Compilation 12

Conversation 1-Writing As Translation, Translation as Writing

Saleh Najafi, Nima Parzham, Pages
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Saleh Najafi: I started translation from editing around 2001. My uncle was a translator and since at that time I was studying Persian literature, he would give me his translations and I would edit the Persian text and compare it with its original English. One time my uncle decided to send back a book which was suggested to him by a publisher. I was tempted to read the book and translate it myself. It was an almost hundred-page book in political philosophy titled *On Tolerance* by Michael Walzer. The book contained very few quotations. Some thinkers were mentioned in the book, but unlike the convention of theoretical books, there were no paragraphs quoted directly from other writers or books; you can say it had a consistent prose. I began translating the book in the following way: I wrote my first suggestion for each sentence. Then I wrote the words and phrases that I had doubt about under them. Sometimes for each sentence I had five options. I did not reach a good sentence in my head, rather I wrote down on paper all the options that crossed my mind and chose one from them. I read the chosen sentence to myself to see whether its rhythm was good enough or not. Translation was strangely interwoven with writing. Therefore, I spent almost one year for a hundred-page book and I constructed each and every sentence of it. The final result was not very satisfactory, but I could say that finally I had translated a book and my name was now on the cover of a book; I thought I was somebody else with another identification card in my hand.

My second experience was a book called *Identity Crises* by Robert G. Dunn. It was a criticism of postmodernity written in the 1990s. The

author was an American who had presented a kind of outline of all the present theories up to that point. He believed that there was a lack in the social critique of postmodernity. He also had a theoretical proposal which was a synthesis of Judith Butler's theory of "Performativity" and George Herbert Mead's "Social Pragmatism". The final chapter of the book had a fascinating title, *Redeeming the Subject*, which could be translated in Persian as "absolving" or "paying off" the human subject. At the end, I translated it as "Saving the Subject". The subject, on one hand, has a performative character and is constituted by discursive processes, and on the other hand, it has a social and tripartite nature based on the relations between me, you, and the other. This book was exactly the opposite of the first book I had translated. It was full of references to various people and traditions with various prose styles and writings. My personal experience changed a great deal there. For the second book, I started collecting or archiving many texts in Persian language which were related to the topics discussed in the book. I even gathered newspapers in which by chance I noticed Persian translations from theoretical and quasi-theoretical postmodern texts. I thought I could find in newspapers equivalents for some words or understand a certain concept better. Here something new happened to me. You are translating a book into your own particular prose, but in the book you eventually deliver to the reader, there are numerous voices and proses with different styles and rhythms, and this diversity was not just due to diversity in prose in the source language. Without institutional and academic background and with different motivations and abilities, Persian translators for some time were engaged in translating texts which were mostly related to postmodernism. So I had to create a prose which had a relation with these previous translations of these texts; I had to create a fairly harmonious, homogenous, and to some extent "meaningful" unity out of that diversity – or better say "chaos". Four translators would used four different equivalents for a single word which all are supposed to refer to the same theoretical system. What should a translator do with all these equivalents? My second experience in translation was an experiment in subsuming different rhythms –

rhythms which were also not reliable – within a single translation and framework. This experience included searching for all kinds of quotations in Persian – and interestingly the title of the book was "Identity Crises".

However, the decisive moment in my translations dates back to 2004 when the *Idea Desk* in *Sharq* newspaper had become a place in which one could define a line of thought for oneself. It was also a place where one would think if I wrote something there or my name was mentioned there, I would join a big community of leftist and progressive intellectuals or people who imagine and wish that ideas would effectively change reality. Since *Sharq* was a daily newspaper, every week you expected some new theoretical event. There was a small group to whom I taught history of philosophy. In those years I had almost no access to the internet, so I asked one of my students to see what he could find online for me about this philosopher named Alain Badiou who was introduced in *Sharq* and whose thoughts seemed to contain all our questions and concerns. He found an interview with Badiou called *On Evil* and an article by Edmond Wright in which Badiou was mentioned. I translated this interview in one night. Reading each and every sentence of that interview, I had the feeling that something important was happening to me. I felt if I wanted to take a position on something, I would probably say it in in his words. The important thing was that never in my previous translations had I thought I could read a sentence and immediately reach a translation for it. I used to think I have to make a sentence several times to reach the final sentence. This did not happen in that night. Every sentence that crossed my mind was like I had said it before in English and now I was writing it in Persian. This experience was almost never repeated itself. In the morning when the translation was complete, I told myself that last night was different from all the other nights of my life. I thought I must translate in this way, i.e. to assume that the text I am reading has been written by me in another language and now that I am writing it in Persian I would not have been able to write it if I had not read it in English. It is as if one could translate one's own words. That specific

