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### **Translation as a Critical and Cultural Approach: The Case of Translating Latin Poetry into Arabic<sup>1</sup> (An Overview)**

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#### **Abstract:**

The Arab World, especially Egypt, is now living in a period of abundant translations into Arabic from the original Greek and Latin texts. This has helped cross the borders and make classical writers accessible to the Arab readers. In this regard, we may distinguish three levels or types of readers in the Arab World: firstly general public, secondly educated and learned amateurs, and thirdly specialized academicians and students. The Arab translator of Latin poetry faces many problems of translation, and accordingly has to handle them, as persuasively as possible, to pave the way for the Arabic translation to meet the demands of the readers, seeking their endorsement. The

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<sup>1</sup>- The present paper is a slightly modified and expanded version of an earlier paper read at the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association (ICLA) , held in the Sorbonne, Paris (July 18-24, 2013). I would like to express my gratitude to the audience for their useful discussions. I should also like to thank sincerely the University of Alexandria which kindly gave me the opportunity to participate.

Arab translator also has to elucidate the cultural context in which a Latin poem was written by enriching his translation with commentaries and notes, otherwise the translation may be meaningless and tasteless to the Arab public audience. The translator, at the same time, cannot help avoiding his (or her) critical sense to be in work during the process of translation. In my present paper, I argue that translating Latin poetry into Arabic is a creative re-construction that involves both critical and cultural perspectives.

**Key Words:**

Translation, Latin poetry, critical approach, cultural perspectives, interpretation.

At a time of growing interest in foreign literatures which has given increasing impetus to the practice of translation, classical literatures, Greek and Latin, are accessed in the Arab World through translations. This is one sort of the Eastern reception of the Western cultural legacy.

While previous scholarship in Egypt in the past years, in the field of Greek and Roman classics, depended to some extent on English translations, currently translating Greek and Latin texts in Egypt is in the ascendant. Now, academic translators are presenting to the readers in Egypt a contemporary Arabic perspective on both Greek and Latin literatures.

The act of translating Greek and Latin texts into Arabic is a work of great industry and erudition, and I may say that it needs considerable patience. Apart from the difficulty of transmitting ancient cultures to modern, there is another difficulty derives from transmitting Western culture to Eastern, especially for the general Arab public. Two sorts of Arabic translations of Greek and Latin texts are available in the Arab World:

1-The one is a translation from a mediatory European modern language, a translation from a translation.

2-The other, which is the focus of my concern here, is a translation from the original classical texts accomplished by academicians.

My present contribution is an overview which has come out of my own practice in my research work in Latin literature over the years, and out of reviewing and reading

the Arabic translations made by others.<sup>2</sup> Much of the argument here is to present a case especially for Arabic translation as a critical and cultural approach.<sup>3</sup> A representative selection of the work that has been done in the field of translating classical texts in Egypt is Latin poetry.

The aim of this paper is to explore the way in which Arab translators have responded to poetry which was originally written in Latin, and how their practices involve critical and cultural perspectives.

Because of the different nature of both Latin, as a source language (SL), and Arabic, as a target language (TL), it is necessary to my argument to raise the following points:

- To what extent is critical study necessary to translate Latin poetry into Arabic?
- How does translation allow Arab readers to create discussion topics, responses and response to response hierarchy?
- Is the Arabic translation considered a new reading of the original Latin text? Is it a creative re-reading or re-writing? Is it an interpretative rendering of the original text?
- How to convey the symbolic forms, the wit, intelligence, allegories, allusions, emotions, original insights, and the Latin text's own range of both explicit and implicit meanings to Arabic?
- How to translate into Arabic an "un-said word", for an audience with or without knowledge of the Latin language? How to achieve super sensitivity to patterns of wordplay?
- How to differentiate the individual from the universal, when the Roman poet uses "I"?
- How the Arab translator out of necessity has to change, add and cut?
- What about the translator if obliged to footnote every sentence, or even every word, in keeping with his (or her) aim at a general audience?

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<sup>2</sup>- For reviewed Arabic translations, see for example, El-Nowieemy (2011), (2013), (2017). As far as the translation of Latin poetry is concerned, see for example (in alphabetical order by translators' names), Ali (2000), (2003); El-metwelly (2017), (2019); Fawzi (2002); Hassan (2013), (2019), (2020); Saber (2011), (2013), (2017); Shaarawi et alii (1971), (1977), (2011); Shaarawi (2014).

<sup>3</sup>- Nida (1991) 19-32, esp. 20, rightly points out that "one reason for the great variety of translation theories and subtheories is the fact that the process of translation can be viewed from so many different perspectives: stylistics, author's intent, diversity of languages, differences of corresponding cultures", etc. For definitions and types of translation, see As-Safi (2011) 1-6. Cf. Bassnett (2002) 23-24.

- How to achieve accuracy of rendering at the same time with felicity of expression?

