UNIVERSITYOF BIRMINGHAM

Hard translation

Gould, Rebecca

HARD TRANSLATION: PERSIAN POETRY AND POST-NATIONAL LITERARY FORM

REBECCA GOULD

ABSTRACT

This essay examines how translation theory can further globalize contemporary literary comparison. Whereas Persian Studies has historically been isolated from developments within literary theory, world literature has similarly been isolated from the latest developments within the study of non-European literatures. I propose the methodology of hard translation as a means of addressing these lacunae. As it was understood and practised among Chinese and German translation theorists in the early decades of the twentieth century, hard translation is a method that incorporates translation in the form of exegesis, while preserving traces of the source language in the target language. Coined in 1929 by the Chinese critic, writer and translator Lu Xun amid the ferment stimulated by the May Fourth movement, hard translation (*yingyi*) is here considered alongside Walter Benjamin's cognate and nearly contemporaneous arguments for translation in a context of linguistic incommensurability.

Keywords: Persian poetry; comparative literature; world literature; translatability; translation theory; poetics; Shafiʿī Kadkanī; Lu Xun; Walter Benjamin; Gayatri Spivak; Emily Apter; Ḥāfeẓ

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> As far as I am concerned, I must either go on producing these hard translations, or produce none at all. I can only hope that readers will be willing to make the necessary mental effort to read it. (Lu Xun)[1]

CRITICS OF COMPARISON within literary studies have long complained that comparisons between European and non-proximate Asian and African literatures unjustifiably privilege European frameworks and go too far in refashioning non-European sources to fit European norms.[2] Lawrence Venuti's concept of translational invisibility is directed against this type of loaded comparison.[3] More famously still, Edward Said labelled a certain type of uneven analytical relation 'Orientalism'.[4] As these influential critiques from translation studies and postcolonial

studies attest, a major risk of comparison amid uneven distributions of geopolitical power is that Orientalist forms of reasoning will constrain engagements with the texts on their own terms. And yet the isolationalist orientation of many nation-based domains of literary studies courts dangers no less pernicious, no less Orientalist, and no more immune to the structural inequalities that plague world literature in our globalized age. Even amid its incorporation into a global literary canon, poetry should be read in terms of the priorities of poets working within their specific traditions. Ultimately, however, scholars stand to lose more than they gain by isolating their literatures from the broader universe of global literary inquiry. Drawing mostly on examples from Persian poetry and its translation into English, this essay elaborates a framework through which specialists of specific national (and non-national) literary traditions can open their work to comparison by drawing on the resources of translation theory.

The Persian literary geography from which most of the examples in this essay are drawn has extended at various points in history from Bosnia to Bengal, and Bukhara to Madras. It currently traverses a much smaller fraction of this terrain, and is predominantly associated with a single nation state: the Islamic Republic of Iran. Although the spatial and temporal disjunctures involved in making the cognitive shift from Iran to Persian complicate the relation between language and national identity, the move also harbingers a conceptual agenda to which this essay aims to contribute. I draw on the resources of translation theory, and in particular the perpetual debates around translatability, to situate Persian poetics within global literary studies. I show how, by adding an interpretive layer, translation enriches our encounter with the source text. For the purposes of my argument, the mediation afforded by translation roots us more deeply in the text. As I explore concrete examples of poetry in translation, I consider how translation studies and literary comparison intersect, and ask how these fortuitous crossings can enrich both disciplines.

By way of making Persian available for global comparison, I begin with a reflection on the currency of untranslatability within recent critiques of world literature. I counter these critiques by suggesting that the resistance to theory, which is also resistance to comparison, can be understood, and overcome, by reconceptualizing how translation mediates culture through linguistic incommensurability. In the interest of furthering the encounter between translation studies and comparative literature, I sketch a provisional alternative to untranslatability as the *sine qua non* of literariness, or another way of viewing the fact of literature's resistance to

translation. Bringing reflections on translation and translatability by Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) and the Chinese modernist Lu Xun (1881–1936) into conversation with analogous conversations within Persian Studies, I advocate 'hard translation' as a method that can refine how comparison is done within the academy. I begin by reviewing recent appropriations of untranslatability within scholarship on world literature. I then consider how this debate is carried out within Persian Studies. I conclude by staging a conversation around untranslatability involving Walter Benjamin, Lu Xun, and their multitudinous counterparts across the wide world of literature past and present.

Untranslatability versus world literature

Untranslatability is in vogue these days, thanks to its promotion as an antidote to the homogenizing excesses of world literature. Several recent manifestos have advanced untranslatability as a solution to our malaise.[5] Gayatri Spivak celebrates untranslatability as a possible afterlife for comparative literature.[6] Emily Apter promotes untranslatability as a form of 'creative failure with homeopathic uses' that illuminates the complex and unstable relations among sign, signifier and signified.[7] Finally, Jacques Lezra argues for understanding untranslatability as a means of enriching rather than antagonizing everyday translation.[8] These provocations are fortuitous and timely. Scholars are increasingly aware of translation's centrality to literary studies. In institutional terms, research councils and review boards are beginning to recognize translation as a form of research in its own right.[9] Of particular interest to comparative literary inquiry today are those aspects of the literary artefact that resist translation. And yet, although Apter invokes the eminent theorist of translation, Walter Benjamin, the extent to which her understanding of 'translation failure' engages with Benjamin is unclear.