night determined all my life as a translator. That night a new thought, a new idea, grew in my mind: that night I experienced a specific form of writing which might be called "writing as translation" or "translation as writing". From that point on, I told myself that there are a series of writings whose inscription is a duty or vocation for me. In other words, I am obliged to write something, but I can only actualize it through translating. I should produce a text which has nothing redundant. My criteria for removing redundancy was to write in a way as if I was translating, because when one is translating, one feels responsible for each word or phrase which one adds to the original text. Later I came across a sentence in the introduction of the English translation of *Gravity and Grace* by Simone Weil. In the introduction of that book, Gustave Thibon, a priest who was a close friend of Simone Weil, recounts a letter written by Weil to him. She said in the letter that many writers and thinkers in European history suffer from a kind of megalomania which is against thinking. Her idea was that writing or thinking must reach a certain level of simplicity or plainness with no trace of ostentation and the writer's strong presence must be omitted in order for the writing to become real writing. Simone Weil says that the real way of writing is to write as we translate, since when someone translates, she/he is extremely careful not to add anything so that she/he can render the original text into the target language in the most precise manner. True writing means translating a text which has not been written down... I took this formulation seriously. You experience true writing when you are engaged in translating. And of course writing, in the proper sense, is translating from an absent text. Later I found a new evidence for this idea: Sadeq Hedayat's prose. I have always been concerned with this question that at what moment Iran's modern literature was established. Modern prose, the prose of the novel, or the possibility of thinking about writing a novel in Persian language – even if it fails – is interwoven with Sadeq Hedayat. Many years ago, a writer with the aim of "disclosure" claimed that Sadeq Hedayat had plagiarized in *The Blind Owl*. There is a paragraph in the middle of *The Blind Owl* which is an exact translation of *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* by Rainer

Maria Rilke, without any quotation mark, reference, or hint from Hedayat. I am referring to the piece in which the narrator reflects on the problem of faces/masks: "Life as it proceeds reveals, coolly and dispassionately, what lies behind the mask that each man wears. It would seem that everyone possesses several faces. Some people use only one all the time, and it then, naturally, becomes soiled and wrinkled. These are the thrifty sort. Others look after their masks in the hope of passing them on to their descendants. Others again are constantly changing their faces. But all of them, when they reach old age, realize one day that the mask they are wearing is their last and that it will soon be worn out, and then, from behind the last mask, the real face appears"[1]. This piece is usually used as an evidence to claim that Hedayat cannot be considered a creative, original and inspired writer, because he has "plagiarized" in his best or most celebrated work. I took this accusation of plagiarism seriously, in the sense that one is always engaged in the act of translation, i.e. in reading every text, paragraph, or sentence, you feel you must later "quote" it in different settings and "transfer" it to different contexts. We have a series of notes all of which are formed by translation. Undoubtedly, Sadeq Hedayat did this a lot. He would read for example Rilke or Dostoevsky and he would probably take notes and translate them. One scenario for Hedayat's plagiarism could be that he forgot that one of his taken notes was a translation. However, the point is that when we read *The Blind Owl*, this piece is a bit irrelevant to its preceding and succeeding parts. It is like a montage, i.e. the narrative is cut and a quasi-philosophical image or reflection about the relationship between face and mask is put in the middle of there. Then he might have thought that it should not go to waste and let's keep it. I call this act Hedayat's "unconscious coding" in the heart of the novel, meaning that *The Blind Owl* is a story written based on translation. All of *The Blind Owl* is written based on the "politics of translation". When it was published in Iran, there were two reactions to it: one concerning its content, the other with regard to its style. The content-based reaction claimed that *The Blind Owl* promoted suicide and was full of dark pessimism. Left intellectuals considered it a decadent book for its indifference to the status quo and its

