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slanted truths & fearless clichés

Talking With Richard Jeffrey Newman

June 7, 2009 [admin](#) [One Comment](#)

(First a small note of apology regarding the time it is taking me to respond to submissions for the summer issue that is just around the bend. We have had a death in the family and, though it was expected, I have not had the energy to give the work the attention it deserves until now).

Because these interviews are conducted through email, I try not to impose too greatly upon the writers' time. I ask all the questions in a single email. And, so far, this means a whole new set of questions arise by the time I read the answers. And yet if I were to follow up, the interviews would invariably branch into endless interviews and discussions on endless subjects.

For now, this is all I gave [Richard Jeffrey Newman](#) an opportunity to respond to, and I am grateful that he was so generous with his time.

Newman is a poet, translator, essayist and educator. Although his work often focuses on gender and sexual issues, I have asked him questions about his experiences as a translator and his views on biography & poetry and voice.

RP

Like many excellent translators, you don't speak or read the original language that you are working with, yet in the preface to your book *Selections from Saadi's Bustan*, you discuss your "anger" regarding previous mistranslations of Persian texts. Can you say a little about your own translation process and how you approach your search for the (or a) correct translation?

RJN

First, a small correction: While I do not read or write Persian, I do speak and understand quite a bit. Not enough to discuss politics, say, or to understand most poetry on a first hearing (though I have sometimes surprised myself with what I am able to understand), but enough that I have a feel for the rhythm and syntax of Persian—if not the prosody—and for how feeling is constructed and expressed, and so I know enough that when I consult an informant, as long as she or he provides me with the vocabulary I don't have, I can discuss the original with some small authority. It also helps that I have been married for 16 years to an Iranian woman, most of whose family lives near us in New York, and so while I would never say that the Persian culture I have come to know in knowing them for so many years is the same as what one would confront living in Iran, I do think it has given me a way into the texts I have been translating not only that I would not otherwise have had, but that helps me to apprehend their "Persian-ness" even though the words I am reading are English—and, at least in the case of my sources for *Bustan* and *Gulistan*, an English that is very far removed from both the language as we speak it in 21st century United States and as it is used in contemporary American poetry.

In order fully to answer your question, though, I need to say a little bit about how I came to translate these texts in the first place, because before 2003, when I was initially approached by Mehdi Faridzadeh, executive director of the [International Society for Iranian Culture](#) (ISIC), about taking this project on, I knew next to nothing about classical Iranian poetry. ISIC is a non-profit organization whose mission is "augmenting common understanding of Iranian identity in the United States by providing cultural experiences that connect American society with the rich heritage of Persia." One of the ways the organization has been attempting to

fulfill this mission is by producing literary retranslations of important classical Iranian texts, several of which—like Saadi’s *Gulistan* and *Bustan*—are already recognized masterpieces of world literature, but which existed prior to my work in translations that were either very much out of date or scholarly or both, and were therefore not the kinds of books one would read for pleasure. The last time the full *Gulistan* was translated into English, for example, was in the 1880s, and while the one translation of the entire *Bustan* that I know of was published in the 1970s, the translator, G. M. Wickens, used an old-fashioned and complex syntax and diction that is, to me anyway, far more scholarly in its intent than literary, including words that were so out of date that I needed to look them up in the *Oxford English Dictionary* in order to understand what he’d written. The same can be said for the book I am working on now, *Attar’s Ilahi-Nameh* (*The Book of God, or Book of the Divine*). Exactly one translation exists in English, produced in the 1970s by John Andrew Boyle, in a prose style very clearly intended, to my ears anyway, to resemble the King James Bible.

ISIC’s objective is to publish literary retranslations of these three and, ultimately, seven other texts, and so when Mr. Faridzadeh went looking for someone to produce these translations, he was more interested in finding a native English speaking poet than someone who was bilingual—though I imagine that if he had found a native-English speaking poet who was fluent in Persian who was willing to take this project on, he or she, and not I, would now be answering your questions. He wanted the books he published both to stand on their own as works of contemporary American poetry and to be books that people might actually enjoy reading for their own sake. Nonetheless, when he first discussed the project with me, I turned him down. Not only was I not literate in Persian, I knew—as I said above—next to nothing about the literature he wanted me to translate, and I was sure those two shortcomings were enough to guarantee I could not do justice to what he was asking me to do. Surely, I told him, there had to be people better qualified than I was to do this work. Why wasn’t he asking them? He had already asked them, he said, or at least those he knew, and none of them were able or willing to take the project on.

