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## If the Benefit of Translation is Concealment<sup>1</sup>

EZRA POUND has said that a period that is remarkable for creativity in literature is remarkable for translations as well, or the age of creation follows the age of translation. An example might be the Elizabethan period in English literature. According to Pound, Golding,<sup>2</sup> the translator of Ovid, is such a great poet that he can be compared to Milton. There have also been a few translations into English which are even better than the original in some respects, for instance Sir Thomas Urquhart's (1611–60?) seventeenth-century translation of Rabelais,<sup>3</sup> or, in our times, [C. K.] Scott-Moncrieff's rendition of Proust, which, in the opinion of the author himself, is superior to the original.

Pound's opinion on the importance of translation is relevant for Urdu literature as well. In the context of world literature, we hesitate to use the term "great" for an Urdu poet or a period in the literary history of Urdu. Nevertheless, whatever kind of greatness we may have, it certainly

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<sup>1</sup>The title is a playful adaptation from a famous verse of Ghālib's which can be roughly translated as follows: If the benefit of silence is that it conceals one's state / I am glad that it is impossible / to understand my utterance. "Gar Tarjumē sē Fā'ida Ikhfā-e Ḥāl Hai," was included in the anthology of 'Askari's critical essays *Sitāra yā Bādbān* (Karachi: Maktaba-e Sāt Raṅg, 1963), 166–79. This translation is based on a reprint that appeared in 'Askari's collected works, *Majmū'a Muḥammad Hasan 'Askari* (Lahore: Sang-e Meel, 2000), 301–10. The footnotes have been added by the translator.

<sup>2</sup>Arthur Golding (1536–1605). His translation of *Metamorphosis* appeared during 1565 and 1567.

<sup>3</sup>François Rabelais (1494–1553), French writer, author of the comical and satiric masterpieces *Pantagruel* (1532) and *Gargantua*. These texts are remarkable for their linguistic and other excesses and are major works of narrative prose in French.

has some relation to translations. From the beginning of literary activity in Urdu until Ghālib's time, there may not have been many translations, but our poets tried to do two kinds of things. The first was to meld concepts and usages from Persian into our own language. The second was an attempt to establish a temperament and a spirit for the language. This is exactly what poets in Italy and England, under the influence of French, tried to do for their own languages in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

When the influence of the West began to be felt in our literature, a novelist of the stature of Sarshār translated *Don Quixote*. At least two novels in Urdu owe their existence to Cervantes. One is *Fasāna-e Āzād*<sup>4</sup> and the other is *Hājī Baghlōl*.<sup>5</sup> Anyway, it is certainly obvious that there are deep connections between Sarshār's creative writing and translation. But the question is, how good is *Khudā'ī Faujdār*, Sarshār's translation of *Don Quixote*? The first thing that must be said is that Sarshār has not done a translation, he has clothed the original story in native dress. In the process he was obliged to distort the text and even make interpolations. Thus, some parts of the book are entirely devoid of meaning. Sarshār also did not try to understand Cervantes fully, and perhaps there was no need for him to do so, for, although social change had begun in Sarshār's time, at least outwardly, the form that the culture had evolved into over centuries of development was still in place. And I think that an individual belonging to a strong, fully developed cultural tradition cannot understand the literary tradition of another culture completely. His sensibilities just refuse to accept alien experiences. It is people like us who live in a vacuum that have the desire or concern to understand the literature of others. For example, even Europe only began trying to look towards the philosophies

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<sup>4</sup>A long four volume picaresque account of the hero Āzād and his sidekick Khōjī. The novel first came out serially in 1878–79 from Lucknow and was published in 1880. Written by Ratan Nāt<sup>h</sup> Sarshār (1846–1902), it was essentially a picture of decadent Avadh culture. Its resemblance to *Don Quixote* lies in its comical satiric spirit, its picaresque plot and the presence of a main character and his sidekick.

