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## The Difficulty of Translating Poetic Texts - The Poem "Al-Buhayra" as an Example -

إشكالية صعوبة ترجمة النص الشعري- قصيدة البحيرة للامارتين أنموذجا-

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## Abstract:

The translation of poetry constitutes a distinct reality in which the creative individual, the translator, literature, and civilization fulfill essential needs that neither creativity nor reading can achieve for them. The translator's task in this field is extremely challenging, as they must remain faithful to the translated text. The success of their translation ensures, to a large extent, the success of the translation, and any deviation from it undermines the translation entirely. The translation of poetry is a creative artistic work in itself, which is why it seems that the most capable individuals for translating poetry are the poets themselves. Creative and knowledgeable individuals possess an unparalleled understanding of the language of the other, its civilization, and values, as well as their own language, culture, and the nuances of beauty within it. In this study, we attempt to answer the following question: Can a poetic text maintain its beauty and rhythm when translated? To what extent does the translator succeed in preserving the essence of the translated text?

**Keywords:** Translation - Poetic Text - Modern Criticism - Literary Criticism Schools

## الملخص

إنّ ترجمة الشعر واقع قائم بذاته يحقّق بها المبدع والمترجم والأدب والحضارة حاجات أساسية لا يحققها لهم الإبداع أو القراءة. فمهمة المترجم في هذا المجال صعبة جدّاً، إذ يجب عليه أن يكون وفياً للنص المترجم. فنجاح ترجمته يضمن إلى حدّ بعيد نجاح الترجمة والإخلال به يسقط الترجمة إسقاطاً. إنّ ترجمة الشعر عمل فني إبداعي قائم بذاته، لهذا يبدو أنّ أقدر الناس على ترجمة الشعر هم الشعراء أنفسهم، المبدعون والعارفون أيضاً معرفة لا حدّ لها بلغة الآخر، وحضارته وقيمه، وبلغتهم وثقافتهم ومواطن الحسّن فيها. نحاول في هذه الدراسة الإجابة عن السؤال التالي هل استطاع النص الشعري المحافظة على جماليته وإيقاعه عند ترجمته؟ و إلى أي مدى وفق المترجم في النص المُترجم؟

الكلمات المفتاحية : الترجمة - النص الشعري - النقد الحديث - المدارس النقدية .

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Arabic literary criticism, like other global literatures, has not been immune to changes. It has undergone various developments, ranging from stability to innovation and radical transformation, influenced by numerous factors in the modern era, such as translation, which had the most significant impact on its evolution by exposing it to other world literatures. It served as a qualitative leap for the art of poetry and prose. This Arab renewal was infused with Western influences, carried by literary figures from different schools (Diwan, Emigrant Literature, and Apollo Group), who blended ancient Arab authenticity with the new Western civilization<sup>1</sup>. The characteristics of this fusion manifested in numerous translations of various literary forms such as poetry, prose, short stories, novels, and plays. Through these translations, they attracted readers and introduced them to diverse global literatures that were not present in their literary landscape before.

Cultural exchange between the Arab world and the West began, and interest in foreign languages grew in Egypt and Lebanon. Translation expanded to encompass most literary genres, including poetry. Only then did Arab poetry witness a significant renaissance, exemplified by poetic plays written by Ahmed Shawqi, influenced by his exposure to Western poetic drama. The renewal introduced by the Apollo school was evident in both the content and form of poetry. It was also apparent in the free verse movement and, finally, in prose poetry, where poets continue to experiment and explore to this day.

## 2. IMPLICATIONS OF TRANSLATING POETRY

Poetry is one of the earliest beautiful forms of Arabic arts that responds to the needs of the human soul. It represents one of the highest forms of linguistic and cultural expression. It emanates from the emotions, creativity, and sentiments of the poet, reflecting their personal experiences, struggles, and inner feelings. The poet, as a living and thinking individual, expresses and imagines, portraying a picture of their social environment to which they belong. They live in it, feeling its concerns, sensing its needs, and aspiring towards its ambitions. Poetry can be an expression of the self, where the poet articulates their innermost feelings, emotions, sufferings, and pains. Its subject matter can also be humanitarian, influenced by the external world.

Translating poetry is challenging, especially from a European language into Arabic, as it sometimes involves the complexity of the translation process<sup>2</sup>. If we translate poetry into prose, inevitably, we will lose the essence of the poetic text, encompassing both sound and meaning.

