemistiches to intensify the themes of the poem; but nonetheless, Forde continues, the text “itself is too general to provide him with the raw material he needs to build vivid, concrete images”

(Forde, 1991: 125). However, this statement is only partially true. In fact, modernist poets, in the vein of T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and Bunting himself, would approve that the mind of a poet has to see the world as it is: it is, in Eliot's words, "a receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images, which remain there until all the particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together" (Eliot, 1958: 19); and as Pound writes, "[n]o one language is complete. A master may be continually expanding his own tongue, rendering it fit to bear some charge hitherto borne only by some other alien tongue, but the process does not stop with any one man" (Pound, 1969: 36). In the case of Rūdhakī's poem, the imagery of a poet's rotten teeth as once comparable to shining lamps, silvery pearls, drops of rain, and the morning star, and his current state of decrepitude as a result of ill-luck, Saturn's omen, and the decree of God, are (more than) enough material for a modernist poet-translator to work upon and to embody in a concrete fashion, palpable to a universal register. An embodiment, of course, will not take place if the author has not considered the exact details of the text during the intrusive and extractive process of the second step of the hermeneutic cycle. If in the second step (aggression), for instance, the translator disregards the poet-narrator's sports imagery in referring to his lover's curls—as curly as a Polo (*chogān*) mallet (lines 18-19)—how can he deliver a refined imagery based on that in the target language? Therefore, it is not the text itself that lacks enough material for Bunting to utilize for providing a vivid imagery of a positive translation; the fault lies with Bunting.

But then, this is not to say that, in translating, Bunting does not try to embody and to incorporate. In his second letter to Zukofsky, quoted above, Bunting's endeavour to show a tenth century Khorassani poet's mind "in my English" adds a surplus value to what he trusted to be 'translation-material.' However, given the fact that he translated much of the poem, its conceits and its imagery, in a literal mode, he simply did not leave room for his rendition to utilize the materials at its disposal, and, to bring something new to the fore, to say the least. It is

true that after the translation ‘brings home’ the text, especially because of the vast differences between the target and the original, some losses of meaning are inevitable. But *what to replace these losses with?* In other words, what the text gains in the replacement of what is lost is vital to a sound translation. Bunting’s simplification of Rūdhakī’s rhetoric—toning down the phrases, glossing over imageries, and the like—makes sense only when the translator is, firstly, consistent with such (over)simplifications, and secondly, when s/he opens up the potentials of the text in a way that enriches and surprises the target language, “my English,” as well.

The fourth step is taken when the translator goes through both texts line by line to see if any reparable dissonances can be corrected. Minimally, Bunting was consistent with domesticating and embodying some aspects of the poem. He abandoned the trend of complying with rhyme schemes and metres, something that had been around for two centuries in translation of Persian classical poetry (Arberry, 1954: *viii*). Instead, he sets forth an iambic metre complying with, and more natural to, English verse, compensating for the untranslatable rhythmic cadence and harmony of the original. Moreover, let us suppose that he did have consistency in the oversimplification of Rūdhakī’s poem.¹ Although the distance between the remote cultures of the source and the target language inevitably leaves the translated text with losses, it also holds out the chance for possible, productive gains. The new possibilities diffused by the third step (embodiment) leave the original in a questionable form; at this point in the process of translation, the translator has either deepened the text’s meaning, or, as in most cases, weakened it in the process. The act of translation is a two-sided blade, with both sides

¹ Eco believes that “[t]ranslators are not allowed to change the true references to that world [the world of the text] and no translator could say, in his version, that David Copperfield lived in Madrid or Don Quixote in Devonshire” (*Mouse or Rat? Translation as Negotiation* 63). Eco reduces to “exceptions” the myriad situations in which one can change the references of the story. However, I contend that this approach disregards the vast potentialities that creative/poetic translation can release.