reluctance to accept the writing "vocation", i.e. enlightening and persuading the readers to protest and change the status quo. The other group criticized Hedayat's writing style. This group was mainly traditionalist, conservative and concerned with the continuance of tradition. They declared that the modernization path of Persian prose rested upon the past. From this perspective, the modernization path of Persian literature passed through the prose of writers like Mohammad-Ali Jamalzadeh and Mohammad-Taqi Bahar. From the viewpoint of Persian stylistics, *The Blind Owl* had a deformed prose; a prose which, according to today's idiom, reeked of translation[2]. That is the text is written by someone who is either not competent at Persian or someone who has translated so much that he has reached a rhythm in Persian which is not the "natural" rhythm of Persian language. In other words, he has directly introduced his way of translation into Persian prose. I think if we put these two together – i.e. Hedayat's plagiarism and people who said that this book was deformed and morbid not because of its content but because of its prose – then this coding will make sense. I mean Hedayat offers the readers the coding of the prose of *The Blind Owl* through the translation of that piece from Rilke which is inserted in the book. In fact the fundamental cell of the novel is that part which is translated from Rilke and the rest of the prose can be identified in this way. There are occurrences in the prose of *The Blind Owl* which are only possible through translation. The first problem of anyone encountering the prose of *The Blind Owl* is its unfamiliarity. This prose is unprecedented in Persian and of course it could not have any precedent, since the author of this prose has indeed translated it. He has translated from a text which did not exist and in order to reach this prose, Hedayat had passed through translation. He had read so many French texts that a great deal of the things that he wanted to imagine and write were imagined through translation. We may even say that his translation experience to create a form for modern short story and novel – in general, the modern literature which was established in Iran after Hedayat – presupposed translation, meaning that I translate so much in order for a moment to be reached when I have to translate a text which has not been written yet. The coding of

The Blind Owl is that plagiarism – i.e. what Hedayat accusers have called plagiarism – and as I claimed earlier, it is the founding cell of modern Persian prose in general.

It may be said that we are facing a haunted prose in *The Blind Owl*, a prose which has been possessed by an alien ghost, which has made it stutter and has introduced movements and behaviors into it which are alien to its historical "self". In some ways, one can compare this with the syntax of one of the characters of Dostoevsky's *Demons*. Dostoevsky has created a character in this novel whose vocation is, in a sense, making language haunted. He is in every sense of the word someone who talks through translating. The central core of the story comprises of a so-called revolutionary group with five members. In order to keep the coherence of the group, the group's leader decides to eliminate one of the members who resists against his tyranny. He persuades other members to revolutionary execute Ivan Shatov. Shatov's counterpart in the novel is a young man named Kirillov. These two obsessively think about God. Ivan Shatov wants to have a Russian God, but Kirillov believes that if we can imagine human beings for whom living and dying are equivalents, we will no longer need God because they become God themselves and God is the only entity that life and death makes no difference to Him. His idea is that we must become God through groundless suicide, i.e. suicide without any psychological and emotional motives and with just a philosophical motive. There is an interesting contradiction in his idea: only those committing suicide become God, in other words, only the dead. I can become God only when I do not exist with my own will. Among the characters in the novel, there are so-called Westernized intellectuals who continuously utter French sentences in their talks. Stepan Trofimovich, one of the main characters of the novel who is an intellectual in the 1840s Russia, says an interesting thing: we Russians have not said anything worthy in our own language, so if we want to say something decent, we will have to say it in another language. He frequently uses French sentences and ironically his French sentences are useless. But stylistically speaking, one might say that the main character of the novel is Kirillov. For a

period of time Kirillov and Shatov go to America to work the land and experience agricultural life. Then they both return to Russia. For Shatov, this means a "return to oneself" and an attempt to save Russia through Russian Christianity, Russian God, etc. And Kirillov considers philosophical suicide as the only way of salvation. The notable point about Kirillov is his language. He does not follow Russian syntax and grammar. Dostoevsky has created a character whose linguistic syntax is haunted. This is one of the most excellent instances of being haunted in novels. Kirillov is haunted through language. He is also the most prominent intellectual in the world of the novel who realizes his guiding thought in practice. He has to translate every sentence he wants to utter. Dostoevsky reached this hauntedness of language through syntax. Kirillov does not use any foreign sentences; rather he makes the syntax of Russian sentences haunted, i.e. he alters the word order in Russian sentences. This is an experience which as a rule should take place in poetry, but Kirillov has used it in ordinary sentences.