Pondering over the above mentioned issues, and others, would allow us to view cross-cultural panorama in an enlivening critical and cultural perspective.<sup>4</sup>

Let us agree at the start that Latin poetry is more difficult to translate into Arabic metrical and rhymed verse. The difficulties in so doing are derived from the fact that each language of the two has its own elevated diction, uniformity of style, method of composition, which are completely different from the other. The Arab translator may stray farther from the Latin in search for an apt Arabic phrase to suit verse composition. If we, the Arab translators, in a way or another, can bridge the gulf of time between ourselves and the ancient Romans culturally, we cannot easily bridge the gulf of language and phraseology in composing poetry. That is why any attempt at translating Latin poetry, is usually rendered into plain Arabic prose, not verse. This form is more understandable, though lacking any poetic merit of its own.<sup>5</sup>

Creativity and interpretation, I believe, are related to the act of translation. The original Latin text is expected to be, in a way or another, attractive to the translator, who chooses the text which has a strong hold over him (or her). The more the translator admires the original, the best results he (or she) might achieve. In a sense: you admire the text, this leads you to translate it. Accordingly, your admiration leads you to interpret the text under translation to communicate your feelings to the reader of the translation, after the change in the readers' horizon. You are initiating communication through translation. Hence, you arrive at the point of a creative re-writing.

Choosing Latin poems, or dealing with topics of interest to the translator, are considered a critical approach. In the same way, one may ask how to communicate symbolic forms, and to communicate the Latin text's own range of meanings, without a critical and cultural sense of its literary culture? Or how do we to retell an old myth, an action, and a proper name with the utmost economy of means in the recipient Arabic language without a critical and cultural sense? Or how do we to convey an entire conceptual complex, or a comprehensive fact without interpretative perception?

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<sup>4</sup>- Naturally, cultural perspectives are not a particularity of Arabic translation, they concern every sort of translation. See the illuminating study of Hardwick (2000).

<sup>5</sup>- Differently, compare Perkell's point (1989) xi, in choosing "verse translations in order to give the reader, as much as possible, a sense of the poetry of these texts".

Poetry is both subjective and universal, how do we know whether it is the individual "I" or the universal, which the Roman poet uses, without an interpretative sense? Of course, in such a case, wide range of knowledge helps the translator to find himself (or herself) in the interpretative translation.

Translating Latin poetry into Arabic, for example, may facilitate in some measure the study of the Roman poets in the Arab World, and may cross the border. Because my focus in the present paper is on Roman poetry, I am referring to one significant period, the Augustan, and one significant poet, Virgil (70-19 BC). But as a Latin creative work of the highest class, Virgil's poetry imposes difficulty on the Arab translator, either to produce a literal or a literary translation. It is not always an easy matter to translate such a poet,<sup>6</sup> who offered a best insight into Roman self-perception in that period. The twentieth century reputation of Virgil among scholars in Egypt is both an endorsement and a product of the translation of that poet, either in partial or complete translation.<sup>7</sup>

The word-for-word or line-for-line translation is impossible to achieve faithfully in Arabic. Latin construction is completely different from the Arabic. Sometimes one Latin line calls for two or more lines from the translator. This is not because Arabic language is inapt to express such meanings, but because the translator has to be selective enough to elucidate the alien literary culture to the general public. The translator must know the differences between similar words to decide when to use each, allowing for clear distinctions. The strictly literal translation, however faithful to the original, is not thus easily achieved in Arabic, not to mention that it neglects the beauty of expression in the Arabic language. It has been, and will always be, problematic, I suppose, fidelity or infidelity, in all translations, regardless of the source and target languages.

Naturally, Latin poetry which was designed for a Roman readership may be in translation tasteless to the general Arab reader, who is not acquainted with the culture of the translated text.<sup>8</sup> Thus we may ask: will the translator adapt the Latin text to his

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<sup>6</sup>- As Farrell (2004) 6, correctly notices: "The *Aeneid* is, of course, famously untranslatable".

<sup>7</sup>- For the first Arabic translation of the *Aeneid* in Egypt, see Shaarawi et alii (1971) and (1977). See also El-Nowieemy (2013).

<sup>8</sup>- Cf. Young (2015) 1, who started her introductory chapter by posing the question: Is all poetry "lost in translation"?, as many modern readers are inclined to believe so. Young argues that ancient Romans would have found this notion absurd, as translation was in the very core of Roman culture.

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(or her) own culture? Or will he (or she) adapt himself (or herself) to the culture of the translated Latin text? The Arab translator, in fact, finds himself (or herself) having to interpret, or to adapt the original, to some extent, to the culture of the receptor, as if trying to meet half-way.

The introduction set by the Arab translator, contributes to enhance the critical and cultural translation, so long as it presents an overview of the text, the author's style, structure, and design, let alone the author's life, career, and date of composition.

To do justice to the original Latin text, annotated translation is required in Arabic. It is necessary for the translator to footnote the translation. In order to give the scholars, the students, and the public audience in general, all needful assistance towards the correct reading of Latin poetry, the translator has to add an adequate Arabic sort of explanatory notes; sometimes they are lengthy ones, several times longer than the actual text explained, especially in the lack of an adequate Arabic commentary on the text under translation available to the non-specialized readers in advance. This effort of annotation is most useful for Arabic-speaking readers, and comes to the benefit of all non-specialists. Nevertheless, to make the Arabic translation highly readable, it should be unencumbered by lengthy footnotes, as this would be an unacceptable hindrance rather than a help to the reader.