In his seminal essay 'Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers' [The Task of the Translator] (1913), Benjamin overturned many conventional understandings of the relationship between language and untranslatability. For Benjamin, texts that approximate most closely to information (*Mitteilung*) are less likely to yield to translation. 'The lower the quality and distinction of its language,' Benjamin writes, 'the greater the extent to which it is information [*Mitteilung*], the less fertile a field [a text] is for translation, until the overwhelming amount of content, far from being the lever for a well-formed translation, renders [translation] impossible.'[10] By contrast, a literary text which confounds the ideology that views speech as a form of instrumental

communication and which relies on poeticity for its meaning is 'translatable even if its meaning is touched upon only fleetingly'.[11]

For Benjamin, translatability measures literary complexity and poeticity, but in a very different sense than it does for Apter. Whereas Apter relishes poetry's untranslatability as an abiding testimony to language's ineffability, Benjamin celebrates poetry as translatable on precisely the same grounds. Benjamin would doubtless have found much to agree with in Bellos's riposte to Apter, that 'One of the truths that translation teaches – is that everything is effable.'[12] In rendering everything effable, good translations nonetheless honour what is literary in literary language. Whereas arguments for untranslatability frequently situate the poeticity of language outside language itself, Benjamin recognizes the ineffable as inherent within language. On this reading, poetry's ineffability cannot be translated in the sense of being mechanically reproduced, but is continually recreated in every felicitous translation. In Benjamin's understanding, linguistic refashioning epitomizes what translation does and is supposed to do. The impossibility of translation which poetry demonstrates is, paradoxically, proof of poetry's translatability. In an efficacious translation, what is translated is not the content – this Benjamin regards as the least salient dimension of a poem undergoing translation – but rather its literariness, which is constituted by its form, and by the relationship of that form to its meaning. With respect to his faith in translatability, Benjamin's approach rejects the attitude expressed in Robert Frost's famous insistence that 'Poetry is what is lost in translation […] [and] in interpretation.'[13]

Two decades after publishing his essay on the task of the translator, Benjamin engaged in an even more strident defense of translation, albeit translation of a kind that was distinctly unfashionable within his time. In a 1935 fragment that remained unpublished during his lifetime, to which (although writing in German) he assigned the French title 'La Traduction – Le Pour et le Contre', Benjamin narrates his encounter with a volume of Nietzsche in French translation in a Paris bookstall. As the text was one he had grown to love in German, Benjamin paused over the unnamed book by Nietzsche and searched for a passage he dimly remembered. To his shock, he could not locate the passage that had resonated so powerfully for him in German. The passage was in fact there, Benjamin subsequently explained, but it was in French. Faced with a text had come to know in a different language, it ceased to be recognizable. 'When I looked them in the face,' Benjamin writes of the words he was seeking, as though their absence had humanised

them, 'I had the awkward feeling that they no more recognized me than I did them.'[14] Benjamin uses this incident to exemplify translational failure, a missed encounter that he conceptualises as a failure in mutual recognition. Nietzsche's words had life when he first encountered them in German. They relinquished this life when they were transmuted into French.

Benjamin's understanding of translational failure differs strikingly from Apter's. Whereas Apter and Spivak advocate untranslatability on the grounds of cultural difference, and imply that culturally distant literatures are less likely to be satisfactorily rendered in translation, Benjamin grounds translatability in the incommensurability of literary language. For Benjamin, linguistic incommensurability is the very basis of translatability. This conception of translatability is imbued with a texture lacking in other theories of translation that emphasize transparency as a condition for meaning. In contrast to the contemporary emphasis on what cannot be translated, and its concomitant politics of cultural difference, Benjamin's understanding of translation is grounded in an understanding of language as 'every expression of human mental life'.[15] Not reducible words, language in this sense approximates to a form of consciousness. Benjamin is interested in the movement between the source and target language; it is here that he discerns language's incommensurability, which is also the sign of its translatability and the revelation of the foreignness that language generates. Far from helping us overcome difference, language lies at the origin of difference.

Unlike many more recent reflections on untranslatability, Benjamin's discussions are invitations to translation, to partake of that which is distant, foreign, and strange. In contrast to Apter and Spivak, Benjamin offers a programme for dealing with untranslatability. The aporias he discerns within linguistic incommensurability do not fundamentally militate against literary comparison. Rather, Benjamin uses untranslatability to further the task of translation. In illustration of this commitment, Benjamin's most famous reflection on translation occurs as a preface to his own actual translation of Baudelaire's poetry. Whereas Apter uses untranslatability to argue for world literature's impossibility, Benjamin deduces other lessons from the incommensurability between languages. Texts and contexts drive Apter's critique of world literature as a discourse of, about, and in translation. Benjamin, by contrast, draws lessons in ontology from language's ability to traduce and traverse its self-constituted boundaries.

In the 1935 fragment, Benjamin advocated a translational method that appears to have been suppressed in modernity. This kind of translation is a technique (*Technik*) that thematizes

'the fact of the different linguistic situation [*die Verschiedenheit der Sprachsituation*]' (159).
Most evident in the form of commentary, this translational *Technik* was prevalent in the Middle
Ages, with the rendering of Aristotle into Latin, often from Arabic rather than Greek. Lamenting
that translation-as-exegesis has 'been on the wane in modernity [*Neuzeit*]' (159), Benjamin calls
for its revival. He cites as examples of translation-as-commentary the bilingual editions of the
Greco-Roman classics that circulated in seventeenth-century Germany. Translation-as-
commentary appeals to Benjamin because it incorporates the translational process into its final
product. We should note again the contrast with Frost, for whom the literariness of language is
inevitably lost in translation.