When I finally decided to accept Mr. Faridzadeh’s commission, I did so for three primary reasons. First, and most selfishly, was the chance to contribute something new to contemporary American letters. As a poet, of course, I think I have something original and important to say that it is worth people’s time and money to hear. The fact is, however, that what I have to say might turn out to be both profoundly unimportant and unoriginal. Saadi, [Ferdowsi](#), [Nezami](#) and [Attar](#), however, the four writers Mr. Faridzadeh was asking me to translate, are important and bringing what they have to say into contemporary American English, bringing their poetry into contemporary American poetry, is important work. Second, given the fact that my wife is from Iran and that my son, therefore, is half Iranian, I felt (and feel) very strongly the urgency of ISIC’s cultural agenda. We in the United States know precious little about Iran—and they have plenty of misconceptions about us as well (though they know more about us than we do about them) – and the opportunity to create meaningful cultural exchange between our two nations was something I did not want to pass up. Third, while my son speaks Persian much better than I do – and reads and writes a little – his command of the language is not sufficient for him to be able to read the books I am translating in their original form, and the same is true for most second and third – not mention fourth and what will eventually be fifth – generation Iranian-Americans. So, in the absence of translations like mine, they will have little or no access to this literature that is such an important part of their cultural heritage (which makes it an unfortunate and very difficult irony that both of my Saadi books are out of print and that my publisher, as far as I know, has chosen not to reprint them.)

Here, I suppose, is where I can begin to talk more directly to your question about my anger at some other translators of classical Iranian literature and my own translation process, because my anger has more to do with the agendas they bring to the translating they do than with the inaccuracy of their work per se, and because my own process grows out of the agenda that I outlined in the paragraph above.

One of the first questions I asked myself when I decided to accept Mr. Faridzadeh’s commission was how, given both my inadequate Persian and my overall ignorance of Persian literature, I was going to do this work with any integrity at all, and I decided upon a few guiding principles, partially in response to the problems I have with the work of other translators, but mostly in response to the fact that I am not literate in Persian. The first thing I decided was that, since I could neither read the texts I was translating in the original Persian nor read what has been said about them in Persian, I would focus my efforts to understand these source texts in terms of their reception into English. Fortunately, I discovered that a book about this subject, *Persian Poetry in England and America: A Two Hundred Year History* (Caravan Books, 1977), by [John D. Yohannan](#). Yohanan is also the author of *The Poet Sa’di: A Persian Humanist* (University Press of America 1987). What I learned from reading these two books shaped if not the way I worked as a translator, then certainly what my expectations were of my own translations.

I had not known, for example, that there was a time in the late 19th and early 20th centuries when Persian literature was very much in vogue here in the States and in England and that if you considered yourself a well-read person at the time, you would have expected and been expected to know at least the names Saadi, Hafez, Ferdowsi, [Khayyam](#) and more. More, I learned that this popularity was rooted, at least in part, in the British colonial project in India, where Persian was the language of the Moghul courts. If they could understand Persian well enough, the British apparently thought, they could increase their effectiveness as colonial rulers, and so there were volumes of translations of classical Iranian literature – at least according to Yohannan – that were used to train British civil servants in how to deal with their Indian “underlings.” This condescension even found its way into translations that were supposed to be “literary.” In researching previous translations of Saadi, for example, I came across one man. A. Hart Edwards, who translated *Bustan* into prose because, according to him at least, the fact that Persian poets did not pay attention to the rules of Persian grammar, among other things, made it hard to know how to render Persian poetry into poetry in English.