The correct Arabic translation leads to a correct interpretation of those comparatively difficult and unfamiliar Latin texts to the Arab reader, and vice versa. The translator's involvement in intensely debated critical questions might affect the way he (or she) selects his (or her) vocabulary and his (or her) phrasing. This selection leads to the belief that translation is a sort of critical and cultural interpretation.

Scarcely, not every single Latin word can be easily matched in Arabic.<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, the translator tries to find out reliable Arabic equivalents. Instead of inserting some brief descriptive phrases between brackets for those readers without specialized classical knowledge, the translator may have to find out a way to produce a version, which, while remaining faithful to the text, offers pleasant and easy reading, even to the non-classicist. In the laborious task of translating, the Arab

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<sup>9</sup>- In the words of Bassnett (2002) 38, "sameness cannot exist between two languages". Cf. the illuminating views of Jakobson (2000) 113-118.

translator has to change, cut, add, and adapt. With the omissions and the additions, we thus view Latin poetry through the critical and cultural lens of the Arab translator.

The Arab translator may be encountered with a flow of demands and suggestions to offer a balanced rendering of the text under translation: the Arab translator's cultural perspective and knowledge of previous Greek and Latin literatures in general are naturally of great value to him (or her), especially when he (or she) faces points of intertextuality.<sup>10</sup> So in such a case, the Arab translator has to draw on a wide variety of literary texts, either of the period in which the Latin text in hand was written, or of previous periods, to explore a certain question, and to accommodate the text under translation to its larger cultural context. Sometimes the translator has to seek in the classical past for forms, patterns, themes to solve the riddle of intertextuality. In such a case we consider translation as a brilliant re-construction.<sup>11</sup>

The translation actually constitutes a double re-reading: on the one level, the Arab translator's reading of the original, on another, the reader's reading of the Arabic translation.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, there are also two levels of interpretation: the one by the translator, the other by the sort of reader of the translation. If there is a gap between the two, translator and reader, (taking into consideration the aforementioned three types of Arab readers), there must be a gap between the two interpretations. In all cases, language and interpretation are interdependent.

To conclude, the original Latin text, one may say, is an undertaking that is somehow, and to a certain extent, inimitable in Arabic, in the strictly literal sense of the word, but it could be creatively re-worked, re-made, re-produced, interpreted, and re-interpreted, in the process of making the translation familiar to our own literary, linguistic and cultural Arabic context.

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<sup>10</sup> - For more details concerning intertextuality and translation, see El-Nowieemy (2008) 107-121. And for a useful study of intertextuality in this context, see Thomas (1999). This is not to mention what intratextuality may also impose on both the reader and the translator. For intratextual readings of Latin Literature, see Harrison, Frangoulidis and Papanghelis (2018).

<sup>11</sup>- I agree with Lefevere (1992) xi, in his view that "the history of translation is the history also of literary innovation, of the shaping power of one culture upon another".

<sup>12</sup>- Although I agree that if one can just make the translation silently in mind, this means that reading can be counted as a form of translation, for when we read we absorb, yet I am not concerned with this issue in my present paper.

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English into Arabic Translation as a Case Study. If, however, the translation of scientific texts from one language to another participating in modern cultural development is not too difficult, it is not surprising that the converse is true- that translating scientific material from a modern Indo-European language into a language largely outside the reach of Western science is extremely difficult. This is one of the really pressing problems confronting linguists in Asia today. Scientific translation, thus, becomes a prerequisite not only for the acquisition of technology, but to its introduction, installation, and operation as well.

2. *Requi Translation and Cultural Equivalence: A Study of Translation Losses in Arabic Literary Texts*. Article. Full-text available. Mar 2009. Hanada Al-Masri. This article focuses on cultural translation, especially addressing the issue of cultural inequivalences or losses occurring in the translation of Arabic literary texts. The aim of this study is to investigate the translation strategies that led to cultural losses and to emphasize the important role of the translator as a cultural insider. I will use Cultural Approach, that is, postcolonial theory especially Orientalism and mimicry to analyze the two questions. By revealing the character's ways and displaying her action I can observe why and how she preserves her family heritage and the purity of Dutch bloodline and culture. Literary translation bridges the delicate emotional connections between cultures and languages and furthers the understanding of human beings across the national borders. In the act of literary translation the soul of another culture becomes transparent, and the translator reveals the specified aspects of ways of life characteristic for foreign countries and their people through the linguistic, musical, rhythmic, and visual possibilities of the new language [2]. In the case of translating poetry, it is vital for a translator to decide whether the verse should be rendered either into verse form, or into free verse or into prose.

*Translation as a Critical and Cultural Approach: The Case of Translating Latin Poetry into Arabic (An Overview)*. <http://www.electryone.gr>. Save to Library. When a work of European literature is translated into Arabic, the language of a predominantly Islamic culture, terms referring to Arabs as a people or Muslims as a religious community, the name of Muhammad as the Prophet of Islam, etc., cease to be foreign and exotic, to become local and familiar.