<sup>5</sup>*Hājī Baghlōl* is a comic novel of the boisterous humor type, written by Munshī Sajjād Husain of Lucknow. He was the editor of *Avad<sup>h</sup> Panč* which serialized *Fasāna-e Āzād* as well. Published before 1902, strong traces of the characters of both *Don Quixote* and Sancho Panza can be seen in the eponymous hero Hājī Baghlōl.

of the East in the nineteenth century when the foundations of Western society became shaky.

So if Sarshār distorted a masterpiece of Western classical literature in his translation or adaptation, one shouldn't make fun of it. He read into the book only what his society or culture wanted him to. However, all right, this is one fault of *Khudā'ī Faujdār* as a translation. An even bigger fault is its unevenness. Sarshār writes half a page with great verve and enjoyment and then makes a hash of the rest of it. In fact, I grant all the faults that one may find in the translation, and I don't rate it as one of Urdu's great books. Yet I'm prepared to use the same words about it that Ezra Pound used regarding Pope's translation of Homer. Pound said that Pope may have made Homer into something else, but he at least made something of him. Similarly, in translating Cervantes, Sarshār has at least made "something" of him. I cannot say this about the translators who succeed Sarshār. At the very least his translation is a book whose title cannot be omitted from a list of significant works of Urdu prose. At least thirty or forty percent of the book can be read with enjoyment. Judging from the quality of other translations from the West that have appeared so far in Urdu, even this much readability is worthwhile.

The number of translations that appeared during the time when Niyāz Fatehpūrī and others were active is not many. Nevertheless, the kind of jejune romanticism and weak aestheticism these people tried to produce was only the result of the old tendency to adapt and/or translate selectively. I read these people some time ago when I was very young and now I can't find the courage to go back to them again. "Sorrows of life, sorrows of love" were a handful anyway,<sup>6</sup> so why should I have gone to the trouble of keeping another goat.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, I don't know who the Western writers were that they imbibed or which stories they translated. Oscar Wilde, for one, is an undisputed influence because their writings are peppered with badly translated ideas from Oscar Wilde. A second influence is perhaps that of Goethe's *Werther*.<sup>8</sup> Anyway, they did attempt to experiment to achieve Oscar Wilde's effervescent brevity. They began to write sentences without verbs. I've mentioned on many occasions the

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<sup>6</sup>"*Kuč<sup>h</sup> gham-e daurān, kūč<sup>h</sup> gham-e jānān*"—These two were standard phrases used to describe one or another kind of literature in the 1930s; that is, literature either depicted the scope of social problems or personal sorrow and pain.

<sup>7</sup>Keeping a goat refers to a Persian proverb "*Gham na dārī buz be khar*" which can roughly be translated as "If you don't have problems buy a goat."

<sup>8</sup>*Sorrows of Werther* (1774), Goethe's famous novel.

harm that such sentences wreaked on our prose. Still, I agree that sometimes one does need tail-docked sentences, especially because in Urdu the sentence ends with a verb and the monotonous repetition of “was coming” and “were coming” ruin the rhythm of the prose. Also, if the sentence is a little longer, “of him,” “of her,” “of them” and “that” are bound to occur no less than four or five times. This is a perpetual headache. Sometimes I get so piqued as to say that good prose is impossible in a language like this. Anyway, the feeble pseudo-aesthetes did devise a solution to this problem which can be useful on occasion. And this solution could even be learned by translating the thoughts of Oscar Wilde.

