

From Eastern Love to Eastern Song: Re-translating Asian Poetry

FRANCESCA ORSINI

Abstract:

This essay explores the loop of translations and re-translations of ‘Eastern poetry’ from Asia into Europe and back into (South) Asia at the hands of ‘Oriental translators’, translators of poetry who typically used existing translations as their original texts for their ambitious and voluminous enterprises. If ‘Eastern’ stood in all cases for a kind of exotic (in the etymological sense of ‘from the outside’) poetic exploration, for Adolphe Thalasso in French and E. Powys Mathers in English, Eastern love poetry could shade into prurient ethno-eroticism. For the Urdu poet and translator Miraji, instead, what counted in Eastern poetry was oral, rhythmic and visual richness – *song*.

Keywords: Orientalism, poetry, translation, lyric

In the century and a half between William Jones’ *Poems Consisting Chiefly of Translations from the Asiatick Languages* in 1772 and Ezra Pound’s 1915 ‘removal’ of ‘the crust of dead English’ from his ‘translation’ of Chinese poetry in *Cathay*, Oriental or Eastern poetry translations, particularly of classical poetry, became a mainstay of European print culture at all levels, as the contributions to this special issue show (particularly Burney, Italia, and Bubb).¹ In Britain, the culture of translation was profoundly changed by this expansion of translation beyond the tradition of English or European literature. As Annmarie Drury has argued, ‘for the Victorians translations were a site of experimentation and poems in their own right – as for the Modernists’.²

In some cases, it was Orientalist scholars themselves who directly undertook literary translations from the original languages with general readers in mind. Occasionally they used pseudonyms, particularly when translating ‘erotic’ poetry. Their translations were ‘prismatic’ in that they took account of other scholarly translations in European languages,

including Latin, and engaged intertextually with Greek and Latin poetry, as Maddalena Italia has shown.³

If located in the colonies, ‘Oriental translators’ often used ‘native informants’ who knew the original languages, and usually left them unacknowledged. If in Europe, like the prolific E. Powys Mathers, they used scholarly as well as literary translations in *European* languages, mainly French (see the first example below). But whereas Annmarie Drury has highlighted the enduring currency of Victorian poetic language for translations of non-Western poetry, Powys Mathers’ early-twentieth century translations followed Pound in employing a sparse poetic register that emphasized vivid and sensuous images within simple syntactical structures, whether he translated Japanese waka (or Hokka, as he called it), Urdu ghazals, or Cambodian folk songs:

THE TRYST

In thy presence my arms, my hands, my lips, all my being,
 Tremble as tremble the leaves
 Of cinnamon-apples shaken by the wind.
 — The leaves of the cinnamon-apples do not tremble, O my love.
 They shiver under the caress of the wind
 Which drinks deep of their perfumed kisses.

Come with me tonight under the cinnamon-apples
 And like their leaves you will shiver under my caress,
 And like the wind I will drink deep of your perfumed kisses. [. . .]

‘By an unknown author of Camboja’, translated by E. Powys Mathers.⁴

What Oriental translators produced, then, were retranslations, edited translations, or sometimes pseudo-translations. Powys Mathers, for example, was retranslating from Adolphe Thalasso’s *Anthologie de l’Amour Asiatique*:

LE RENDEZ-VOUS ROMANCE D’AMOUR

— En ta présence mes bras, mes mains, mes lèvres,
 tout mon être
 Tremblent comme tremblent les feuilles
 Des pommiers-cannelle secouées par le vent.
 — Les feuilles des pommiers-cannelle ne tremblent
 pas, ô ma bien-aimée,
 Elles frissonnent sous la caresse
 Qui se grise de leur baiser parfumé.

Viens avec moi, ce soir, sous les pommiers-cannelle
 Et comme leurs feuilles, tu frissonneras sous mes caresses,
 Et comme le vent je me griserai de tes baisers parfumés. [...]

Adolphe Thalasso, 'Cambodje'⁵

Thalasso's anthology included over 150 poems and songs from 29 languages over 377 pages, while Powys Mathers' *Eastern Love* spanned all the way from Morocco to Japan over 12 volumes.⁶ These anthologies sampled and highlighted local specificities while assimilating widely different traditions under the blanket term 'Oriental' or 'Eastern', which became a shifting signifier. They included early poetic traditions as well as popular songs, and even when contemporary poets were included and precise dates were given, they ceased to be coeval with the translators and became part of the heterotopia of the Orient.