Nima Parzham: Saleh mentioned an important point. Before anything else, we need to think about the relation of writing to translation. I think we have to examine this claim that translation is the precondition of writing specifically in the historical background of modernity. In the examples that Saleh provided, the formal aspect of language had an essential role. We all agree that in order to understand a literary work, we have to pay attention to its form; however, if we are asked what we mean exactly by the form of literary works, we won't usually have a straightforward answer. With a quick examination of the history of discussions about modern Persian literature, it seems that alongside the increasing attention and emphasis on the notion of form, its ambiguity is also felt more. One of the reasons for this ambiguity is probably related to the formal character of language itself. Sometimes we are implicitly faced with the presupposition that the poet or the fiction writer simply adds form to the language and the claim that language as such also has form is not considered so much plausible. Saleh talked about how he was obsessively engaged in the form of language during his work on his first translation. We have to take it into account that engaging

in the form of Persian language and its potentials are present in the experience of both writing in Persian and translating a text into Persian. But the subtle difference between these two arises from a limitation of translation which at times inevitably leads the translator to go beyond his capabilities in using the potentials of language. This experience can be considered as a rich and fruitful instance of the dialectical relationship between the "self" and the "other". It is obvious that the probability of such a mechanism to take place, has a direct relation to the difference in the level of capabilities and the range of vocabulary of the source and target languages, and this is why the internal relation between writing and translating in Persian is so much linked to modernity. It is against this background that the unique experience of Hedayat should be viewed.

Most of Hedayat's first stories seem crude, amateurish and even ridiculous to today readers. Since the tradition of fiction writing – in its contemporary prevailing sense – had no precedent in Persian language, the first Iranian fiction writers had to use many of the basic techniques of fiction writing through trial and error. Interestingly, even nowadays we are facing the same experience with regard to some common genres of fiction writing which have no significant background in Persian language. We need to just imagine a science-fiction story whose protagonists are named Manouchehr and Sousan! We have to pay attention that this problem is mainly related to nondescript and unremarkable issues, because even in the West the rise of the novel was based on transferring the narrative backdrop from the adventures of mythical gods, ethnic heroes, god-like kings and eternal saints to the everyday life of ordinary people and their unglamorous concerns; a development which began around the 16th century (Rabelais) and the 17th century (Cervantes) and gradually across centuries became one of the most important genres in the history of literature. But the first Persian fictional works were written at a time when Persian language had not undergone such a gradual and step by step experience. That is why these stories are considered valuable works not despite their inelegance and crudeness, but precisely for these qualities, because their naivety and ridiculousness is nothing but the formal manifestation of our

traumatic historical encounter with modernity.

In *Less than Nothing*, Slavoj Žižek shows with an imaginary example how the form of language is capable to register and expose the traumatic aspect of human experience, an aspect which is by definition essentially inexpressible. Imagine a woman going to the police station claiming that she has recently been raped. To see the validity of her remarks, one should not pay attention to the signs which usually suggest the validity of someone's remarks, i.e. consistency, non-contradiction and credibility of the presented narrative. In fact such signs have an inverse signification here since if her claim is correct, her narration of such a traumatic experience will inevitably be chaotic, inconsistent and disorganized. We can exactly see in this example that what is inexpressible on the level of meaning becomes apparent on the level of form. Therefore, one might say that the trauma of encountering modernity, which is "the Real" of the contemporary history of Iran and the key to understand most of its contemporary political developments, has influenced the first Persian novels and is registered in their form. According to a familiar and common tradition in literary criticism, the first sentence of a novel often reflects implicitly the ultimate truth of the novel. It is not surprising then that the first sentence of *The Blind Owl* is so famous: "There are sores which slowly erode the mind in solitude like a kind of canker"[3]. We should bear in mind that the word trauma literally means wound or sore.

Pages: Nima you place back in time Saleh's reading of how the experience of translation propels the writer to another form of writing: before becoming a form, translation has already been experienced as a trauma. And of course the relationship between translation and the trauma of encountering modernity – that you mentioned – is not separate from our experience of colonialism. Here your example from Hedayat's first stories is interesting. If in *The Blind Owl* it is the protagonist who experiences the trauma of this encounter and it is part of the story, it seems that in Hedayat's earlier stories it is the writer himself who experiences this encounter in the

act of writing. This experience becomes a form of writing in *The Blind Owl*, but Hedayat was really involved with it in his first stories and in contrast to *The Blind Owl*, he does not find a fictional-literary disposition for it. That is why the names and locations in these stories carry a historical-geographical contradiction. While the first texts are the manifestation of that traumatic experience, *The Blind Owl* internalizes this trauma and registers it in language. In fact, in *The Blind Owl*, translation produces a historical position with regard to modernity, to colonialism. In comparison to the early texts, this is where writing becomes a political act. The form in Hedayat's later works is a political form.