Cultural communication between the Arab world and the West began at the dawn of the modern era, with a growing interest in foreign languages evident in both Egypt and Lebanon. Translation expanded to include various literary genres, including poetry. Only then did Arab poetry witness a significant renaissance, manifested in poetic dramas written by Ahmed Shawqi, influenced by his exposure to Western poetic theater. This revival also became apparent in the innovations introduced by critical

schools, both in the content and form of poetry, and was clearly reflected in the free verse movement. Finally, prose poetry continues to be explored and experimented with by poets to this day.

Europe has recognized the importance of translating poetry for over two centuries as an entry point to understanding the Arab spirit. Europe has translated much of Arab poetry, including the "Mu'allaqat," considered one of the most challenging forms of Arabic poetry, often not fully understood or read by contemporary Arabs themselves.

One of the pioneers who attempted to translate poetry into Arabic with significant impact was "Sulaiman Al-Bustani." His translation of Homer's "Iliad" into Arabic, completed in 1895 and published in 1904 by Dar al-Lal in Egypt, included explanations, footnotes, and an introduction<sup>3</sup>. Suleiman Al-Bustani faced challenges in translating it related to the form, content, meters, and rhymes of Arabic poetry. He discussed these issues in his introduction, marking the beginning of a trend towards abandoning uniform rhyme. Among the poets who attempted to translate poetry and novels were Khalil Mataran and, before him, Ahmed Shawqi. It can be said that Suleiman Al-Bustani is considered one of the pioneers who translated poetry into Arabic.

As part of the Diwan group's renewal efforts, they reimagined poetry, contrary to the simplistic definitions of poetry that predecessors adhered to, and many followed suit, leaving them in stagnation as they failed to keep up with the spirit of the time.

Later on, translation took another approach, that of adaptation from Western poetry. Some poets were accused of borrowing from English and French poetry,

including Abdul Rahman Shukri, who, in turn, accused Al-Mazini of stealing some poetry and attributing it to him. Others, including Al-Aqqad, were accused by those proficient in reading foreign languages directly. The door to Western influence in Arab poetry was opened wide after World War I<sup>4</sup>.

Some scholars believe that the influence of Western poetry began with modern poetry, i.e., free verse. This is indicated by both Farouk Saleh, Mohamed Lotfi Al-Youssefi, and Abbas Baydoun, who associates the emergence of "Anashid Al-Matar" by al-Sayyab with "Abariq Mahmasha" by al-Bayati, and "Aghani Muhayyar al-Dimashqi" by Adonis<sup>5</sup>.

Translation has opened up new horizons for Arab poets, allowing them to make their mark on the literary scene. Through translation, Arab poets have been influenced by various literary movements, including Romanticism, Symbolism, Realism, and Futurism. Many poets who were proficient in foreign languages, such as English and French, like Amin al-Rihani, were able to contribute significantly. The Diwan school, represented by figures like al-Aqqad, al-Mazini, and Abdul Rahman Shukri, also excelled in the English language and drew inspiration from Western literature.

Translation played a crucial role in expanding the literary knowledge of Arab writers and exposing them to the experiences of others. This was evident in the poets of the Diwan group, who played a pivotal role in bringing about literary renewal in the Arab world. The school advocated for new poetry and drew its principles from a single source—the English literature. Some critics even consider Abdul Rahman Shukri as a

pioneer of this school, as he not only excelled in poetry but also in criticism, surpassing his peers in all areas.

Abdul Rahman Shukri's influence from English poetry is unmistakable, as seen in his numerous translations of Baudelaire's "Les Fleurs du Mal" and his readings of Byron and Shelley. He was also influenced by global literature and was among the first to introduce Western literature to Arabic readers. Shukri's exceptional translation skills were showcased in his translations of significant works like Omar Khayyam's "Rubaiyat," Arthur Machen's "The Hill of Dreams," and Arthur Machen's "Sweeney." He provided summaries of masterpieces of world literature, published in the magazine "Al-Sabah" by its owner, Mustafa Al-Qashash. Al-Aqqad praised Shukri, stating that he had a broad understanding of both Arabic and English literature, was a highly competent translator, and had a comprehensive knowledge of history and narrative.

These valuable opinions were expressed in acknowledgment of Shukri's wide-ranging knowledge, making him an influential figure in both Arabic and English literature. He demonstrated excellence in translation, surrounded by books on history and narrative. These precious opinions were sent with the courtesy of the moment and are not meant to be evaluative.

### 3. THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF TRANSLATING POETRY

The topic of translating poetry is almost synonymous with the entire debate surrounding literary translation, as it is one of the most complex subjects in the study of the translation process, given the difficulty or perhaps impossibility of translating it. It

represents an issue of utmost importance, sparking debates and chaos among critics, poets, and translators.

