

Translating Keats's "Ode to Autumn" into Arabic Poetry: A Practical Approach

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Abstract

This study is a demonstration of my understanding of poetry translation from a personal, practical perspective and presents an insight into the nature of this type of translation, which is subjective because the translator cannot be neutral. In this paper, I record my experience in translating Keats' "Ode to Autumn," presenting my ideas, feelings, impressions, and the steps I followed while translating this ode. I also present scholars' and translators' ideas

and opinions that supported mine. By using this practical approach, I tackled a number of issues related to translating poetry and the reader's appreciation of and pleasure from the product of the translation, which I consider the criterion for success. Thus, I emphasize the reader's importance in this approach and present to him, as an example to judge, my translation into Arabic of Keats' "Ode to Autumn". However, this approach does not underestimate translation theories. At the end of this paper, there is an appendix that includes "Ode to Autumn," followed by two literary translations of this poem, in which I use the traditional form and the free verse form, respectively.

Introduction

This paper is an attempt to illuminate my readers by offering them a glimpse into the nature of poetry translation from a personal, practical perspective. Many theoretical questions may arise when literary works, particularly poetry, are translated, but, practically, the translator of these works does not think about such questions. The same is true of the readers who do not care for theoretical questions regarding translation because they just want to read and appreciate a successful translation. Translating literary genres is unique and involves a number of activities related to language and the transference of an intended message from the source language to the target language. Therefore, literary translation is not just a (Maalej 2003) "matter of pairing two syntactic systems;" if it were so, machine translation would do the job for us, but this is not the case. A literary work needs a translator who has committed himself to exert his (Adewuni 2006) "efforts to minimize the gap between the original text and its translation." We should keep in mind that literary translation is much more than just an acquired skill in which there is just a linguistic conversion of the text; rather, it is a talent and an artistic endeavor such as playing a lute. Gross (1991) rightly says:

No one who has truly translated or even truly communicated in a single language can deny the real elements of art involved in the art

of translation ... Translation is a far more demanding profession than many are capable of envisioning, which of course determines many of the profession's problems and challenges.

Literary translation (Newmark 1988, 162) "is the most testing type of translation" because it is not the product of predetermined concepts or systematic measures. It is mainly subjective, and it is, as William Weaver says, (Gerding-Salas 2006) "something you learn only by doing." That is why some writers think that translating theory (Emery 2000: 26, 106) "should be discarded in favor of more practical works" because "the quest for such a theory from an essentialist perspective is ultimately doomed to failure." Keane (2003) says:

theory and practice are uncomfortable bedfellows. However, subjectivity does not mean that translation is just an individual activity because a person is immersed in his culture and history. Many of the most famous translators would have difficulty describing how they go about the business of translating.

One should bear in mind that translation is a kind of communication and not a set of theories and rules, and thus, its success in communicating the message of the source text is the criterion of its success. Moreover, good translation theories are based mainly on information gained from practical translation. This is similar to grammatical rules that are derived and based mainly on masterpieces of literature. However, on the one hand, I do not accept sweeping generalizations against theories of translation because some may accept them in translating literary works and in translating non-fiction works. On the other hand, I believe that a translator of literature should deflect the onslaught of theories of translation, because if he is besieged, his creativity will eventually die. Therefore, we can rely on practical translation to provide adequate solutions to translation problems and to provide translation theories with new ideas. Many famous literary translations were completed before the formation of translation theories, one example being the famous translation into Arabic of *Kaleela Wa Demna* by Ibn Al-Muqaf'. Therefore, the importance of

the practicality in translating literature motivated me to record my experience and the steps I followed in translating Keats' "Ode to Autumn" into two versions of Arabic poetry.

Steps and Process of Translating "Ode to Autumn"

Before any practical step is taken, one should have, as a prerequisite to attempting a translation, the self-confidence in one's ability and proficiency to translate. The first step is to choose a poem. In this case, the selection is "Ode to Autumn," which I love and which intuitively responds to my poetic creativity. This motivates and inspires me to translate this poem to share this love with readers in the target language. In addition to my thorough understanding of the poem, which is a requirement for translating, I have solid knowledge regarding the composer's life experience, social and historical background, and the time and place of the poem's production. This is necessary because every literary movement and epoch leaves its fingerprint in works of art and helps the reader and translator understand the piece of literature. Another important facet for the translator is to delve into the poet's vision and imagination, to melt myself within his mindset, which enabled me to understand the recesses of the poet's spirit that is reflected in his poem, and thus translation brings with it new images and fresh insights. After this deep knowledge of and about the poem, I hit a critical point wherein I felt that I had assimilated the poem; I had a unique feeling that prompted me to start my translation. In this state of exultation and enlightenment, I could translate "Ode to Autumn" with spontaneity into a creative, fresh poem in the target language. I refer to this state as the true moment of translation, which is synonymous with the poetic inspiration that enabled me to transform the text in the source language into a creative, fresh poem in the target language. This indicates that the essence of the poem is attained, and so the translated text is lined within an appropriate rhythm and a special system of sounds to fit the new emotions and feelings in the target language. In Adewuni's opinion (2006), when a person starts practically translating a literary work, it is a