Therefore, the issue of translation in *The Blind Owl* cannot be separated from the subject matter of the story. The question that arises here is what did Hedayat unsettle in our tradition of fiction writing? What tradition of writing was he changing? That tradition did not exist! So it is the experience of encountering modernity which answers this question, the experience which both contradicted the writer and in a way is an answer to that contradiction. Maybe the issue of translation helps us to claim that in the absence of a tradition of fiction writing, it is translation which produces a historical position for modern literature.

Nima: Exactly. Because Hedayat's text has no ground to stand on, it has to make a background for itself through translation. This shows that we cannot simply say that we had been "outside" the history of modern literature, the history which is – at least potentially – universal and delivers a general address. It is true that we had no easy access to it and that is why we needed translation; however, the very possibility of translation and its role in our historical experience confirm the universal character of modern literature. That is why Hedayat's valuable experience has become possible. We have heard many times remarks like we are fifty years behind the West and so on. But this is just one aspect of the story. While we are for instance fifty years behind the advanced West, we are also contemporaneous with it. It is this simultaneous synchrony and asynchrony which

constitutes our historical experience and ignoring each of these two aspects is essentially an ideological attitude.

Pages: We do not necessarily experience history as linear, i.e. traversing that fifty years historical gap to reach the present time defined by the West. Following Saleh's coding idea, Hedayat might also want to create a gap or rupture in reading the story by inserting Rilke's piece in *The Blind Owl*. This "jump cut" throws the reader to the present time outside the linear course of the story – a kind of Brechtian distanciation. This montage as rupture is not only interrupting the course of the story, but also it is a reproduction of the experience of historical rupture in our traumatic encounter with modernity and the West. Yet Hedayat presents this historical rupture not as our exteriority to the historical process of modernity and the absence of a modern writing tradition, but as a short-cut to produce a different understanding of being in modernity which is not defined by colonialism.

Saleh: The issue addressed by Nima, that is the relationship of translation and writing to modernity, can be elaborated with the help of Baudelaire who is the first theoretician of modernity. Maybe we can begin from the distinction between the metaphysics of modernity and the history of modernity: modernity has been intertwined historically with capitalism and colonialism. The relation of capitalism with these two notions in the case of Iranian modernity illuminates aspects which have an effect on Iranian writing and the experience of translation and thought. On the other hand, we can talk about "the metaphysics of modernity". According to Baudelaire, being modern always has two aspects: an eternal aspect and an evanescent aspect. It can be said that modernity is a historical experience which creates a kind of metaphysics of modernity, a metaphysics which translates all previous experiences anew. In this sense, we can say that from the beginning writing has been interwoven with translation. The example of Iran is clear. Persian syntax being haunted is evident right from the start of the history of Persian prose because of its encounter with Arabic language. Persian

texts have always been full of Arabic words and there has been interplay between Persian syntax and Arabic syntax. Ironically, many Arabic syntax and grammar texts were written by Persian speakers; for example, Avicenna wrote texts in Arabic and then later he translated them into Persian himself. We observe a similar and noteworthy phenomenon in the European history when thinkers and authors wrote in Latin and national literatures were in a way formed in reaction to the dominance of Latin over Europe's cultural atmosphere. This means that I talk in my native or first language but write in a second language. In other words, from the beginning, writing in many cultures has meant distancing from the native language. This reminds us of the idea that Deleuze took from Proust: many great books are written in the native language, but they treat the native language as a foreign language, as if it is for the first time that the author is writing in his native language. This matter has also a metaphysical state to some extent: people talk in their first language, i.e. spoken language and conversation in its conventional sense, but when they write, it is as if they are dealing with a language which is not their first language. I think this issue metaphysically has an effect on any writing. When we start writing, we no longer deal with our familiar native language. Right from the start, the relation of writing to spoken language is vague and indefinite. Writing is a way for translating oral speech, a way for not forgetting, which itself creates a kind of "dialectics of oblivion" in writing, because writing weakens memory in the traditional sense. When I note down words that I hear, I no longer rely on my reminiscence faculty. As a result, my memory weakens. The first form of writing is noting something down. In Persian, the word note means committing something to memory. I write to memorize. In a sense, this is a way to overcome the fear of losing. This idea is linked to modernity insofar as modernity also generates a kind of metaphysics which connects writing from the very beginning to translation. It is noteworthy that our encounter with metaphysics historically took place through modernity. And this is the trauma of encountering the absence of traditions; a historical wound which might be claimed to have constituted Iranian modernity. Finally, I want to add that "Iranian modernity" – if it has any meaning whatsoever – has a significant