The attention to the difficulty of translating poetry is evident since ancient times, as noted by Al-Jahiz when he emphasized the difficulty of translating poetry in his book "Al-Hayawan," stating that poetry should not be translated or transferred because it would lose its beauty. Al-Jahiz clearly acknowledged the impossibility of translating Arabic poetry into other languages. His perspective rejected the prevalent idea among ancient Arabs, considering poetry as a unique feature of the Arabic language and an art form not shared with other nations. This idea is, of course, incorrect, as poetry is common among all languages and civilizations, and meter is not exclusive to Arabic poetry but is shared among all verses.

Al-Jahiz argued that the languages to which Arabic poetry would be translated lack the linguistic and expressive embrace capable of accommodating Arabic poetry. The first obstacle is the absence of linguistic and expressive equivalents in foreign languages, making the translation of poetry a journey into the unknown.

This external reason is a factor contributing to the impossibility of translating poetry. The second reason is internal and is related to the poetic expression itself, with poetry containing artistic elements that distinguish it from prose, such as rhyme, meter, assonance, and weight.

Al-Jahiz's remarks on translating poetry suggest a certain narrowness, meaning that it is true that a sophisticated poem is impossible to translate to the same level of the original text.

A successful poetic translation is one where the translator becomes a second poet for the poem, as they have managed to unlock all its intricacies. According to Umberto Eco, it is an attempt to assimilate a cultural understanding, a bridge that facilitates the crossing between two languages and allows the discovery of the other.

If we consider the translation process based on three pillars: the translator, the text, and the recipient, its success depends primarily on the first pillar—the translator, who serves as a mediator between the text and the recipient, bearing the consequences.

The concept of the impossibility of translating poetry is associated with the romantic view of poetry. The English poet Coleridge was the first to express this idea in his literary biography in 1817, but it remained a theoretical notion without established laws and reality. Henri Meschonnic argues that the idea of a difference between poetry and language in translation is linked to the linguistic specificity between cultures and points out that Western or European poetry has significantly contributed to revealing the confusion between weight and poetry.

The question that arises is: If it is indeed impossible to translate poetry, and many proficient Arab writers and readers can directly read these global poetic texts in their original language, why do we translate poetry instead of enjoying it in its original language?

It cannot be said that translating poetry is impossible because the translation process requires the concepts of creativity in translating the text. This modern concept is associated with looking at the translation of poetry as more challenging than translating prose.

For over two centuries, Europe recognized the importance of translating poetry as an entry point to understanding the Arab spirit. The ancient Arabs, especially during the Jahiliyyah era, had a rich Arabic anthology full of diverse poetry with linguistic difficulty and eloquence. Europe translated a significant number of Arabic poems, especially the "Mu'allaqat," which is the most challenging form of Arabic poetry and is scarcely understood or read by contemporary Arabs themselves. However, these translations were studied and analyzed to understand the lives and feelings of ancient Arabs.

The possibility of translating poetry is an established fact. When Arabs realized that poetry is not exclusive to them but is widespread among all civilizations and languages, they felt a pressing need to translate the poetry of others to discover the customs of others on the one hand and develop their literature on the other. They enthusiastically embraced translation, and a considerable number of poems were translated and adapted into all living world languages. Translating poetry has become a permanent feature in Arabic journals, particularly in publications like "Al-Muqtataf," "Shi'r," and "Al-Aqlam."

#### 4. THE CHALLENGE OF DIVERSE TRANSLATIONS OF A SINGLE TEXT

The multiple Arabic translations of a single poem or text, and their repetition, may be attributed to the dissatisfaction of the Arabic translator with the previous translations. They may have undertaken a second translation, perhaps one that is better than its predecessors and closer to the intended meaning for the reader. Another justification for the phenomenon of repeated

translations of the same work is that all literary works of the author may have already been translated, leaving nothing for Arabic translators to focus their efforts on. The general utility of having multiple translations is not devoid of benefits, as it reflects diversity in interpretations and translation methods. It provides various possible formulations for the translated literary text, making it a factor of enrichment and diversity. Moreover, the multiplicity of translations serves as a clear indicator of a strong interest in the translated literary work and signifies a significant cultural need for the Arabization of that particular work.