Urdu translations of French and Russian stories began to come out around 1936. From these, Urdu prose writers learned how to write unsentimental narratives and how to pack a sentence with the names of the numerous parts of a thing. The kind of prose that is now used in our Urdu short stories owes its existence to these translations. Scores of people produced translations during this time (1936) but if one had to choose one name as an example it would be Manṭō.<sup>9</sup> One must not disregard the role Manṭō’s translations played in determining the language of our short story today. However, on the other hand, it is also true that, aside from the two things mentioned above, the translations from this period didn’t contribute much else to Urdu prose. Similarly, I’m unable to say what we’ve learned of the art of prose style from Russian fiction writers? For me, such books, where the essence or soul has been separated from the physical thing, are unreadable. But aside from this personal prejudice, I suspect that although Dostoevsky’s novels stir one’s soul it has been observed that people who were deeply affected by his writings never really grew up. In any case, the influence of the Russian short story on the Urdu short story is marginal, but I know of a couple of Hindi writers who were spoiled by Dostoevsky. Perhaps the faults in Bedi’s short stories can be attributed to the influence of Dostoevsky.<sup>10</sup> Anyway, I don’t really know, or I can’t say, whether one can learn to write good prose by reading the Russian short story. The pity is that we read so much from the short sto-

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<sup>9</sup>Sa’adat Hasan Manṭō, one of Urdu’s greatest short-story writers, began his career by translating French and Russian short fiction via English into Urdu.

<sup>10</sup>Rajinder Singh Bedi, an important fiction writer of Urdu. He authored film scripts as well. Later, one of his novels, *Ēk Čādar Mailī Sī*, was made into a successful film.

ries of Maupassant, but still didn't learn anything except the choice of a subject in fiction.

Anyway, let's come to the present. The need for translations is being felt acutely and some translation work, whether good or bad, is also being done. But the existence of translations is in itself not so important. What is important is the impact the translations can have on our creative literature. So far we have undertaken translations only from the perspective of enabling the Urdu readership to have an idea what the story was in the original book. At most, the impact of these translations on us is that our authors also begin to write about the things or subjects found in the translated works. But the present-day translations do not cause the kind of creative emotion in us that Sarshār could elicit [in his translations], nor do they add to or cause a change in our extant prose styles. I personally haven't produced a translation that I can be proud of. Still following Ezra Pound, I can say that I believe a good translation is one that may not necessarily contain the spirit of the original, but it should become something. The problem is that, so far, we have regarded the matter of translation as a purely literary problem, and that's why our literature, and especially our prose, is becoming feebler by the day.

We have not appreciated the importance of this problem thus far because of our complacency about our language. This complacency is probably partly due to the Hindi/Urdu controversy and partly due to the wonders of the Urdu literary critics. We're told again and again that our language is one of the world's great languages and that every thought can be expressed in Urdu. Well, I don't know much about thoughts and ideas. Perhaps Urdu can accurately convey the ideas of a philosopher like Kant, but if someone can do a proper translation of even one of Proust's sentences I'll proclaim Urdu the world's greatest language. Let's leave that aside for now. You may say that Urdu has yet to develop the ability to sustain complex, complicated sentences, so let's confine ourselves to simple straightforward sentences. As far as translation is concerned, I too have translated *Madame Bovary* [from the original French]. Now, there is a passage in that novel describing snow falling on the heroine's umbrella. If all Urdu writers sat together and translated those eight or ten lines in a way that retained in its entirety the beauty of the original, I would promise not to touch another book except those in the Urdu language.

I'm not deprecating Urdu. All languages have shortcomings, but for some reason we believe that our language has no need for any addition or change. A writer must love his language and have faith in it. But, whatever the standard of our language may be, good or bad, our creative writ-

ers should not be concerned with whether it is regarded as one of the best languages in the world or not. For better or worse, this is the language we have and, just like the old man in the tale of Sindbad the Sailor, we can't get rid of it. Our first concern should be to examine the capabilities of the language at present and then consider what new methods of expression and communication can be invented for it.

Our literary critics have no qualms in saying that we have learned all that was good in Western literature and that now our literature is firmly the equal of Western literature, but when you sit down to translate a Western novel the reality of your inability to do so becomes apparent in five minutes, provided of course that you're aware of the nature of the author's style. But even if you understand the challenges that translation entails, and want to find a solution to those challenges, Urdu literary criticism blocks your way because publishers are only willing to publish books that will sell, and Urdu literary critics have dulled the minds of book buyers. Now if you want to do creative translations, how is that possible?