Translation-as-commentary is distinct from other varieties of translation in the sense that
it acknowledges the difference between the source and target language. By means of this
acknowledgement, a process that Venuti was later to call foreignization, translation becomes an
element (*Bestandteil*) of the linguistic world into which it is translated. Throughout this process,
the foreignness of the translated text is rigorously preserved, and the ties between the translation
and the foreign original are perpetually on display. Benjamin cites the German statesman Gustav
Stresemann (d. 1929) to illustrate his view that translation should aim to 'represent
[*repräsentieren*] the foreign language in one's own' (160). How a translation that prioritizes the
representation of foreignness over its suppression fares in the literary marketplace, and among
readers who cannot access the text in the original, is a matter to which I return in this essay's
final section.

Notwithstanding their salutary rejection of homogenizing tendencies within world
literature, most theorists today who emphasize untranslatability in their critiques of world
literature have barely engaged with non-European literatures, either in the original or in
translation. The work of David Damrosch, who arguably founded the study of world literature in
the contemporary sense of the term, is a case in point. Damrosch's geographic, linguistic and
temporal range is considerably more extensive than that of his critical counterparts Apter and
Spivak.[16] As a reviewer of Apter's 2013 manifesto points out, in a book that has as its primary
nodal points Flaubert, Pynchon and DeLillo, 'readers might have acquired a better sense of
Apter's intervention into World Literature as textual practice as well as discipline were more
space given to more global writers'.[17]

The elisions noted thus far reflect a broader pattern, which has particular relevance for the study of literary forms outside the European canon: polemic against translation are all too frequently accompanied by an inward-looking gaze and a return to European pasts, because, so the reasoning runs, we will never be able to appreciate non-European texts in the original. The presumed impossibility of translation is used to justify ignorance of literatures in languages not already widely known, which has the effect of maintaining the status quo, and of keeping in place the very provincialism which the concept of world literature was created to displace. The philological resistance to theory, described by the literary critic Paul de Man as the process through which 'a tension develops between the methods of understanding and the knowledge which those methods allow one to reach',[18] here finds itself in an unexpected alliance with a poststructuralist conception of incommensurability. In the aftermath of the critique of world literature, we are left in the same impasse, stagnating within the basic methodological problems that the philologist confronted, and failed to resolve, decades earlier. We still lack a lexicon, a repertoire and a canon that can meaningfully link the philologically grounded study of Persian, Arabic, Turkish, Sanskrit, Chinese, Japanese and Korean literature with the study of global literary form.[19] Nation determines discipline, even for subjects that long preceded the advent of national consciousness. In the remainder of this essay, I show how translation, both as a disciplinary practice and as a conceptual approach to language, can help comparative literature—in particular its border zones that often carry the label of world literature—move beyond this stalemate.

Resisting translation in Persian

While untranslatability resonates widely throughout literary studies today, it resonates in specific ways in the Islamic world. Specifically, the contemporary argument for untranslatability within world literature strikingly parallels classical Islamic teachings concerning the untranslatability of the Quran. This teaching was based on the view that the language of the Quran was a miracle ($i\,j\bar{a}z$) that could only occur in the Arabic language.[20] According to this view, the Quran was both impossible to translate and beyond the reach of imitation. No human speech or writing could rival its perfection. (Inevitably, the Quran was translated, but the key issue for translation theory is the understanding of the Quran's unique discursive status that arose from this teaching.) The implications of the Quran's inimitable status for the study of Islamic literatures have been

widely discussed, if inadequately from the point of view of literary theory.[21] An ingrained awareness of the Quran's untranslatability has profoundly shaped the development of literary theory and criticism in Arabic, Persian, Turkic and other Islamic cultures, and influenced how translation is understood within this tradition, with respect to secular poetry as well as sacred scriptures.[22]

This rich body of work and the debates it has stimulated show that both Persian and Arabic poetics have substantially been enriched by the concept of inimitability (*i'jāz*), even when the texts under consideration bear no genealogical relation to the Quran. Beyond its contribution to Arabic and Persian literary theory, the concept of inimitability has a significant, and largely unexplored, contribution to make to the study of translation generally. Yet, notwithstanding its uses within literary theory, inimitability can have destructive effects when it is used as a justification for resisting translation as such. I want to flag one polemic, which, like Apter's critique of world literature discussed above, illustrates the risks of over-zealousness with respect to untranslatability. As with so many key trends in Persian literary criticism, this conflict arises in connection with the reception and legacy of the poet from fourteenth century Shiraz in southern Iran, Shams al-Dīn Ḥāfeẓ, whose *ghazals*, together with Rūmī's *Masnavī*, occupy a position within Persian literature similar to that held by the Quran in Islamic culture generally.

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, two established figures, the Iranian poet and critic Muḥammad Reḍā Shafī'ī Kadkanī (b. 1939) and the British translator and poet Dick Davis (b. 1945), published two separate reflections on untranslatability within Persian poetry.[23] Although they were composed independently of each other, their arguments run parallel in many respects. Both Shafī'ī Kadkanī and Davis turn to the *ghazals* of Ḥāfeẓ to support their argument that Persian poetry cannot be translated into English.