The act of translating a text or poem requires the use of multiple terms, employing translation techniques and methods, including the use of tools such as dictionaries. All these steps taken by the translator are not bound by a single language. The fact that multiple individuals translate a single text does not mean that the poem or text is impossible to translate. Rather, it depends on each translator's perspective, proficiency, and cultural understanding of the language they master. Here, the translator's skill is evident, displaying a high proficiency in foreign languages. A notable example of this is the poem "Al-Buhayra" by Lamartine, which has been translated into Arabic at least twenty times.

A successful translator is one who "relies on the use of foreign languages to avoid linguistic errors of all kinds and levels." What should be present in a successful and creative translator is mastery of both the source and target languages, as well as proficiency in their grammatical rules, rhetoric, and expression. Translation is not an easy task, and not everyone can attempt it without experience or

specialization. Proficiency in a language or two does not guarantee success in the field of translation. Translation requires honesty, accuracy in conveying others' ideas, and sufficient knowledge of terminologies. The translator must excel in using a style that somewhat resembles the original, so that the translation is on par with the original without deletion, abbreviation, or elongation.

The poem "Al-Buhayra" by the famous French poet Lamartine, often referred to as the prince of French poets, is considered a gem in world literature. It has garnered significant attention from Arab writers and poets. This poem has been translated by more than twenty-five poets and authors in various forms, including vertical and free verse, as well as prose. Notable poets like Nājī Nādī, Ibrāhīm Nājī, and 'Alī Maḥmūd Ṭāhā have contributed to its poetic translations. In addition, prominent writers like Aḥmad Ḥasan al-Zayyāt and Muḥammad Mundhūr have provided prose translations. Below is a presentation of some of the translations of the poem<sup>6</sup>.

### **Le lac**

#### **Alphonse de LAMARTINE -1790-1869**

Ainsi, toujours poussés vers de nouveaux  
rivages

Dans la nuit éternelle emportés sans retour  
Ne pourrons-nous jamais sur l'océan des  
âges

Jeter l'ancre un seul jour?

O lac ! l'année à peine a fini sa carrière  
Et près des flots chéris qu'elle devait revoir  
Regarde ! je viens seul m'asseoir sur cette  
pierre

Où tu la vis s'asseoir  
Tu mugissais ainsi sous ces roches  
profondes

Ainsi tu te brisais sur leurs flancs déchirés

Ainsi le vent jetait l'écume de tes ondes  
Sur ses pieds adorés

**1. Translation by Mohamed Mandour<sup>(7)</sup> :**

Do we continue forever, guided like this, to  
?new shores

Carried incessantly amid the eternal night  
?without rest

Or can we one day cast our anchors  
?on the shores of the timeless expanse

O, Lake! The year has barely completed its  
cycle, and yet, look  
here I am alone, seated upon this rock  
that I saw you sitting on  
next to your beloved waves that would  
return to see you

You used to murmur beneath these deep  
rocks  
and you used to break against its rugged  
sides  
while the winds would cast the foam of  
your waves  
over her worshiped feet

**2. Translation: Idris Al-Wagish<sup>(8)</sup>**

Poem: The Lake  
Thus...

We are always driven to new worlds  
In the eternal night, we drift without return  
Could we, while in the midst of our lives,  
Leave the anchor even for just one day?  
Oh, Lake!

The year has barely finished its course  
Near the beloved waves  
You would have seen them again  
Look...  
Here I am, coming alone  
To sit atop this rock  
You used to murmur beneath these towering  
rocks

You used to break on their jagged edges  
And the wind would cast the foam of your  
waves onto her golden feet.

**3. Translation by Nicolas Vayad<sup>(9)</sup>**

The Lake

?Is this how our dreams always unfold  
Folding life, and the night of death  
envelopes us  
Life's ships sail swiftly, leaving us behind  
In the sea of existence, do we not cast our  
anchors

Lake of love, life welcomes you  
Your waters revive us with whispers of  
secrets

I used to hope for a year-end reunion  
But today, meeting is not expected in the  
passage of time

So, I came to sit alone wherever  
The beloved took away from me the love we  
shared  
Your sighs have not changed their melody  
Carrying our songs for a long time

Above your shore, the waves never cease  
Crashing against the rocks at times, and the  
wind at others  
And beneath your feet, oh, how many times  
From the foam of the water, the hand of the  
wind secured us

**4. Translated by Muhammad Abu Hafs  
Al-Samaha<sup>(10)</sup>**

And thus fate always drives us,  
From one shore to other shores.  
The darkness advances with no return,  
when  
Will we ever rest on the shore of life?



A year has passed, and I returned, O my  
lake,  
To your precious abundance, without  
my beloved.  
How many times you sat here with me,  
and here I am,  
Sitting alone today upon the rock.