being dialectically bound. As Steiner believes, aggression (intrusion and extraction) and incorporation (embodiment) lean more towards the benefit of the target text, “altering the harmonics of the whole system” (1975: 316). In other words, after the second and third steps, the text loses its balance, and the equilibrium between the original and the translation is lost. In order to compensate for this imbalance, the translator must turn to the fourth step in the hermeneutic process: restitution. Here, a “[g]enuine translation will, therefore, seek to equalize, though the mediating steps may be lengthy and oblique. [...] No such perfect ‘double’ exists. But the ideal makes explicit the demand for equity in the hermeneutic process” (Steiner, 1975: 316-317). Equity is key here, related to reinstating a moral and formal balance. It is both moral—an ethical responsibility towards the original—and formal—“a negation of entropy”—by which Steiner means any attempt made by the translator to reinscribe and restore the balance which “his appropriative comprehension has disrupted” (Steiner, 1975: 318).

The same parallel could be seen between two concepts set forth by Steiner: ‘elective affinity’¹ and ‘resistant difference’ (Steiner, 1975: 399): As much as there should be an affinity felt in the target language so that the meaning is not ‘off,’ there also needs to be maintained a certain element of strangeness and difference: one must consider that which was non-existent in the semantics of the target language before translation. The resulting tension between affinity and strangeness in translation is what Steiner describes as ‘elucidative,’ since it allows us to “recognize it” and to “know it again” (Steiner, 1975: 393).

In the last line of the poem, Rūdhakī asks for his *Anban* and staff: *Anban* is a form of basket that is usually made of leather. It is used in old Persian to refer to a bag that beggars carry with themselves to keep their goods in. According to the *Oxford Dictionary of English*

1 Steiner here is invoking Goethe’s novel, *Elective Affinities* (1809), which deals with the 19th century sociological belief that ‘chemical reactions’ between people are predetermined and according to a set of chemical codes. See for instance, Jeremy Adler, “Goethe’s Use of Chemical Theory in his *Elective Affinities*” 263-79.

Etymology, ‘wallet,’ in its archaic sense,¹ is used to connote either a bag that pilgrims used in their journey, or one that peddlers carried around to sell their goods with (Hoad, 1986: 532). In the following lines by Bunting, the word ‘beggar’ is not there in the original: “Times have changed. I have changed. Bring me my stick / Now for the *beggar’s* staff and wallet” (lines 63-4; emphasis added). He added it, so it seems, to infuse the connotation that the word *Anban* is attached to in Persian. The rendition certainly refers back to the original with the addition of ‘beggar’ to the text; but as a result, what has happened is that the meaning has changed from an old beggar who carries his belongings in his bag (now, after his lost luxurious past), to a vagabond who carries his ‘wallet’ around to either sell his goods or to carry his provisions on his pilgrimage.

This vagueness prompts confusion in translation: the element of strangeness, of ‘resistant difference,’ in other words, is there in full force; however, almost to the point where the element of ‘elective affinity,’ with which the English reader might find a concrete alternative to the Persian figurative meaning, is missing. Against a static notion of language in which meaning transfers merely from A to B, meaning is “what comes next.” It is therefore obligatory for the translator to ‘listen’ to the intricacies of the text, first and foremost. Only then can s/he decide whether to inflict upon the original a new notion, revealing its “logic of expression” far truer to the meaning expressed in the original (Steiner, 1975: 394).

This case is especially important with the mixed use of feminine and masculine pronouns in the rendition. If, for example, in lines 26-27, Bunting changes the masculine pronoun to a feminine one (“The days are past when *she* was glad and gay / and overflowing with mirth and I was afraid of losing *her*” [my emphasis]), the addition of a third lover into the translation has the element of ‘resistant difference’ (i.e., strangeness), and that is something not problematic per se. What is at

¹ It is less likely that Bunting here uses ‘wallet’ in the modern sense of the word. If he does, it raises more questions, such as: ‘*why would a decrepit beggar have a wallet?*’

fault here is a lack of consistency in the fact that, once a third lover is introduced, Bunting leaves it there, hanging, unqualified, without offering the ‘affinity’ needed in English to find or explain what happens to the third lover: she simply vanishes into thin air. This lack of consistency undermines the retributive, fourth step of the hermeneutic process, where the off-balanced text needs to be compensated. The fourth motion, restitution, therefore, is a step-by-step cross-reading that enables the translation to give back what it has “adulterated, diminished, exploited, or betrayed” during the process (Steiner, 1975: 399).