successful "attempt to guess the mind of an author correctly." Thus, after capturing the meaning of the source text, there is a process of transformation and then the reformulation of the source text into the target language while honoring its elements peculiar to poetry. After the completion of the first draft, I revised the translated version to be sure that I produced a poem that has the characteristics of an excellent poem in the target language both in form and content. The revision of the output is necessary to ensure a final translation that is of the highest quality. Accompanying all steps of translation is keeping an eye on the source text because (Kangaroo 2004) "translation should maintain the poets' basic literal meanings," and at the same time be creative. I felt that the process of translating this ode is like cooking different dishes with the same items; the ingredients are the same, but the way they are combined is different. The same ideas and meanings are there in the poems in the source and the target languages, but the way these are combined is different. Thus, there are different poems in the source and the target languages much like two different recipes made with the same ingredients will each taste differently.

The Reader is the Touchstone

I believe that the reader who appreciates the production of translation is the touchstone for the assessment quality of the translated material, i.e., he is the taster who says whether the translation is a success or a failure. This testimony of success is given when the reader feels that the translated text is an excellent creation in the target language. Therefore, the reader is of extreme importance, and he is, nowadays, no longer the passive receiver he was in the past of creativity works. Richard Jackson (2004) observed the importance of the reader:

They [translators] have considered the contemporary reader, as Petrarch urged, along with the meaning and rhythms. This is precisely the example of Horace and of Pope. As Johnson wrote of Pope's Homer: 'To a thousand cavils one answer is sufficient:

the purpose of an author is to be read, and the criticism which would destroy the power of pleasing must be blown aside.'

Without the reader the meaning is not communicated because the translated text is not only the meaning of (Aiwei 2005, 51) "what is intended by the author" or "contained in the text," but also what the reader created of that text. Thus, one of the greatest advances of modern literary studies has been the re-evaluation of the reader who becomes more of a producer than a consumer, particularly since the spread of information through the Internet. Thus, the idea of one correct translation of a given text ends for a number of reasons. In my opinion, there are mainly two: first, the growing role of the reader. The message designed by the writer of the source text is received differently by readers because, naturally, different readers may have different interpretations and comments, and even the same reader may have different interpretations of and comments on the same text in course of time. Second, translators are individuals with unique characteristics and backgrounds, and so the quality of the translated text depends on the quality of the translator, i.e., his skills, knowledge, expertise, cultural background, mood, etc. We should keep in mind that the translator is first a reader who has his own outlook toward the source text, and then he becomes a translator in which he is influenced by his point of view as a reader. Thus, after the reader examines the two translations of Keats' "Ode to Autumn" at the end of this study, it is my ultimate desire that the reader firmly believes that the translated texts are successful creations and not just cold, literal equivalents because (Al Abdullah 2001) "the most important thing is, the conversion should end up with a good piece of new language."

Each Poem is Unique with Special Problems

Each poem in its source language has a unique entity and needs to be translated in a special way to produce a suitable form and content. This is clear even in words. Some poets may use simple and forward words and expressions, while others may use elaborate

sentence structure. In this regard, I believe Keats used simple words and expressions in "Ode to Autumn." From my experience in translating the ode, I am convinced that the Arabic language has great flexibility and capacity for reflecting the content and form through the reconstruction and the repainting of the translated poem in the target language to produce a total overall effect on its readers by transferring the ideas, emotions, ease and flow of the original text. However, I cannot claim success in translating Keats' ode, but I can claim that I tried my best to artistically transfer the ode into another poem that could be appreciated and tasted by the readers of the target language.

Giving Life to a Translated Literary Piece

Despite the importance of preserving the meaning and message of the translated poem, what is more important, in my opinion, and which I tried to do, is giving is giving life to the newly translated poem through artistic touches. This is the soul that gives life to the body. James Kirkup says that the role of the translator of poetry (Rodrigues: 2001) is to:

pour carefully the wine of a poem from the bottle of one language into the decanter of another. It is the soul of the wine that concerns them most, and no matter if there are a few splashes and overflows.