If I mention my own translations in this context please don't think that I'm trying to promote my own books. I'm only going to share with you the reasons for the failure of my translations: what the problems that I faced were and why I couldn't resolve them.

Some kind friends have told me that my best translation is *Ākhrī Salām*.<sup>11</sup> This does boost my spirits but I still don't regard that translation as an achievement. This book of Isherwood's belongs in the tradition of realism, but its prose is not like Maupassant's. The author is mainly interested in events and characterization and his prose is ordinary. Through the translations he did around 1936, Maṅṭō had shown the way that texts of this type could be transferred into Urdu. Thus, if you have an adequate grasp of the Urdu idiom and can bring literary prose nearer to the rhythm of ordinary conversation, you can come up with a good translation of books like *Goodbye to Berlin*. I feel that although my translation may not be equal to Isherwood's original, reading it can obviate the need to read the original.

The kind of Urdu prose needed for a translation of Isherwood's book was already in place. Urdu readers seek no more in a translation than an easy flow and simplicity in the prose and that the translation reads like an original work in Urdu. Forgive my boastfulness, but this is something I

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<sup>11</sup>Translation of Christopher Isherwood's *Goodbye to Berlin*.

can do in my sleep! But then, what would Urdu literature gain from such an exercise? There's no doubt that this approach of easy readability will also lighten the task of the translator considerably, but our language remains where it was.

Making fluency the ultimate criterion for good prose has devastated our literature, especially literature in translation. If our literary critics had shared with our readers the secret that exerting one's mind during reading is not something objectionable then perhaps there might have been some experiments in prose writing, at least in translations. But now one is afraid to move or displace even a single word for fear of not finding readers [for a prose whose syntax is slightly alien to Urdu]. Had the Urdu language been rich in many styles of expression and narration, the demand that the translation should read like an Urdu original would be justified, but imposing such a condition while we are in a state of poverty sounds really strange. If such a mind-set continues to dominate our literature then writers like Rabelais or Joyce will never be translated into Urdu at all. Until about eight years ago I subscribed to the crazy notion of disregarding the manner and style of Urdu when translating, but now I'm scared of Urdu literary critics and can't summon up the courage to fight them. However, my publishers are really brave and they publish my work even if I break and twist Urdu as much as I like.

The one translation of mine that should be read carefully is *Madame Bovary*, that is, as an example of a failed translation. In the first place, which language in the world can boast an accurate translation of *Madame Bovary*. Poor Urdu is just a baby. As far as Urdu is concerned, the book deserves to be translated by a team of eight or ten translators working together over a period of three or four years. Perhaps then some viable translation might have resulted. I can't claim to have understood all the problems of prose style this book poses. It would probably take a year to do that. Anyway, the few things I did understand I tried to create in Urdu. For example, one of the things I tried to do was to create dimensions of meaning through punctuation just as Flaubert does. But the calligrapher messed up all of that. Also, Flaubert frequently presents a variety of concepts in the space of one sentence in order to promote both comparison and contradiction. Instead of interpreting such sentences, I preferred a literal translation into Urdu, but readers complained that my translation lacked fluency and clarity. For example, the very first page of *Madame Bovary* has a description of a hat made from a shawl. If it were just a question of fluency and clarity I could have, in the *Hājī Baghlōl* style, given a most amusing description of that hat. But my aim was to

translate each sentence of Flaubert into Urdu as closely as I could, even if it meant stretching the resources of Urdu beyond the possible, and I did just that. People complained that the translation's language was convoluted on the very first page. I would have been happier if someone had sent me a better translation of that sentence. I would have printed it in some journal to show that at least one problem of Urdu prose had found a solution. These are some of the small problems of Flaubert's book. I didn't have the courage to tackle the bigger problems, such as the rhythm of the prose or the construction of paragraphs. These issues were so difficult that I regarded them as one would regard a heavy rock which one touches and leaves undisturbed. Anyway, Urdu readers did read the novel. Only a few people know what my successes and failures were in that translation.