I also discovered that the most popular contemporary translations of classical Iranian poetry into English—those of Rumi by Coleman Barks and of Hafez by Daniel Ladinski—were more concerned with spiritualizing the texts and writers they were translating

than in rendering any but the most tenuous connection between their translations and the original texts, not to mention the culture in which those original texts were written and where they are still very much a living literature. It's not that I think all translation must hew a particular line in relation to the original text; nor do I think that either my personal dislike for Barks' and Ladinsky's work (neither moves me) or my objections to their motives and methods (about which more below) means that their work is bad in some absolute moral sense—though it does seem to me that it is false advertising to call Ladinsky's work translations and that it would be more appropriate to call them “writings after Hafez,” or “versions of/improvisations on Hafez,” or some such thing. Rather, it's that, given both the history of the translation of classical Iranian literature into English and my personal connection to that literature through my wife, my son and the many Iranian friends I have, I feel very strongly the degree to which past translations, including those of Barks and Ladinsky, have been very explicitly invested in misrepresenting Iran, its culture, its literature and, ultimately, its history. More to the point, this misrepresentation was not the misrepresentation of which all translation is guilty by definition; it was an almost willful—and sometimes fully willful—misrepresentation that grew out of the political or spiritual, non-literary agenda of the translator.

It would be foolish of me, I think, and not a little arrogant, to claim that I am interested in producing “pure” or “correct” translations, since I think neither kind of translation actually exists (though I do understand why you used the word “correct” in your question). I too have an agenda, and it is as open to criticism as any other, informed as it is by the three motivations I discussed above. I suppose that if I had to choose one word to name what I would like to achieve with these translations, outside of the question of literary value, it would be honesty; I want my translations to be honest ones that acknowledge their limitations (which I did much more explicitly in the introduction to *Gulistan* than in *Bustan*), even as they assert what they are trying to accomplish as translations. If I had to make these assertions explicit, I suppose I would say that I want my translations to:

1. Stand on their own as poems in English (as I worked, I thought in terms of my translations being my versions of the poems the original author might have written had he been writing in English);
2. Give a sense, through their formal properties as poems in English, that the original author was a working poet, by which I mean someone who was at least as concerned with questions of rhyme and meter (because classical Iranian poetry is all formal), with diction and metaphor and all of the other writerly/technical/craft aspects of making a poem, as he was with content;
3. Give a sense, through their formal properties as poems in English, that classical Iranian poetry is and is part of a literary tradition;
4. Render, to the best of my ability, a sense of the culture in which the original authors wrote without the orientalist condescension that informs so many of the existing translations, especially those produced in the 19th century;
5. Stand as an explicit response to previous translations, especially those that I think fail to account for numbers 2, 3, and 4 above.

The first assumption I made in order to achieve these goals was that I could take Mr. Faridzadeh at his word that the old and scholarly translations he was giving me to use as trots were the most semantically accurate versions in English that were available. (I have, of course, consulted with informants when I needed; and I am sure there were times I should have when I didn't.) This turned out not to be the case for *Shahnameh*, the Iranian national epic, but here, unless I say otherwise, I will be referring specifically to my Saadi translations since those are the only two that are complete and published. The second decision I made was that I would find poetic forms in English that, for me, could hold the content of what I was translating in a way that would do justice to my understanding of the original. Saadi's *Bustan*, for example, is written in a form that most nearly corresponds to heroic couplets in English. As well, the moral/ethical/didactic content of his work finds its closest English analogue in Alexander Pope. Nonetheless, I chose not to do *Bustan* in heroic couplets because I didn't think I could make the heavy rhymes sound with the authority they sounded with in Pope's time (maybe somebody else could have, I don't know). So I chose a fairly strict blank verse instead. To my ear, blank verse can carry the kind of weight and authority I hear in the original when I listen to people recite it. To give you two further examples of formal decisions I have made: I have hung my translation of [Shahnameh](#) on a very loose Anglo-Saxon-like alliterative line. I made this choice because of the ways that *Shahnameh* reminds me of *Beowulf*. I am doing Attar's *Ilahi Nameh*, on the other hand, using two different forms, blank verse and a loosely rhymed iambic tetrameter, as a way of distinguishing the two different voices that inhabit the book, even though the original is written using a single verse form. In making these choices, I am not looking for precise correspondences—which would be impossible anyway—or even for the illusion of a precise correspondence, but rather for intuitive and emotional analogues in English (or maybe “containers” is more precise) for my admittedly limited and limiting understanding of the originals. The third decision I made was that I would hew as closely as possible to the literal meaning of the translation I was using as a trot, though I did not worry about a line by line correspondence, even when my source did.