And so you were roaring waves,  
Crashing under the towering rocks.  
The foam of the waves on the feet of  
Those who loved, thrown by the passing  
winds.

These are various translations of some passages from the poem "Al-Buhayra," and there are still several translations for it. Each translation stands out from the others in terms of emotion, thought, style, and the ability to match, imparting the authentic character indicative of familiarity with the subject matter and a command of both the conveying and the conveyed languages. Additionally, there is a need for an understanding of the spirit of both cultures, embodying the poet's persona in his poem starting from grasping its verses, and comprehending its events with precision, depth, and taste<sup>11</sup>. And this is by uncovering the hidden depths of the meanings and understanding what occurred within the translator's mind regarding the text to be translated.

Translation varies with its practitioners in terms of spirit, practice, knowledge, and culture. Thus, translation can be likened to a bottle, in the words of Mohammed Didaoui. We find clean translation that disappears upon sight, as well as dirty translation that obscures it, deceiving the gaze and obstructing vision.

It is certain that the novice translator is not like the proficient one; the more capable

and experienced the translator is, the more refined their translation becomes. Sometimes, it can even surpass the original text because, in their translation, the translator feels the heart of the author, sees through their eyes, speaks with their tongue, and adheres to the nature of the text. This enables them to channel their spirit and emotions into words, expressions, and style that suit the context.

Jackson Matthews raised an important issue, stating that translating any poetic poem is essentially creating another poem in a language close to the original text, dominated by the spirit of the author. The translator is the one who fulfills an individual need in a larger literary and cultural context through translation, bridging their language with others. Every literature needs continuity and renewal, to see itself in other languages and to assimilate texts from other literatures, expressing them in its own language. Without translation, each literature would remain confined to its own country and wouldn't reach other worlds.

The actual impact of translation is leaving a beautiful impression on the reader's psyche, as if they read it in the original text. The success of poetry translation lies in its alignment with the aesthetic beauty of the conveyed language. This is evident in the Arab enjoyment of Omar Khayyam's quatrains and the influence of Arabic muwashahat on the troubadour tradition in Spain. True translation is one that doesn't seem like a translation but rather a second text by another author, exemplified by Arberr's translations of the Mu'allaqat, Anis Al-Maqdisi's translation of Tennyson's "In Memoriam," and translations of selected contemporary Arabic poetry into English by poets like Mikhail Naimy and Ilya Abu Madi.

## 1. CONCLUSION:

Translating poetry is a creative endeavor in itself, unrelated to copying and transferring the text from one language to another. It involves a great deal of creativity, innovation, and generation. Therefore, it seems that the most capable individuals for translating poetry are the poets themselves—creative individuals who possess profound knowledge of the language, civilization, and values of the other, as well as their own language, culture, and the nuances of beauty within it.

Translating poetry is a distinct reality that fulfills essential needs for the creator, the translator, literature, and civilization, needs that cannot be fulfilled by creativity or reading alone. The translator's task in this field is exceedingly difficult, as they must remain faithful to the translated text. The success of their translation ensures, to a large extent, the success of the translation, and any deviation from it undermines the translation entirely.

Reading poetry in its original language is a thousand times better than reading it translated into another language. However, those who are proficient in foreign languages are few, and even fewer are those who dare to translate a poem from one language to another. This process requires a lot of patience, research, and a deeper understanding of the poem's content to avoid losing the meaning of a word or its shadow.

Poetry translation often loses many connotations of words and discards figurative expressions that carry in their original language many implications that impact the people for whom the poem is written. However, when the translation is accurate, faithful, and aware, it conveys the artistic

structure of the poem, as well as the poetic imagery that constitutes its essential elements. It also preserves the poetic content that represents the message the poet wants to convey to their people, and indeed to humanity as a whole. All these aspects are significant when trying to understand the poetic works of a nation, even if we do not speak its language, and we seek to comprehend it, perhaps through other means such as writings.

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<sup>4</sup> - Ibrahim Khalil: Modern Arabic Poetry, p. 38

<sup>5</sup> - The same reference: page 39.

<sup>6</sup> - The poem "Al-Buhayra" by the famous French poet Alphonse de Lamartine, who was dubbed by

<sup>1</sup> - Sami Khushaba: Intellectual Terms, Egyptian General Book Authority, Cairo - Egypt, 1997, p. 61.

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Arab literary figures as the Prince of French Poets, is one of the finest global poems. It stands as a gem in world literature and has garnered significant attention from Arab writers and poets.

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