Shafī'ī Kadkanī's essay, 'On the Untranslatability of Poetry', first appeared in 2002. Notwithstanding the universalizing implications of his title, which claims to treat poetry in general, Shafī'ī Kadkanī is here mostly concerned with Persian-English translation. Specifically, he is engaged by failed attempts to translate the poetry of Ḥāfeẓ.[24] At the beginning of his essay, Shafī'ī Kadkanī cites the claims of the 'Abbasid polymath al-Jāḥiẓ that 'poetry cannot be rendered into another language' because translation necessarily severs poetry 'from its concinnity [*naẓm*] and its meter becomes false. Its delicacy becomes mediocrity, and the nuances of its beauty are crushed'.[25] Notwithstanding his invocation of Jāḥiẓ at the opening of his essay,

Shafiʿī Kadkanī accepts throughout that Persian poetry is translatable into Arabic. This implication underlies his statement that 'translating from French into German is easier than from French to Arabic or French into English'. Poetry in the abstract is untranslatable for Shafiʿī Kadkanī, but this judgement is situated within a continuum, whereby some language pairs lend themselves more easily to translation than others. His preferential treatment of the language pair Persian-Arabic indicates that linguistic distance is of lesser salience to Shafiʿī Kadkanī than cultural proximity. Translation from an Indo-European language into a Semitic one can be more felicitous than translation from one Indo-European language into another. Underwriting this typology is the assumption that proximity equals translatability, and translatability is a condition of possibility for a successful translation.

Although he cites Jāḥiẓ in support of poetry's untranslatability, Shafiʿī Kadkanī's conception of the impossibility of translation is relative, and premised more on perceived cultural difference than on linguistic incommensurability. This much is made clear by his proof text, a seemingly untranslatable verse from Ḥāfeẓ (130):

[for correct formatting see published version]

به می سجّاده رنگین کن گرت پیرِ مغان گوید
که سالک بی‌خبر نبوَد ز راه و رسم منزل‌ها

Rendered literally, this verse reads: 'Colour the prayer rug with wine if the old sage says / the wanderer is not unfamiliar with the customs of the stations on the way.' Shafiʿī Kadkanī points to the abundance of terms that resist translation into European languages: prayer rug (*sajādih*), *pir-i mughān* (old sage), *sālik* (wanderer). The appreciation of this verse depends on a recognition of both the twists and turns of the path followed by the wanderer (*sālik*) as well as of the customs of the stations on the path that are known old sage (*pir-i mughān*). Because these terms cannot be translated into English or French, Shafiʿī Kadkanī argues, the verse is untranslatable from the perspective of European languages. As I will argue, however, the relevance of translation to this verse can be viewed in a different way.

With respect to his understanding of untranslatability as a function of culture more than language, Shafiʿī Kadkanī's views anticipate those of Apter and Spivak, and contrast with those of Benjamin. When it comes to culturally proximate language pairs, such as Persian/Arabic, which have no genetic relation but which share a broad cultural repertoire, Shafiʿī Kadkanī

accepts the possibility of translation. Apter and Spivak similarly are less opposed to translations between proximate language pairs such as English/French than they are to translations between culturally distant languages. The risk and stigma of exoticism motivates these manifold rejections of translation. Forgotten in their cautious avoidance of othering discourse is the fact that the most significant cultural encounters often involve substantial, prolonged, and conflictual exposure to cultural others. Consider the case of Victor Segalen (d. 1919), the French poet, sinologist and theorist of the exotic encounter. Decades before *Orientalism*, Segalen argued for the epistemic and poetic value of cross-cultural encounters that celebrated alterity, and which refused to homogenize difference. Controversially but also presciently, Segalen defined the 'sensation of the exotic' as simply 'the notion of difference, the perception of Diversity, the knowledge that something is other than one's self'.[26] 'Exoticism's power,' he added, 'is nothing other than the ability to conceive otherwise.'[27] Crucially for present purposes, Segalen's programme for 'aesthetic diversity' was envisioned as a kind of translation. 'Upon a ladder of steps made of artifice and skill,' he imagined elliptically, 'would not the highest rung be to express one's vision by an instantaneous, continuous *translation* that would echo one's presence rather than blurt it out bluntly?'[28] The productive afterlife of these provocative questions in Francophone postcolonial literature, especially their critical appropriation by the likes of Édouard Glissant and Abdelkebir Khatibi, demonstrate that there is no antimony between respect for the other and a heavy reliance on translation as the mediator of this otherness.[29]

In his probing essay on Persian poetry's translatability into English, the British translator and poet Dick Davis steers a middle path between Benjamin's linguistic incommensurability as an ontological condition and the cultural incommensurability that lies at the foundation of poetry's untranslatability, as understood by Shafīʿī Kadkanī. Recognizing both the linguistic and the cultural barriers to translating Ḥāfeẓ, Davis adds a third dimension. He thereby becomes the only critic among those discussed so far to ground the discussion of translatability in the specificity of the poetic utterance. Untranslatability on Davis's reading is generated from divergences across literatures and cultures regarding the 'conventions as to which language, topoi, and tropes' are seen as 'intrinsically poetic and thus suitable for poetry'.[30] The real obstacle to the translation of poetry on this view is not language or culture, but the specificity of poetic discourse, which sets it apart from other discursive forms. Linguistic utterances in general are translatable, Davis implies, but poetry – insofar as it is poetry – resists translation. A

linguistic utterance that is translatable is necessarily unpoetic, because translation is regarded here, in un-Benjamin fashion, as the mechanical transfer of meaning from one language to another. (Benjamin by contrast would insist that this linguistic transfer is a form of creation; hence any perception of transparency is an illusion, because there is no meaning that preexists its embodiment in language.)