I have spoken with other translators, and have heard bilingual Persian translators speak, who disagree very strongly with my choices; and I have spoken with others who agree with them, or who at least see them as valid. In general, I try to stay out of the debates that arise out of such agreements or disagreements because, as often as not, they seem to have a lot more to do with turf and ego than with the actual quality of the work under discussion. I have no idea if my translations succeed in realizing my ambitions for them. That is something that time and readers will decide.

RP

In the introduction to Saadi's *Bustan*, you criticize Coleman Barks, who explicitly states he translated the poems of Rumi out of the poet's historical and cultural context. You say you felt that he was too easily dismissing Rumi's childhood and relationships with his

wife and students. Does this mean you believe, in general, that a poem is necessarily integrated with or only truly understood within the context of the poet's biography?

RJN

I am going to quibble slightly with the way you have asked this question, because while it is true that I wrote "the cultural context [...] Barks so blithely dismisses was also the cultural context [...] of his childhood, his marriage—of everything, in other words, that made him who he was," I wrote that sentence in the context of criticizing Barks' assertion that his "grandiose project is to free [Rumi's] text into its essence," which is a quote from the introduction to *The Essential Rumi: New Expanded Edition*. Moreover, the list of things I said that Barks excluded from relevance, which appears where the second ellipsis is in the above quote, included the culturally specific Sufism that Rumi practiced and his friendship with Shams (each of which is deeply relevant as inspiration for and conceptual framework of Rumi's poetry).

I point this out only to say that while I think your question is a fair one, the point I was trying to make in the passage you are referring to was not about, or not merely about the importance of a poet's life narrative to understanding her or his work. Rather, I was trying to make a point about what is, to me anyway, the arrogance of Barks' claim that he is freeing Rumi's text into its "essence," the presumption—and this is not something I wrote in that introduction—that without any knowledge of Persian (or at least, as far as I know, with no more knowledge of Persian than I have), working from the same kinds of translations I worked from, and assuming for the moment that a text can have a transcendent essential nature, the claim that he is somehow able to work backwards from the 20th or 21st century American English, through 19th century translations into British (and sometimes American) English, and gain access to the "true" meaning contained in Rumi's 12th century Persian. This seems to me an arrogance not much different from that displayed by A. Hart Edwards, whom I talked about in my answer to question one, who said that Persian poets do not follow the grammatical rules of their own language.

That said, my answer to your question is no, I don't think a poem can only be "truly" understood in the context of a poet's life story; I have never been convinced that there is ever a "true" understanding of any poem. That does not mean, however, that there are not real misunderstandings. I always think of the example—I don't remember where I heard it—that while there are many readings of *Hamlet*, and each one can be characterized as a misreading, to read *Hamlet* as a comedy is not to misread the play, it is to read it wrongly, incorrectly. It is to arrive at a non-understanding of the play. I don't know Rumi's work well enough, or Barks', to know whether, in his reading of Rumi, Barks is reading *Hamlet* as a comedy when he makes his translations, though it is telling to me that almost every Iranian I know who knows Rumi's work says that, especially when it comes to Barks' versions of the ghazals, it is often, if not always, impossible to identify the original from which any given translation by Barks was taken. (Though I will also add that these Iranian are, to a person, grateful to Barks for putting Rumi, and therefore classical Iranian poetry in general, on the map.)

So I guess I do think that if you are translating poetry that was originally written in a time and place as radically different from our own as 12th century Iran, then you do owe something both to the cultural context in which the poetry was written and to your readers in terms of making them aware of that context—especially, and here is my bias, if the person you are translating is as central to her or his literary tradition as Rumi is to Iran's. And if you are going to discard that context, then I think you need to be honest in saying that what you are doing is rooted in your own personal agenda—political, spiritual, artistic—and not claim that you are somehow channeling the supposed "essence" of the work you are translating, which is what both Coleman Barks and Daniel Ladinsky — who translates Hafez — do, though Barks is far more subtle and sophisticated in the way he says this than Ladinsky is.