Albrecht Neubert highlights the importance of the competence of a translator at three different levels: language competence, subject competence, and transfer competence (1995: 412). Lacking language proficiency and a grasp of the subject, a translator’s endeavour in transferring (or in Bassnett’s words, ‘transplanting’) meaning from source to the desired target is doomed to failure. Proficiency is crucial because in order for a transfer to take place, all semantic levels of the source text must first be analyzed. It is only then that a reinvention and re-composition of those elements are foreseeable. Such de- and re-composition are the basis for a contrastive analysis in Translation Studies. Whereas Neubert is against any kind of mistake stemming from language proficiency, Steiner is ready to condone some mistakes. He differentiates between ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ mistakes: “Poor translation follows on negative ‘mistaking:’ erroneous choice or mechanical, fortuitous circumstance have directed the translator to an original in which he is not at home. [...] Positive ‘mistaking’ on the contrary generates and is generated by the feeling of at-homeness in the other language, in the other community of consciousness” (Steiner, 1975: 398).

The superficial mistakes and literalism of Bunting’s translation of Rūdhakī’s poem aside, a lack of feeling ‘at home’ in the Persian language, expressed in numerous parts of the analyzed text, points to my contentions that Bunting’s version is not a reliable one. Based on the first hermeneutic step, trust, Bunting’s attempt is shown to be half-

hearted. With the second and third steps, appropriation does not lead to an ‘expropriation’ which can angle the text towards an ‘at-homeness’ for the translator in his native language. Moreover, a disregard of setting the record straight between the elements of strangeness and affinity, renders the fourth step—the balancing of the multifarious forces set to play in the text—questionable.

4. Conclusion

Bunting’s role as a traveller-translator is unique and regrettably, strangely overlooked. A ‘travelling translator,’ as Bassnett and Lefevere suggest, often fabricates much of what s/he translates. The implication for a translator who travels is that their readers often do not know much about the cultural background and the linguistic aspects of the original (1998: 34-36). Readers tend to rely on the traveller as someone who is in the know, and they therefore agree “to suspend disbelief” and collude with the traveller-translator’s pretence (35). Thus, according to Bassnett and Lefevere, travelling translators take advantage of this linguistic difference and take liberty with the act, often glossing over aspects that they either intentionally deem unworthy for the target culture to know, or simply because they themselves are not sufficiently steeped in the language and culture of the original text to be able to provide a more accurate rendition.

A deep contrastive analysis of Rūdhakī’s translation has shown that the veracity with which Bunting is highly appreciated and known for—in his rendition of Persian classical texts—is a problematic one. Steiner’s hermeneutic theory of translation helps us understand more about ‘the meaning behind the meaning’ which the translator sought to set forth, making it easy to trace his mindset during the act. Bunting’s literalism and oversimplification of the original, as seen, is not enough to produce a viable rendition. It is also notable that showing a mere interest in a text does not make that text worthy of translation. If anything, a translation that is abound with ‘negative mistakes’ not only undermines the original text, but erroneous

rendition also perpetuates the pretence of mastery and colludes with readers in justifying the translation as authentic and veracious. Moreover, this study shows that the act of translation is a work in progress, and the more the translator spends time on refining and reimagining new possibilities for its betterment, the more powerful it gets over time. The opposite of a static translation, one replete with erroneous superimpositions and exuberant confusions, is a dynamic one: one that shows its translator's constant writing and rewriting and tinkering with missing pieces, time and again, to go beyond its static bearing. Bunting has very strong translations (*positive mistakes*) as well, and further in-depth studies are required to analyze them.

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