Of the three modes of untranslatability proposed by Apter, Shafīʿī Kadkanī and Davis, Davis's focus on the untranslatability of poetic conventions from one language into another most comprehensively engages with the specificity of literary discourse. Davis's approach also brings us back most forcefully to Benjamin's idea that the forms of discourse most removed from the communicative function are most generative in terms of translation. To transpose this argument into Roman Jakobson's six-fold schema of language's functions, it is the poetic function of language that most readily yields to translation rather than the referential, expressive, conative, phatic or metalingual functions, when translation is understood as the creation of a new linguistic life in a new language.[31] Although they reach different conclusions concerning poetry's translatability, Benjamin and Davis both construct a dialectic between linguistic incommensurability and poetic discourse.

As it does for Davis, poetry for Benjamin presents a special problem for translation, and translation poses a special problem for poetry. For both writers, this challenge goes to the heart of what poetry is. Yet differences remain. 'Poets who seem to develop a poetry's capabilities most tellingly, who seem to their linguistic communities to be the most "poetic" of all, are often precisely those whom it is most difficult to bring over into another language,' Davis writes, directly contradicting Benjamin.[32] Whereas for Davis the specificity of poetic discourse is revealed through its untranslatability, for Benjamin linguistic incommensurability is uniquely revealed through poetry. Paradoxical though it may seem, this incommensurability is most forcefully demonstrated in the act of translation.

For Benjamin, the revelation of incommensurability is poetic because it stimulates the reader to recognize the ineffable in language. For Davis, Persian poetry is untranslatable into English due to its 'idealization of reality, and calling forth of emotions like wonder and astonishment, which are seen as reactions to unprecedented perfection'.[33] These types of emotions and aesthetics, Davis argues, appear merely peculiar rather than enticing within Anglophone poetics. Although Benjamin stresses linguistic incommensurability and Davis

stresses cultural untranslatability, in other respects their approaches converge. Both writers make poetry's simultaneous habitation in, and transcendence of, language the basis of their translational aesthetics. Poetry's special relationship to translation is more broadly reflected in its relationship to literary comparison. The historian aims at, among other things, reconstructing a socio-historical context, and thereby at making the incommensurate commensurable. Discrete objects must together make sense from an historical point of view. Context must cohere; otherwise its explanatory function is eviscerated. The literary comparatist aims at, among other things, bringing incommensurabilities into comparison, and thereby at disrupting the idea of context.[34] The time has come for exploring how these reconstructive and deconstructive mandates can work together, to reorient the discipline of comparative literature, and to bring it into a more intimate relationship with translation.

Long before Apter turned to untranslatability as a way of resisting world literature, German and Chinese critics in the early decades of the twentieth century developed strategies for recognizing linguistic incommensurability without surrendering the translational mandate. One way they did this was by vesting their faith in translation's capacity to adjudicate cultural difference. Whereas Spivak, Apter and their Persianist counterparts use poetry's untranslatability to contest the homogenization of cultural difference, Benjamin insists that 'the translatability of linguistic creations ought to be considered even if men should prove unable to translate them'.[35] While their argument for untranslatability is related to a politics of language, Benjamin's argument for translatability resists on an ontological understanding of language's role in creating consciousness, and being as such. Here I have aimed to think these points of view, the political and the ontological, together.

In her contribution to the 2014–15 ACLA Report on the State of the Discipline of Comparative Literature, Arabist Shaden Tageldin recognizes the promise of untranslatability in the political present while questioning its durability.[36] Denominating untranslatability an 'Idea of the Decade', Tageldin highlights the contradictions that suffuse most versions of this argument. Invoking the contemporary Moroccan literary critic ʿAbdelfattah Kilito, whose theory of untranslatability is the centrepiece to (and most non-European element within) Apter's thinking, Tageldin notes that 'Kilito exposes the work of translation at the heart of Arabic's "untranslatability".' On this reading, the untranslatability of the literary artefact is best accessed in and through translation. Illustrative of a similar tension is the fact that Shafiʿī Kadkanī was

compelled to translate al-Jāḥiẓ's interdiction on translation from Arabic into Persian to advance his general argument for poetry's untranslatability.

Without translation, literature, and indeed culture, could not exist. Benjamin recognized the importance, not only of translation, but specifically of mistranslation, to the production of culture as early as 1935. In the fragment written that year, 'La Traduction – Le Pour et le Contre', he singled out productive misunderstandings (*productive Mißverständnisse*) (159) as the key textual evidence for the value of translation. Among its other functions, translation is efficacious within world literature for its contrarian revelation of language's incommensurability. Translation's magical capacity to cast the familiar utterance in a new light has contributed to what Charles Forsdick has called (with reference to Segalen) 'an aesthetics of surprise'.[37] Translation cannot be overdetermined, let alone interdicted, because it is impossible to foretell where it will lead or to envision the forms of culture it will generate. There is always an element of discovery, and of fortuity, in any translation worthy of the name. Translation's unpredictability results from its embodiment in language. There is no language beyond translation, and hence no text untouched by cross-cultural transference.

Hard translation

Rather than reject translation on the grounds of cultural difference or linguistic incommensurability, we ought to seek out new ways of bringing translation's necessary and productive imprecisions more closely into view. In order to advance this goal, I conclude this essay by bringing the translational method of the Chinese writer, critic and translator Lu Xun with Walter Benjamin's views on translatability. Lu Xun first introduced his signature translational ideal, hard translation (*yingyi*), in the preface to his translation of an essay by the Soviet critic Anatoly Lunacharsky (1875–1933). In this preface, Lu Xun reflected on his efforts to render the Japanese version of Lunacharsky's Russian text that he was working with into readable Chinese prose.