relation to the history of global modernity, i.e. to the globalization process of the universal aspect of Europe's culture. In order to become global, European universalism has always operated through colonialism: countries which were directly colonized were inevitably involved in the co-ordinates and contradictions of European modernity. They were colonies of a developed country for a while and this colonizer consequently introduced its own language to the colonized, and they became practically bilingual. Then the bilingual colonized people used the universal aspect of the colonizer's culture and the first thing they demanded was independence. They wanted to be independent/separate from the colonizer, yet as bilingual people. In all the countries with independence movements, it is as if, in a metaphysical sense, presupposition to independence was being colonized or being bilingual. This bilingualism has been also in a Hegelian sense the condition for being modern. In these countries, educated people are bilingual from the beginning. From childhood they talk and write in two languages. Therefore, translating from one language to another is an experience in which they are involved from the start. Iran had a unique and distinctive experience, since the way it was colonized was different from other countries. It has never become bilingual in that sense. The only form of bilingualism that we have is pre-modern, between Arabic and Persian. That is, there are people who say their prayers in Arabic and in a way are competent at another language. Only after we truly start being modern, we move toward monolingualism, which means searching for pure Persian and sometimes excluding Arabic words from Persian. So we became modern without becoming bilingual. In this context, translation is a condition for encountering the real trauma, which is of course not enough for traversing this trauma. For a proper evaluation of translation, a hypothetical/ideal situation has to be imagined in which all the readers of your translations are able to read the original text. In other words, real translation is not for people who are not familiar with the source language. In modern era, I have to translate for those who know the source language just like me. In that case, I can claim to create something in the target language, otherwise I am offering a text to readers who do not have any access to the source language and their only access is through me. This makes the

experience going on between writing and translating senseless. Therefore, I think "Iranian modernity" reminds Western modernity of a strange point: that in Europe, after the globalization of capitalism and free market, universalism and globalism became one thing and consequently at times we have seen the "glocalization" process which might be a reaction to not facing the universal core of globalization which is itself realized through capital and colonialism. It might be claimed that Iranian modernity refers to this point, although in a negative way. In the history of modernity, Iran has been the site of modernization without bilingualism. Let's go back to Athens and ancient Greece: Encountering the other and internalizing this encounter in language is the philosophical concept of translation and this is a process which from the very beginning has accompanied thought. If this accompaniment has now reached the level of consciousness in us, this is certainly a modern incident. Historical modernity gives birth to a kind of metaphysics of modernity and renders possible the experiment with rhythms which cannot be realized without translation in the target language itself.

Nima: The issues discussed above are definitely true, but an important point is missing here. Before anything else and in order to prevent misunderstanding, I have to emphasize that right from the start we have had "languages" and not "language". I agree that writing entails a kind of experiencing "the other" and the possibility of distancing from oneself. But we must take it into account that this distancing from oneself is already rooted in language itself. Language acquisition splits us from within and leads to our distancing from ourselves. It is precisely for this reason that we can talk to ourselves. Which one am I, when I talk to myself? Am I the one who talks? Or am I the one being addressed? This ambiguity is embedded in the nature of language. My problem with this formulation is that it reduces and limits experiencing the other to the experience of another language. As I said earlier, I completely agree that historically speaking, modernity is correlative of becoming bilingual, but this was not necessarily the case before modernity – at least not for this reason.

Pages: It is possible that Hedayat links us to the primal traumatic experience of distancing we have with language, but *The Blind Owl* he conveys this experience in a specific historical situation and this is where questions of universalism and locality raised by Saleh become important. What Hedayat does is that he situates this experience of distanciation in a fictional context and within the experience of subjects in a specific tradition and a specific historical encounter with the other.

Saleh: Determinate negation of literature has historically occurred in Hedayat's work, in the sense that literature for us used to be symmetrical poetry with harmony and prosody whose beauty was guaranteed in a way. Hedayat negated this by translation. His traumatic prose shocked the readers who were reading something which lacked literariness. Can we call something literature if it lacks literariness or not? Translation for us was maybe the only way to determinately negate the literariness in Persian prose. We could only detach ourselves from it by translation and then return to it in order to rewrite literature and its history. In this sense, we did not have a history of literature; we had only history of literariness. We had the history of so-called beautiful texts and proses.