Hazo (1999) says that the ideal translator is the:

one who is fluent--spiritually as well as linguistically--in the language from which he is translating and equally fluent--spiritually as well as linguistically--in the language into which he is transposing the original. Translating a vision is more than translating words.

Rodrigues and Hazo are correct because one of the main aims of every translator of literary works is to try to keep and adhere to the spirit and essence of the message of the source text and to transfer them with spirit to the target language.

The Balance between Faithfulness to the Source Text and Creativity

I am aware of the conventions that are required of me to strike a balance between the need to be faithful to the source text and the desire to produce an original translation that is poetry. I believe that viewing translation as a creative rewriting of the literary work in the target language is capable of changing our ideas of viewing translation erroneously as either faithful or unfaithful. However, it is almost impossible to be fully faithful in translating a poem because (Aiwei 2005, 12) "no language is ever a valid substitute for another." Moreover, translating a poem depends as much on form as it does on meaning. Thus, in translating Keats' poem, I am controlled (Asfour 2000: 15) "by the need to give the best possible expression of the original message in the target language," and at the same time to be creative. I think both faithfulness and creativity are vital because there is no alternative but to be faithful and keep constantly an eye on the source text, and at the same time to be free and creative in translating. To follow the source text word-for-word does not make a poem despite the fact that it may be judged faithful in form. Literal translation alone makes the translated text imperfect, mechanical, and far from being alive because (O'Rourke's 1999) the "experience of translating poetry texts leads eventually to the view that translation is creative after all, and not just a mechanical procedure." Creativity is essential because it is the (Ketkar 2003) "magical aspect of the work of art, which in fact makes it a work of art," but, at the same time, if it is not bridled by faithfulness, it will take the translator far from the source text.

A Poem is Expected in the Target Language

An Arab reader expects to read and appreciate Keats' poem as a poem in his native language that he can accept with the same ease in its native rendering and not just a prose equivalence of the source text. My readers expect me to produce a literary work that does not sound strange in his target language. Thus, despite the fact that no translator can claim that he is fully confident of his literary

translation because of the richness of literary works, surely (Al Abdullah 2001) the "most important thing is, the conversion should end up with a good piece in the new language." Layman says (2002) "a translation should not sound like a translation. It should sound like any other good, natural speech or writing in that language." The translated version should appear to a native speaker of the target language as an original poem that conforms to form and content with his language conventions, i.e., to be a color in line with the target language.

"Ode to Autumn" Translated into Two Arabic Poetic Forms

Translating poetry into poetry is not an easy task. The special form of the traditional measured and rhymed Arabic poetry restricts the freedom of the translator. These restrictions of meter, foot and rhyming schemes are the main reasons for the wide abandonment of the traditional verse form worldwide, and in Arabic literature, since the second half of the twentieth century. On the other hand, it is also responsible for the spread of the free verse form. The limitations that are imposed by the nature of the rhymed verse compelled me to greater adaptations in my translation of the source text in the traditional form than that of the free verse form. For example, "swallows" in the last line of "Ode to Autumn", which in Arabic is "sonono", cannot fit in the metered and rhymed version in Arabic, therefore, I translated it as "asfoura" (a small, female, non-predatory bird with the connotations of gentleness) to fit into the metered version because of its auditory and rhythmic qualities. Even though the metered, rhymed version seems to deviate a bit from the source text, it captures the essence of the ode. However, traditional poetry is celebrated by its memorability, beautiful wording and musicality which, through practice I believe, compensate for its restrictions and limitations. A well-known example of a practical translation that keeps the essence of the source poem is Fitzgerald's translation of Omar Khayyam's *Rubaiyat*. On the other hand, I feel that in the free verse translation, I am able to get accurate equivalents in Arabic more

than in the measured and rhymed translation. Thus, "swallows" is translated into its Arabic equivalence "sonono" in the free verse form, so I am closer to the source text in the free verse form than in the rhymed and metered version.

At the end of this paper there is an appendix that contains three poems: Keats' "Ode to Autumn" and my two translations into Arabic of this ode. The first is rhymed on the traditional Al-Ramal meter , which I used because I think it replicates the ease and flow of "Ode to Autumn." I believe that by using this meter, I preserve its internal music and rhythm. The second is the free verse version. However, what is important is that (Ball 1995) "the translated text makes sense," but "it does not mean that it necessarily makes the sense that was intended by the original author." The two versions show that each form, whether traditional or free, is in need of a special handling in translation.