This question about a poet's biography and how one understands her or his work, though, makes me think of something else as well. One of the things that I learned while doing my research on Saadi is that, until recently, many critics, both Western and Iranian, worked from the assumption that Saadi's work was all autobiographical. When he wrote that he traveled, they assumed he went precisely where he said he went, despite the fact that — according to contemporary critics — it would not have been physically feasible for Saadi to travel as widely as an autobiographical reading of his work would suggest. One Iranian critic went so far as saying that to suggest Saadi fictionalized his work would be to call Saadi a liar. There are other, far more interesting and complex examples of this that I don't have the time or space to develop here, but I am fascinated by this phenomenon, which seems to have its roots in the 19th century British view of classical Iranian literature — and while this is, I should say up front, a useful generalization, it is overly broad — as worthwhile primarily for what it has to teach, rather than for any literary value; and so they tended to see the first person stories told by writers like Saadi as personal, real-life examples brought to illustrate whatever point the story was trying to make.

There is a lot to say about this phenomenon, I think, but what brings it to mind in response to your question is this: to assume that a writer's work is all autobiographical is to deny him or her the right to literary invention, to fictionalization; it is to suggest that what he or she has written is, in some sense, not literature. I am not sure if I am being clear here, since this is the first time I am trying to articulate this in writing, and I don't really have anything else to say about this right now, but I do think it's an interesting phenomenon, one that's worth looking at more closely for what it might teach us.

RP

In the same vein [as the previous question], do you believe that biography can help bridge gaps between cultures? I ask this specifically in light of your book *The Silence of Men*, which appears to be intensely personal. [Eve Rifkah](#) said in a review: I am drawn into what this man and many men have gone through to survive in this culture.

RJN

The idea of a “gap” between cultures conjures a very apt spatial metaphor. The thing about a bridge that allows one to cross that gap, however, is that the bridge essentially leaves the gap intact. the gap itself is still there, and even if you build a series of bridges to allow people to move from one side to the other at different points along the gap, you still have not changed the nature of the gap itself. It is still the emptiness between the entities on either side of it; it is still what needs to be crossed – not what needs to be changed – for the people on either side to be able to interact.

Another way of thinking about the space between people or cultures, however, is as a silence, or even a series of silences; and silence also, in English anyway, is understood metaphorically as a space. It is something we fill, or, depending on the circumstances, choose not to fill, and if we think of language (biography) as what fills the silence between cultures (or between people), then language (biography) becomes a kind of topography that people can walk across, a landscape that people can navigate, from one side to the other. (Of course, language can also end up being a very hostile landscape that it is impossible to cross.)

The Silence Of Men is a very personal book, though there is less autobiography per se in it than a lot of people think, and while I had never thought of it this way until I started to answer your question, I like very much the idea of my poems as providing a landscape that people can navigate towards an understanding of the particular version of male experience my poems embody. Interestingly, though, the metaphor that was at work for me when I gave my book its title was that of breaking silence, of silence as this solid thing that needed to be shattered. It’s the metaphor in the title poem, which you quote from in question 4, that I think comes closest to what I am talking about here. The last line of that poem is, “The silence between us is the silence of men,” and there are several other poems in the book where the silences between men are framed as emptinesses that need to be filled, sometimes with language, sometimes with the body, but always with a gesture that declares in one way or the other, “this is who I am.”

RP

Two random excerpts from your work:

from your translation of “Nothing Fails to Bow Low Before Him”, from Selections from Saadi’s Bustan:

This existence and the one that follows
form in the endless sea of His knowledge
a single drop. When He witnesses a sin,
He quickly draws the veil of His mercy,
hiding the transgression from Himself.
Holder of Creation, Knower of Secrets,

from “The Silence of Men”, from the book of the same name:

A man I’ve never dreamed before walks
into my apartment and sits in the green
chair where I do my writing. He carries
in his left hand a large erect penis
which he places silently on the floor.
The phallus begins to waltz to music
I cannot hear, its scrotum a skirt;
its testicles, legs cut off at the knees.