Lu Xun's translations were intended for a specific readership: 'the proletariat literary critics who had special class interests to advance'.[38] Lu Xun's emphasis on the responsibilities of the reader as well as of the translator reflects his commitment to bringing about social change through language. This political agenda makes him unique among the theorists discussed in this essay and gives him a distinctive voice within the history of translation theory.[39] In his preface,

Lu Xun explains that he developed his technique of hard translation in the hope that 'readers will be willing to toughen up and make hard efforts to read through it'.[40] Translation for Lu Xun is labour, not a luxurious pleasure reserved for the elite.

Critics of Venuti's valorization of the politically liberating potential of foreignizing translation have noted the class bias of foreignizing approaches that foreground their relation to the original and thereby assume a readership bilingual in both the source and target texts.[41] Furthermore, it has been argued that foreignization works better as a translational method for literatures attached to major nation-states than for literatures attached to endangered communities or to literatures that have a belated relation to European modernity, including Persian.[42] Because they are incontrovertibly steeped in foreignness, minor literatures are more likely to benefit from translational strategies that privilege domestication. Arguably, this same principle applies when minor literatures are translated into major ones. Adopting this line of critique, Laetitia Nanquette counters Venuti's advocacy of foreignization as the penultimate form of translation with the argument that 'translational ethics' for the Persian–English translator entails 'adopting a less elitist position and using more domestication strategies so that American readers can relate to Persian texts'.[43] Vladimir Nabokov's famously unreadable yet meticulously researched rendering of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* into English prose is one illustration of how Venuti-style foreignization can generate an elitist approach, accessible only to the most erudite readers and closed to the vast majority of would-be lovers of Pushkin in translation.[44] In Lu Xun's case, however, hard literalism tilts in the opposite direction, towards readers who do not aspire to access the source text, a group that in this case included the 'translator' himself, who did not read Russian. Given the many different motives and agendas associated with foreignization as a translational method, which vary according to the literary contexts in which they occur, this strategy cannot be aligned with any particular agenda, political or otherwise. Like untranslatability, foreignization works in contradictory ways: it can facilitate *or* impede the reading process, and open *or* limit access to texts in languages unknown to the reader.

Hard translation for Lu Xun involves close adherence to the original, but it does not aim for exact reproduction. As Pu Wang notes, although his translational method has been celebrated by countless proponents of literal translation, Lu Xun in fact based his understandings of the texts he translated on Japanese translations, and had no access to the texts in the Russian original.[45] Because his relation to Lunacharsky's text is mediated by Japanese, Lu Xun's

literalism is distinct from Venuti-style foreignization. By showcasing the traces of the original within his translations, Lu Xun was furthering the mandate of the May Fourth movement, which turned to translation as a means of elaborating 'a desire for the linguistic Other' and thereby of modernizing the Chinese language.[46] Because the linguistic other was European, although more often Russian than German, French or English, this outward turn was brought about by the broader modernizing agendas that were pursued by the intellectuals of the May Fourth movement. In this context, hard literalism implied the desire to reform the Chinese language and to bring it more closely into conversation with developments in the world at large. Equally, the domesticating translation methods pursued by Lu Xun's opponents showed clear signs of an effort to prevent Chinese traditions from being touched by modernity.

Lu Xun offers his fullest elaboration of his views on translation in his essay 'Hard Translation and the Class Character in Literature' (1930). This work follows up on his preface to the Lunacharsky essay and is the centrepiece of his polemic against the translator of Shakespeare's complete works into Chinese, Liang Shiqiu (1902–1987), who had criticized his translations as 'dead'. After quoting from his earlier preface, Lu Xun goes on to defend his method in terms of its intended readership. 'I translate for myself,' Lu Xun writes in this landmark essay, 'for a few who consider themselves proletarian critics, and for some readers who want to understand these theories and are not out for "pleasure" or afraid of difficulties.'[47] Hard translation was for Lu Xun a political-aesthetic creed that demanded as much of the reader as it did of the translator.

As Lu Xun's deployment of this concept suggests, hard translation entails more than approximating the original. The rough edges of a hard translation reverberate within their target culture, as a challenge to existing linguistic norms. Above all, hard translation is a strategy for rearranging political relations by aesthetic means. Profoundly attuned to the resistance to translation pose by the source text, hard translation brings source and target into conversation and occasional confrontation. This ability to mutate while preserving the textures of the original makes this translational method relevant to comparative literature generally. Adapted more broadly to the requirements of the discipline, hard translation can serve as a methodological foundation for comparing distant yet cognate bodies of knowledge such as classical Islamic rhetoric, Sanskrit aesthetics, Russian formalism and European genre theory. Hard translation compares literary cultures while recognizing the incommensurability that suffuses every verbal

artefacts, and poetry above all. By insisting on the necessity of translation without homogenizing difference, hard translation honours all that is untranslatable within the translation process. In these regards, Lu Xun's method is a model that could help to structure, both methodologically and empirically, the way in which world literature is studied.