1
The Blind Owl, translated by D.P Costello, New York: Grove Press, 1957, p. 80.

2
This is a literal translation of the idiom for which I could not find any close equivalent in English. With regard to translated works, it means that the translation has still traces of the linguistic features of the source language and does not seem natural in the target language. (translator's note)

3
The Blind Owl, translated by D.P Costello, New York: Grove Press, 1957, p. 6.

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Life is elsewhere: Telegram and the Writing of Immediacy

Nima Parzham

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Solitude cannot be uttered without immediately ceasing to be. It can only be written at a distance, protected from the eye that will read it.

"Of Solitude as the Space of Writing", Edmond Jabès[1]

Apparently the increasing and hasty tendency of individuals to be in social media is accompanied with often the same individuals' growing criticism of these media with the theme of rupturing social, familial and other relationships. It seems that here again we are facing another example of the famous definition of late capitalism: they know what they do and they still do it. However, one should not forget that the pervasive spread of virtual relations does not leave such a great range of choices for us; we defenseless subjects, we vulnerable isolated atoms. What can one do to resist against this trend? The first answer that crosses one's mind is avoiding them. In fact my personal choice with regard to Facebook was this act. But after a while when a friend told me that "those who are not in Facebook are still in Facebook", it made me think again. Although this remark was clearly indicating a presence through absence or with the mediation of absence, after the emergence of Viber, WhatsApp and finally the widespread use of Telegram, I was faced with more empirical aspects of this powerful determinism: one who still persists on avoiding virtual relations would eventually realize that day by day he is becoming more alienated from the social environments in his daily life, and gradually he notices that he cannot understand the jokes of his acquaintances with one another since he is not aware of the common background of their remarks. Therefore, he finally comes to this understanding that it is a while that he is not able to satisfy some of his needs and he realizes that transferring files,

photos, movies and important personal, professional and general news is only carried out via the virtual media, whether at workplace or among his friends and family. Here we are facing the ridiculous and banal actualization of Rimbaud's famous line: "Life is elsewhere!" It will not take long that if one is still concerned with resistance, he is obliged to decide to experience these virtual relations in a controlled and careful manner instead of avoiding them. Probably in most cases there is not a long way from this point to severe addiction.

However, where does this addictive satisfying feeling of experiencing Telegram come from? What void does Telegram fill in our lives? Undoubtedly one has to be suspicious of this common sense idea about the virtual social media, which most often is part of the addiction process to them, that "they ruin the immediate and alive familial and social relationships". The issue at hand is certainly more complex. We all know that in modern society dominated by capitalism, human beings are transformed to isolated atoms, a kind of extreme individualism which apparently and logically is supposed to create a beautiful and diverse plurality of colorful differences. Paradoxically, the more this plurality of differences is expounded and diversified, the differences themselves become less significant to the point that the afore-mentioned process eventually homogenizes this plural spectrum and leads to a type of herd uniformity . Adorno and Horkheimer, in a passage entitled "Isolation by Communication" in *Dialectic of Enlightenment,* provide an excellent example to explain this process:

> *The railroad has been supplanted by cars. The making of travel acquaintances is reduced by the private automobile to half-threatening encounters with hitchhikers. People travel on rubber tires in strict isolation from one another. What is talked about in one family automobile is the same as in another; in the nuclear family, conversation is regulated by practical interests. Just as every family with a certain income spends the same percentage on housing, cinema, cigarettes, exactly as statistics prescribe, the subject matter of conversations is schematized*

according to the class of automobile.[2] *(p. 184)*

The emergence of Telegram should be considered in the background of this logic. What Telegram steals from people's lives is not alive and organic social relationships. What this claim hides is that these organic relations in modern society have been already transformed and to a great extent have become ruptured and fragmented. In fact it is common that people warn one another in gatherings not to trade away these moments of gathering around for virtual socializing. What Telegram steals from people is not only their fragmented and often worthless daily socializing but more importantly their solitude, where the rupture of relations and the poverty of collective experience manifest itself as a void. Telegram transforms the individuals' solitude to virtual socializing.

But the most important evidence for this claim is the theme residing in the heart of virtual media phenomenon: Writing.