I believe these excerpts more or less illustrate the difference between the dictions you use when translating the classical Persian texts and when you write your own poems. How does working with Poetic Diction, which is used sparingly for the most part in contemporary poetry, affect your own “voice”?

RJN

A very interesting question, though I am not sure that the excerpt you took from Bustan is truly representative of the work as a whole. Those lines are from the obligatory poem in praise of God that opens every book of classical Iranian poetry I have worked

with. I am still learning the conventions that govern these poems, and I am nowhere near confident enough in what I know, much less what I think I know, to say more than this: each of the introductory poems I have seen uses a similarly heightened diction. On the very next page, though, the poem “Wear The Lining As The Silken Shirt You’d Hoped For,” begins with these lines:

I’ve roamed the world’s far corners now for years,
for years I’ve shared the lives of foreigners,
finding pleasure in each small moment,
taking from each harvest an ear of corn.
Yet nowhere have I met a humble folk
to rival those who call Shiraz their home.

Still more heightened than the stanza you quoted from my book, but not as “poetic” as the lines from “Nothing Fails to Bow Low Before Him,” these lines are, I think, more representative of the work in Bustan. As to how working in this more formal, more heightened language, affects my voice, I am really not sure. Certainly I am not conscious of any obvious cross-over. I have always written formal poetry, and so it’s not as if the translations have introduced something new into my writing practice in that respect. And yet your question makes me wonder if the recent poems I have been writing that are far more about the music of language than about any content per se, far more about letting language generate its own meaning than about trying to write a coherent narrative—and most of the poems in my first two books are narrative—are in part coming out of my experience of translation as a process of building something.

What do I mean by this? For me, the experience of making my translations has been in important ways almost mathematical. I have a structure that I need to fill and the challenge is to find the language that will fill that structure such that the result is a poem more or less faithful to the original from which I am working. It’s not about figuring out what I want or need to say – indeed, there is much in Saadi that I disagree with profoundly – not about responding to my own life or the lives of those around me, or the issues alive in our culture today. Rather, it’s about finding language that clicks as neatly into place as possible and sings my version of what someone else said in Persian. Similarly, the poems I am writing now are not about what I have to say in the way that the poems in *The Silence Of Men* are; they are about finding language that will click into place as I follow the syntactic, semantic and musical thread(s) of whatever words have enough energy as I write to make me want to follow them. There is a strong similarity between how I feel when I am writing these new poems and how I feel when I making translations.

RP

Your website says:” In his translations, which were commissioned by the International Society for Iranian Culture, he has focused on finding verse forms in English that can embody the spirit and content of the poetic masterpieces he has been asked to work with, the formal characteristics of which are virtually impossible to reproduce in English.”

I am curious about the sounds of the Persian language, which are so different from English, in regard to the “spirit” of a poem. I have noticed words in some languages sound harsh to my ears, but mean something gentle and vice versa. Do you listen to the poems read in their original language while working on the translations? Does translating the literal sound of the poem come into play? That is: what roles do you think the sounds themselves play in creating or translating the “spirit” of a poem?

RJN

Reading the copy you quote from my website in the context of this interview, I am left to wonder if I even knew what I was talking about when I wrote it and I am thinking that perhaps now would be a good time to change it. I am not trying to duck your question, but the copy you have quoted makes it sound as if I have thought a good deal more about the “spirit” of the poems I have translated, and how that spirit is embodied in the sounds of Persian, than I have. I did not listen to readings of Saadi while I was translating him largely because there are no recordings of people reading (or singing) Saadi that I have been able to find. (It has not been practical for me to find someone who could recite Saadi’s poems for me.) I have, however, heard people recite Shahnameh and recite (and sing) Rumi, and I carry the sound of that in my head, as I carry the sounds of spoken Persian, and I could not even begin to articulate the role those sounds play in the translations I produce, though I assume they play a role, if only by establishing a kind of Persian atmosphere in my imagination (whatever that means).