Benjamin's fragment, 'La Traduction', which I have discussed above, was composed within five years of Lu Xun's essay. The concept of translation-as-exegesis elaborated in this fragment is closely related to Lu Xun's hard translation. Acknowledging its role by means of commentary, this translational method makes the fact of linguistic difference into 'one of its themes' (159), which is to say that it regards the challenges posed by untranslatability as an enabling means. In contrast to his earlier paradigmatic essay on translation, which singled out poetry as a privileged vector for his translational method, the late Benjamin (as evidenced in this fragment) understands translation as a form of exegesis, even when this method is not ideally suited to the translation of poetry. Like Lu Xun's hard literalism, Benjamin's exegetical translation underscores the function of the translation process that is most relevant to the global poetics that this essay aims to advance. Although, as Benjamin points out, exegetical translation does not create a new language, it can lay the groundwork for comparative poetics. Every translation is an interpretation, and the best interpretations are those that are most transparent with regard to their premises. Exegetical translation is therefore useful as a methodological agenda for comparative literature. Like Lu Xun's hard translation, Benjamin's exegetical translation offers a variant on Venuti's concept of foreignization that, to a greater extent than Venuti, privileges clarity over obfuscation, and lucidity over opacity. Ultimately, what is at stake in Benjamin's conception of translation, as well as in my own, is not the relation between the source and target text but rather the ability of translation to *generate* literary form, and to bring new literary worlds into being.

Like Benjamin, Lu Xun worked to show how translation can be 'effective, an element of its own world' ('La Traduction', 159). Both Lu Xun and Benjamin conceptualize translation as labour. They focus on the philological work involved in engaging with a literary text, regardless of the aim or use which this engagement is intended to serve. Even when these acts of reading are not formally incorporated into a translation process, Benjamin and Lu Xun highlight the relevance of these cognitive adaptations to translation theory. Although their translations are hard and the exegesis involved is painstaking, both exegetical translation and hard translation

effectively extend the possibilities of literary form in the target cultures. Theorists of the impossible and partisans of the real, Benjamin and Lu Xun laboured in the conviction that more is gained than lost when texts traverse cultural and linguistic boundaries, no matter how zagged are the peregrinations from source to target. Through their writing as much as through their thinking, Benjamin and Lu Xun remind us what translation can do for literary comparison today.

Where is the Persian counterpart of these German and Chinese interventions?[48] Like the translator of a Russian essay from Japanese into Chinese, the would-be translator from Persian must translate not only a set of words but an entire culture, along with a sketchily known geography that is dimly perceived by the target culture, when rendering Ḥāfeẓ into English. When negotiating the dialectic of translation and untranslatability, we should cherish felicitous disjunctures. Clashes between a Persian original and the conceptual and cultural horizons of a distant target audience have their use. Translational 'failure' can highlight areas where the target language might profitably be reimagined from within. Possibly the most valuable lesson of untranslatability is that translational failure is best understood not as a failure of translation itself, but rather as a guide to limitations inhering within the target culture. When the limits of both the contemporary framework for world literature and its contrarian (and potentially isolationist) critique are made legible, then Persianists (and Arabists, Ottomanists, Sinologists, Sanskritists, and their counterparts across the range of world literatures) will be uniquely positioned to help literary studies move beyond its current structural limitations. No longer will we need to cede jurisdiction over key concepts in world literature to Europeanists simply because the history of modern capital has caused non-European literatures to appear belatedly within the discipline of comparative literary studies.

NOTES

Unless otherwise stated, translations from Persian and German are mine.

[1] Lu Xun, '"Hard Translation" and the "Class Character of Literature"', in *Selected Works of Lu Hsun*, Vol. 3, trans. by Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1960), pp. 65–86 (pp. 75–76).

[2] For a preliminary assessment of the state of the field, see Sunil Sharma, 'Persian Literature between Comparative Literature and Area Studies in North America', *Inquire: Journal of Comparative Literature*, 4.1 (2014) < http://inquire.streetmag.org/articles/147> [last accessed 22 June 2017].

[3] Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility; A History of Translation*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2008 [1995]).

[4] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978).

[5] See Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (London: Verso, 2013).

[6] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

[7] See Gayatri Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (London: Routledge, [1993] 2012), p. 219; Apter, *Against World Literature*, p. 16. For the latter book, further references are given parenthetically in the text and are to the e-book version.

[8] Jacques Lezra, '"This untranslatability which is not one"', *Paragraph*, 38.2 (2015), 174–88.

[9] See 'Translation as Research: A Manifesto', *Modern Languages Open*, 5 November 2015: <http://www.modernlanguagesopen.org/index.php/mlo/article/view/80/140> [last accessed 22 June 2017].

[10] Walter Benjamin, 'Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers', *Gesammelte Schriften - Band IV: Kleine Prosa. Baudelaire-Übertragungen. 2 Teilbände*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, 7 volumes in 14 (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1972–1989), 9-21 (p. 20). Further references to this work are given parenthetically in the text.

[11] For further reflection on these counter-intuitive axioms, see Rebecca Gould, 'Form Without a Home: On Translating the Indo-Persian Radīf', *Translation Review*, 90 (2014), 15–28, and the Introduction to *After Tomorrow the Days Disappear: Ghazals and Other Poems of Hasan Sijzi of Delhi* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2016).

[12] David Bellos, *Is That a Fish in Your Ear? Translation and the Meaning of Everything* (New York: Penguin, 2011), pp. 290, 152, 153, 279.

[13] Quoted in Louis Untermeyer, *Robert Frost: A Backward Look* (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 1964), p. 18.

[14] Walter Benjamin, 'La Traduction – Le Pour et le Contre', *Gesammelte Schriften - Band VI: Fragmente vermischten Inhalts. Autobiographische Schriften*, ed. by Tiedemann und Schweppenhäuser, Vol. 6 (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1972–1989), 157-160 (p. 158). Further references to this work are given parenthetically in the text.

[15] Walter Benjamin, 'On Language as Such and on the Language of Man', in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 1 1913–1926*, ed. by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 62-74 (p. 62).