Last year I translated Stendhal's novel *Surkh-o-Siyāh* [Scarlet and Black]. This novel made me pull out my hair in frustration. Again, if fluency had been my goal I could have dashed off fifty pages a day from my bed. But Stendhal is such a rascally fellow that he places the art of prose over the art of poetry. Now my problem was: should I be a traitor to Urdu or to Stendhal? I admit that out of consideration for my publisher, I played traitor to Stendhal. After all, my poor publisher was brave enough to agree to publish such a lengthy novel. But the Urdu language tied my hands in some ways as well. Stendhal uses abstractions for analyzing emotions. Urdu doesn't have this ability. If I had tried to invent a new mode of expression for this there was the fear that Urdu literary critics would have raised their eyebrows and said: is this a novel or a dissertation? So I was cornered. I offered my apologies to Stendhal's spirit and filled his dry prose with some emotional color. Or you might say, I bribed Urdu's literary critics a little.

But there was yet another problem: though Stendhal's prose seems dry and colorless at a cursory reading, a closer reading reveals a concision and pithiness that almost borders on irony. This is something that couldn't be captured in the English translation even though the novel had such a great translator in Scott-Moncrieff. The truth of the matter is that behind Stendhal's prose is a century-and-a-half tradition of French literature created by the writers of *Maxims*. It is La Roche Foucault who often speaks from behind the prose of Stendhal. Where could I find a tradition to fall back on that would enable me to translate Stendhal's prose into

Urdu? Could I have used Niyāz Fatehpūri's language or Mīr Amman's?<sup>12</sup> Granted, Urdu has a great literature, but I challenge you to successfully translate four sentences of Stendhal.

These days I'm translating [a] Choderlos de Laclos novel.<sup>13</sup> It is presenting me with a new problem: how to recreate the author's tone of voice in Urdu. This I'm utterly unable to understand. There are the examples in Sarshār or in Sajjād Ḥusain,<sup>14</sup> if I were looking for farce or broad humor. But how do I make Urdu reflect the nuanced sophistication that characterizes the jokes and merrymaking in eighteenth-century French? But I must say this about my translation of Stendhal, Sarshār couldn't have done a better translation than mine. But then he would have been able to make something of this novel and I can't even do that. This means that now Urdu prose doesn't even have what it had three quarters of a century ago.

I've spoken at such great length about my own translations because I wasn't able to solve the literary problems I had encountered during my work. I have indeed translated a few major books, but I haven't added even a particle's worth to Urdu's existing prose styles. And my complaint with Urdu readers and literary critics is just the same. I'm not making exaggerated claims, but even if I wanted to I couldn't have dared to experiment with new styles in Urdu. Therefore I have to keep asking myself this question: what's the value of translations that have no impact on creative writing? The purpose of translation, even if it's not successful, should be to present new problems regarding the means of expression for writers and readers. It doesn't matter if no problems are solved, at least let the translations present the new problem. But, so long as there is Urdu literary criticism, God willing, no literary problem can ever arise in our minds. □

—Translated by Mehr Afshan Farooqi

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<sup>12</sup>Niyāz Fatehpūri is much respected for his so-called poetic prose in fiction, while Mīr Amman of *Bāgh-o-Bahār* fame produced tales in the tradition of the oral narrative, marked by simplicity and easy flow.

<sup>13</sup>Although 'Askari does not mention the novel, he probably means the classic *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* (Dangerous Liaisons, 1782) of Laclos which is regarded as one of the earliest examples of the psychological novel.

<sup>14</sup>Editor of *Avadh Panā*.