RP

A related question is the “otherness” of a translation. As a translator of the Norwegian language, I feel an “otherness” that I have to inhabit. I am concerned about imposing my images of what is Norwegian on the work, while I am obligated to present the unfamiliar in a way that is accessible. My assumption is that this is something you feel and must deal with to a much larger degree. Still today so much of what we know of Persian culture is based on images of fragmented images of the unfamiliar. Do you feel you have a need to break down these assumptions and misunderstandings for your readers, or for yourself for that matter?

RJN

One of the challenges I had to confront as I worked on my Saadi translations, and that I will have to confront again as I work on Attar (because Attar’s work, too, is informed by Sufism) is that I don’t hold the religious/spiritual beliefs that inform so much of their

work. Indeed, as I worked on Saadi, I constantly found myself reaching instinctively for, and then having to resist, translation choices that would minimize, if not erase, the presence of the god he worshipped and that he assumed his readers worshipped as well. Especially in the chapter on ecstatic love in Bustan, which is the most explicitly Sufi chapter in the book, as far as I can tell, in which love is defined by/as the desire of the lover to be immolated in the beloved (hence the centrality of the moth and flame metaphor in much Sufi poetry) – and this is an idea of love that I reject – I found it very difficult to make poetry; my imagination just wouldn't go there. It felt too much like a kind of self-betrayal. This was a frustrating aspect of not having chosen myself the material I would be translating. (I don't recall saying this earlier, but, as I understand it, prior to beginning this project, Mr. Faridzadeh had convened a committee of scholars in Iran to choose which sections of which books should be translated. The overall shape of my books of translations, in other words, reflect more the values of that committee than my own values.) The chapter on ecstatic love in Bustan, I think, is the weakest in the book because of this resistance, though I think if I were to go back to it now, I would have enough distance from the material that I might be able to do better.

I am not sure if that really answers your question, though; or maybe I am feeling like it answers your question in a very narrow way that leaves out the broader implications of what you are asking. I think that if I were translating contemporary Iranian poetry I would be dealing more with the limited knowledge, and the media-cultivated misunderstandings, of Iranian culture that exist in the US. Because the poetry I am translating is so old – *Shahnameh*, for example, was written in the 11th century – presenting it is not a counter to any of the images people currently have, in the way that presenting the work of, say, [Maryam Ala Amjadi](#), a young poet writing in Iran today, would be. Nonetheless, there have been times when people's thinking about Iran runs up against what is in the books I have translated and the resulting discussions can be quite interesting. Saadi, for example, is known for his humanistic values. *Gulistan* was one of, if not the first work of Iranian literature to be translated into a European language—in the 1600s, by a Frenchman named Andre du Ryer—in part because, to put it broadly, the humanistic values represented in much of that book convinced du Ryer that perhaps Muslims were not so different from Christians after all. Saadi's most famous lines, for example (which are, in a very different translation, inscribed on the wall in the Hall of Nations in the UN building, and are the lines that President Obama quoted in [his video message to Iran](#)), are:

All men and women are to each other
the limbs of a single body, each of us drawn
from life's shimmering essence, God's perfect pearl;
and when this life we share wounds one of us,
all share the hurt as if it were our own.
You, who will not feel another's pain,
you forfeit the right to be called human.

(I should add that this is the version I came up with after the uncorrected proof of the book that I sent you was finished.)

More than a few people have asked me, after hearing these lines, why the people of Iran – and they do tend to put it in terms of the people of Iran, not the government – have so fully turned away from the values expressed by their great poets. If, they ask, Iran is a country that so loves its poet – which Iran does – why do they not take more seriously the values those poets espouse? The discussion that follows is the predictable one: distinguishing government policy from the lives and thoughts of ordinary people; talking about the kinds of images the mainstream media shows us of Iran (which, thankfully, since Obama's election has changed for the better) and how those images shape our understanding of ordinary people's ordinary lives; asking about whether any nation ever fully does justice to the humanitarian ideals contained in its cultural framework, and so on. This kind of conversation, however, is not something I take consciously into account when I am actually translating.

RP

Finally, as a translator, you become intimate with the unfamiliar, continually address the nature of communicating something previously hidden, "teaching" in a way. Does this affect your own poetry? How do you guide the reader into your own, private world, or culture, as a poet?