Today the discussions of leading left thinkers about voice have convinced us increasingly that Derrida hastened to identify voice with the "metaphysics of presence" in order to defend writing, and he ignored the enigmatic and amazing nature of voice. However, the structural significance of writing should not be forgotten. Human sound is based on the immediacy of presence. Speaking presupposes the presence of the speaker and the listener. Writing, on the other hand, rests upon the absence of one of them in the presence of the other. Therefore, writing is indeed a kind of positive organization of absence. With regard to the immemorial link between immediacy and ideology, it is clear that writing has in fact more ability to resist against the domination of ideology, and the improvisation and immediacy in most conversations make them more vulnerable in this respect. Compare the written war of words between two thinkers in the successive volumes of a monthly magazine to the face to face debate of the same thinkers. Although the dramatic feature of the latter might render it more effective in some aspects, the former, no longer restrained to the fast rhythm imposed by the logic of present

conversation, has at least the condition and the capability to be more coherent and more resistant to the sophistries caused by repartee and flattery. As mentioned before, if Telegram not just steals the worthless daily socializing of people but also and more importantly their solitude, it can be claimed that Telegram tries to transform absence and writing to, respectively, presence and speech. Thus, our experience of the act of writing in Telegram is often close to the experience of present conversation with regard to the amount of immediacy, timing, and irresistible acceleration of rhythm. In Telegram, the metaphysics of presence haunts writing like a specter and changes its nature. Writing in Telegram is a haunted writing, a writing captured in the immediate logic of speech which has become its midday shadow.

This is how social media extracts surplus value from our social relations in the same society that renders these relations impossible. That is why these networks at the same time become a tool to produce these relationships virtually for the sake of filling the apparent void in humans' solitude which reveals the absence of these relationships. Therefore, social networks tame and domesticate humans' solitude and cover up its cracks.

But does a controlled and careful participation in Telegram or showing some degree of subjective resistance even have a meaning and is it possible? Although clearly it seems way more optimistic, it should not be forgotten that the presence and participation of human subjects in this programmed and systematic environment ultimately contains an amount of tension in the subject which renders impossible the complete assimilation of the subject in the system. That this amount of subjectivity would be able to tame and control this pre-programmed environment by a certain strategy or discipline might be possible in a determinate level yet not with much success. In such a case, subjects (in both senses, i.e. agents and the ones who are subjected) should be able to reduce as much as possible the acceleration of that torrent of naked texts which are emptied out the historical substance of language, carrying the mud of passing conversations. They have to try to still preserve their fragile solitude,

put limits on their presence in the limitless and indeterminate space of these networks, and (using Badiou's words) become their own "relentless censors"[3]. They have to exorcize haunted writings. However, beyond all these speculations, certainly the most important issue is that the subjects desiring to resist should instead of flattering themselves that they are resisting within virtual networks recall during their presence in social media that life is really elsewhere.

Writing is organizing absence. We should use writing, like translation, in a more general sense. If Telegram transforms the void, which has been resulted from the absence of real social relations and collective and alive traditions of resistance, to immediate writing or "metaphysics of presence", we should look to save writing in a more general sense. But what does writing in a more general sense mean? Is it not that in psychoanalysis symptoms are the writings of language which are inscribed violently on the subjects' bodies? Is it not that Benjamin talked of a prose which would break "the chains of writing" and is "festively celebrated"[4]? What does releasing writing from its chains mean and how can it lead beyond the text to a festive celebration in agora? Can one speak of the writing of politics? In that case, what does the writing of politics, and not politics of writing, mean?

The writing of politics is not the politics or strategy of writing; if writing is the positive organization of absence, then the writing of politics is a writing which organizes the absence of politics. The writing of politics means the formulation of the absence of immediate politics before or after its contingent and Evental emergences and reveals itself in a social manifestation which is the positive organization of that absence. In other words, the writing of politics is organization, i.e. the positive and practical registering and formulating of the remained traces of politics in the time of its absence from social manifestations. The writing of politics is "the elsewhere" in which the residue of people's faulty lives takes shelter in the hope of salvation so that it might break the chains of writing and can be experienced like a festive celebration.

Translator: Farid Dabirmoghaddam

1
The Little Book of Unsuspected Subversion. Trans. Rosmarie Waldrop. California: Stanford University Press, 1996.

2
Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer. *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Trans. Edmund Jephcott. California: Stanford University Press, 2002.

3
Badiou, Alain. "Third Sketch of Affirmationist Art". *Polemics*. Trans. Steve Corcoran. Verso, 2006. p. 148

4
Agamben, Giorgio. "Language and History: Linguistic and Historical Categories in Benjamin's Thought". *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*. Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen. California: Stanford University Press, 1999, p. 48.

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conversation 2: confession as a mode of writing

Saleh Najafi, Nima Parzham, Mehdi Navid, Pages
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The English version of this text will be soon available.

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