Translation Needs a Lot of Effort

No doubt that translation needs a lot of effort, particularly in understanding the depth of the source poem, and then translating this into the target text. I agree with Al Abdullah (2001) that "understanding the tone of poetry written in one language and converting it into another require a tremendous amount of effort." The same idea is stated by Gerding-Salas (2000) who says, "translation is an arduous job that mortifies you, puts you in a state of despair at times." On the other hand, when the spirit of the poem is assimilated, I felt that images and ideas come into my mind spontaneously.

Difficulties faced

Each poem has its specific translation problems and needs to be dealt with in a special way. Thus, the difficulty of translation varies from poem to poem. I agree with Gross (1991) who says that "each translator must improvise appropriate case-by-case solutions."

Despite the fact that literary translation is inherently a difficult activity, I did not encounter any unusual difficulties in translating the ode. Nothing is culturally specific that would alien in the target culture, nor is there obscured syntactic structure that is difficult to convey in Arabic. Thus, the message of this ode is clear, and so it is easy to determine what it is about. In contrast to this, I would like to present Ezra Pound's short poem, "In a Station of the Metro," as an example. After reading it, I found it is not easy for me to determine what the message of this poem is because it is to be found between the lines. Thus, this poem is more complicated and needs more intensive work to understand than "Ode to Autumn." In such a case, the translator needs to solve the problems he faced using all tools available such as adaptation, paraphrasing, equivalence, analogies, comparison, loans and other various translation mechanisms. The following is Ezra Pound's poem "In a Station of the Metro," followed by my two literary translations, the first is formed according to traditional Arabic meter of Al-Wafer and the second is in line with the free verse form. The following translation of this poem in two versions is be compared with the two translations of Keats' "Ode to Autumn" in the appendix:

“In a Station of the Metro”

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
 Petals on a wet, black bough.

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Deviation from the Source Text Justified

We should keep in mind that it is only possible to translate a literary piece with partial semantic and stylistic loss, which some call deviation from the source text. Most translation authorities believe that deviation from the source text is inevitable, particularly in rendering a poem into its equivalent verse. Theoretically, deviation can only be avoided if a text is translated word-for-word, which no one is in favor of because this (Hariyanto 2006) "method will not be able to transfer the original meaning" and this rendering has not been able to create its aesthetic effect and value in the target language. Therefore, deviation is a necessity because (Aiwei 2005, 10):

Not all words need to be translated. Some cannot. Some can be transcribable, but if there is no cultural equivalent, whether it is translatable or not it still needs to be explained, just like a jargon needs to be explained to the non-specialist in a footnote. Words, expressions or interjections that are exclusive to a culture, a religion or a jargon cannot always be translated in a satisfactory way because the same thing does not exist in the other language's culture.

As a translator, I always feel that I am compelled to make various adaptations, additions and deletions to convey and relay the beauty of the content to conform to the expressions in the target language, and this compensates for the loss that occurred in the process of translating the source text. Without this, there will be no creative literary translation. Therefore, this deviation is inevitable to enable the translator to produce a vivid, organic wholeness in an attempt to minimize the gap between the source text and its translation to produce a text that is acceptable for the reader in the target

language. However, it should be noticed that both literal and free translations are there in every translation, including my translation of "Ode to Autumn."

Request to Readers

I plan to translate a number of famous poems from English into Arabic. Therefore, I would request that my readers send me their feedback about my translation and whether it is successful or not, and to vote which is better, the first version, the metered and rhymed, or the second version, the free verse.

Please, e-mail me at:

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Appendix

Ode to Autumn

John Keats

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness!
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;
Conspiring with him how to load and bless
With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eaves run;
To bend with apples the mossed cottage-trees,
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;
To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells
With a sweet kernel; to set budding more,
And still more, later flowers for the bees,
Until they think warm days will never cease,
For Summer has o'erbrimmed their clammy cells.
Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?
Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find
Thee sitting careless on a granary floor,
Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind;
Or on a half-reaped furrow sound asleep,
Drowsed with the fume of poppies, while thy hook
Spares the next swath and all its twined flowers;

And sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep
Steady thy laden head across a brook;
Or by a cider-press, with patient look,
Thou watchest the last oozings, hours by hours.
Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are they?
Think not of them, thou hast thy music too, -
While barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day
And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue;
Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn
Among the river salallows, borne aloft
Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;
And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn;
Hedge-crickets sing, and now with treble soft
The redbreast whistles from a garden-croft;
And gathering swallows twitter in the skies

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