RJN

When I think about my "private world" as a poet, I cannot help but think of how being a survivor of child sexual abuse has shaped my life. I think I might have become a writer anyway, but that I became a poet is – in my reconstruction of it – inextricably linked to the way I perceived in the poetry I read and only half understood as a kid the possibility of voice, of having a voice, one that was mine, that no one could take away from me (as the men who abused me had done) in a way that felt very different from voice in fiction or any other kind of writing that I was reading. (I suppose if there had been an acknowledged genre called creative nonfiction at the time, if people had been writing memoirs about subjects like their own sexual abuse the way they do now, I might have written a memoir instead and had a very different kind of writing career.) When I read poetry back then I felt like I was witnessing the building of reality. I don't think I would have said a reality back then, but I was in awe of the way a poet could, with just a few words in a couple of lines on a white page build something that was, at one and the same time, a part of her or himself, a part of the world outside her or himself and a part of me. When I read fiction, the first part of that triad was missing; I simply did not feel the connection between the words on the page and the writer of those words that I felt when I was dealing with poetry. Even when the poem had nothing to do with the writer's autobiography, that connection was there for me, and the fact of that connection held out to

me the hope that I could also forge a connection between my inner reality and the words I put out into the world – because like many, many people who were sexually abused as children, I kept my inner reality hidden. This is one reason why I say that becoming a poet quite literally saved my life; it kept me sane by giving me a way – and I use that word in two of its meanings: “a method” and “a path” – to bring my inner and outer worlds into some kind of congruence with each other. If I hadn’t started writing poetry, I don’t know what I would have done or what I would have become.

At the same time, while the fact that I am a survivor of child sexual abuse stands at the center of my work for me, I am not interested in writing poems that are, either individually or taken as a whole, a survivor’s memoir. Not that there’s anything wrong with such memoirs. I read them; I respect the courage it takes to write them and I think the world would be impoverished in important ways if they did not exist; but there are enough of them, and enough good ones, that I don’t feel the need to write one. More, I was deeply influenced by something June Jordan said to me when I took my first undergraduate poetry workshop with her. I wish I could remember her exact words, but it was something to the effect of, When you write a poem, you are saying something to somebody, and you want what you say to change that person in some way; you want them to feel something, to do something, to know something such that their life afterwards will not be the same, even if they are not necessarily aware that a change in them has taken place. As I grew older, as I gained confidence in my ability to put one word after the other on the page in such a way that it would be meaningful to others, I began to realize that I had a lot to say about a lot of things, and while much of what I had to say, for me, was rooted in my own experience of powerlessness, of being used and exploited, of being sexualized and objectified, of being violated, I also wanted what I had to say about, say, racism or war or class or whatever to stand on its own without my needing to claim what I have called “the moral authority of suffering” in order for people to take it seriously. (Some version of: Hey, I know what I am talking about because when I was a kid a man who lived in my building shoved his penis in my mouth.)

And so what became important to me – I don’t know if I am leaping around too much here; I’ve never actually tried to articulate this before – was that it would be clear in my poems that I was speaking to “you,” even when there was not an explicit second person address in the poem, because poetry for me is – or at least it has been; like I said above, I have started writing poems that are very different – absolutely about saying something to someone, not meditating on life, not lyric musing, but a direct address, a speaking of truth, or at least my truth, to someone whom I want to hear it; and if it is not too arrogant to refer to the foreword to my own book, I think [Yusef Komunyakaa](#) had it exactly right when he said “there’s a moral gesture at the heart” of my work, and it is that moral gesture that, as I am thinking my way through one possible answer to your question, constitutes what I think of as the guide I provide for my reader into my the world(s) of my poems. How that moral gesture is made manifest in the language of the poems themselves, however, is not something I feel able to talk about in any substantive way.

RP

I want to thank Richard again for the time he spent providing such thoughtful and thought-provoking responses. Very substantial, all the way.

[Richard Jeffrey Newman](#) [Iranian Poetry Translation](#) [Poetry about Sexual Abuse](#) [Saadi Bustan](#) [Rumi](#) [The Silence of Men](#)

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