[16] Damrosch's work ranges across the Sumerian and Akkadian tale of Gilgamesh, to the Serbian epic. See respectively *The Buried Book: The Loss and Rediscovery of the Great Epic of Gilgamesh* (New York: Macmillan, 2006) and *What is World Literature?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

[17] Karim Mattar, Review of Apter, *Against World Literature*, in *Translation and Literature*, 23.3 (2014), 432.

[18] Paul de Man, *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 4.

[19] For a preliminary attempt to articulate such a framework, see Rebecca Gould, 'The Much-Maligned Panegyric: Toward a Political Poetics of Premodern Literary Form', *Comparative Literature Studies*, 52.2 (2015), 254–88.

[20] For further discussion of *iʿjāz*, see Rebecca Gould, 'Inimitability versus Translatability: The Structure of Literary Meaning in Arabo-Persian Poetics', *The Translator*, 19.1 (2013), 81–104.

[21] For a translation of three major treatises, see Issa J. Boullata, trans., *Three Treatises on the Iʿjaz of the Qur'an: Qur'anic Studies and Literary Criticism* (Reading: Garnet Publishing, 2015).

[22] For a recent consideration of Quranic translation within the framework of Translation Studies, see Hussein Abdul-Raof, *Qur'an Translation: Discourse, Texture and Exegesis* (London: Routledge, 2013).

[23] Dick Davis, 'On not Translating Hafez', *New England Review*, 25.1–2 (2004), 310–18.

[24] Unsurprisingly, the essay was subsequently included in a collection of articles about Ḥāfeẓ: Muḥammad Reḍā Shafīʿī Kadkanī, 'Dar tarjome nāpaziri-ye shiʿr', in *Īn kīmīyā-yi hastī: majmūʿah-'i maqālah'hā va yād'dāsht'hā-yi ustād Duktur Shafīʿī Kadkanī dar'bārah-'i Ḥāfeẓ* (Tabriz: Intishārāt-i Āydīn, 1385/2006), 125–33.

[25] For an alternative rendering of these words, taken from al-Jāḥiẓ's *Kitāb al-hayawān*, see Sherman Jackson, 'Al-Jahiz on Translation', *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, 4 (1984), 99–107 (p. 101).

[26] Victor Segalen, *Essay on Exoticism: An Aesthetics of Diversity* (London and Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), p. 19.

[27] Ibid., p. 19.

[28] Ibid., p. 15. Emphasis in the original.

[29] For engagements with Segalen in Francophone postcolonial theory, see Charles Forsdick, *Victor Segalen and the Aesthetics of Diversity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 90–101.

[30] Davis, 'On not Translating Hafez', 313.

[31] Roman Jakobson, 'Concluding Statement: Linguistics and Poetics', in *Style in Language*, ed. by T. A. Sebeok (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960), pp. 350–77 (esp. p. 357).

[32] Davis, 'On not Translating Hafez', 315.

[33] Davis, 'On not Translating Hafez', 318.

[34] On this topic, see most recently *Comparison: Theories, Approaches, Uses*, ed. by Rita Felski and Susan Stanford Friedman (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2013).

[35] Benjamin, 'Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers', p. 20.

[36] Shaden Tageldin, Shaden Tageldin, 'Untranslatability,' in *Futures of Comparative Literature*, ed. by Ursula Heise (London: Routledge, 2017), 234-238. Also available online: <http://stateofthediscipline.acla.org/entry/untranslatability> [last accessed 22 June 2017].

[37] Forsdick, *Victor Segalen*, p. 14.

[38] Leo Tak-hung Chan, 'What's Modern in Chinese Translation Theory? Lu Xun and the Debates on Literalism and Foreignization in the May Fourth Period', *TTR: traduction, terminologie, rédaction* 14.2 (2001), 195–223 (p. 203).

[39] At the same time, it brings his work into conversation with other Marxist translators, such as ʿAlī Sharīʿatī, who is the subject of an article in progress co-authored with Hamid Qessemi, "Translation and Anti-Colonial Revolution: Ali Shariati's Politically Committed Translation."

[40] Cited and translated in Pu Wang, 'The Promethean Translator and Cannibalistic Pains: Lu Xun's "Hard Translation" as a Political Allegory', *Translation Studies*, 6.3 (2013), 324–38 (p. 328).

[41] Thomas O. Beebee, Review of Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*, *Comparative Literature Studies*, 34.1 (1997), 94–98 (p. 95).

[42] For this line of argument, see Anthony Pym, 'Venuti's Visibility', *Target*, 8.1 (1996), 165–77.

[43] Laetitia Nanquette, 'The Translations of Modern Persian Literature in the United States: 1979–2011', *The Translator*, 23 (2017): 49-66.

[44] Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov, *Alexander Pushkin's 'Eugene Onegin'* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964).

[45] Wang, 'The Promethean Translator and Cannibalistic Pains', p. 328.

[46] Chan, 'What's Modern in Chinese Translation Theory?', p. 203.

[47] Lu Xun, '"Hard Translation" and the "Class Character of Literature"', pp. 91–92.

[48] A full consideration of contemporary Persian contributions to translation theory will need to wait for another occasion, but it is worth singling out in this context an original contribution to translation theory by an Iranian intellectual current residing in the United States: Omid Mehrgan, *Ilāhīyāt-i tarjumeh: Walter Benjamin va risālat-i mutarjim* (Theology of Translation: Walter Benjamin and the Essay on the Translator) (Tehran: Farhang-i Ṣabā, 1387/2008).