Already in their own time, these Oriental poetry translations proved tremendously portable, moving nimbly across different domains of print culture and in very different material formats—as translation essays in periodicals, small anthologies, or hefty or multi-volume works. They could move across formats and locations both slowly and quickly, as the apparent paradox of the transcontinental reach of 'limited subscriber's editions' shows (Thalasso's *Anthologie* was printed in only 55 copies: 25 copies on Japanese imperial paper and 30 on Dutch paper). Powys Mathers' translations, Italia's work shows, have enjoyed a stupendously long shelf, intermedial, and now digital life, and often appear in canonical anthologies of world literature.⁷

If Powys Mathers' translations transported Thalasso's versions into the 1920s world of English modernism, two decades later the Urdu poet Miraji (1912-1949) used them for his translations in the Lahore journal *Adabī duniyā* (Literary world):

موسم آنے پر انار کی کلیاں رستی ہیں
 اور جنگل مدھمکھیوں کے چھتوں سے شہد بوند بوند ہو کر
 نکلتا ہے
 چٹان کے نیچے جھیل میں پانی ضرور گرتا ہے
 اور لپٹی لپٹائی آگ پھوٹ کر رات کو بھر دیتی ہے [...]

Miraji, 'Lā'o ke 'ishqiyā rāton ke gīt'
 (Songs of the Love Nights of Laos)⁸

The pomegranate must throw its jellies
 in his season
 and the hot honey drip over

from the combs of wild bees;
 water must spill into the pool
 below the rock
 and the firework burst from its wrapping
 to fulfil the night; [...]

E. Powys Mathers, 'Songs of the Love Nights of Laos'⁹

As the Indian success of Edwin Arnold's *Light of Asia* (1879) and *The Song Celestial* (1885) testifies, Oriental translations travelling along imperial networks to the colonies in the early twentieth century often became the 'authentic' textual sources for Western-educated colonial literati. But translations and anthologies of Eastern poetry also responded to the curiosity and thirst of colonial literati for literary repertoires *outside the West* and beyond the earlier cosmopolitan languages.¹⁰ For all their levels of mediation and remove from the 'authentic' sources, then, Oriental or Eastern relay translations gave unprecedented *visibility* to non-Western poetic repertoires and offered poets like Miraji (1912–1940) models for expanding and renewing the Urdu poetic idiom.

Like other contributions in this special issue (Italia, Bubb), this essay combines book history and translation studies to turn the straight lines of West-East or East-West literary circulation and influence into a loop, with unexpected turns and less clear origins and direction. Thalasso, Powys Mathers and Miraji show that it took many hands and different trajectories of scholarship, exploration and poetic practice to 'render legible' *as* Eastern or oriental *literature* the 'vast and heterogeneous range of practices of writing' and orature, to paraphrase Aamir Mufti.¹¹ In the process, I will argue, the emphasis shifted from Eastern *love* to Eastern *song*. In other words, if 'Eastern' stood in all cases for a kind of exotic (in its etymological sense of 'from the outside') poetic exploration, the examples of Thalasso and particularly Powys Mathers show that *love* could shade into prurient ethno-eroticism, whereas for Miraji what counted was oral, rhythmic and visual richness – *song*.

1. THE ORIENTAL TRANSLATOR

The figure of Oriental Translator I refer to here describes an individual of literary disposition who had perhaps a 'smattering' of one 'Oriental language' but, more importantly, read other Oriental translations avidly and intensely across the board and translated languages he or she didn't know. Sophisticated and knowledgeable amateurs, Oriental translators were 'translators of translations', 'prismatic translators' *par excellence* who

parsed, combined, imitated, and improved upon existing translations. Some, like Powys Mathers, did not publish poetry in their own names but arguably used translation as a 'poetics of disguise', i.e. they forged a lyric voice and poetic vision and attributed them to a 'source outside the poet's self'.¹² And while they relied on often several levels of linguistic and authorial mediation, they nonetheless emphasized the authenticity of the poems and novelty of their translations.

Studies of the European boom of oriental tales have highlighted what an intensely *re-translational* field this was.¹³ As Italia shows in her study of the translations of Sanskrit love poetry, Orientalists' philological translations themselves became *original texts* for Oriental translators. In their own emphatic terms, Oriental translators served Poetry and Beauty, not erudition. And while there were of course polyglots like William Jones or later Richard Burton who translated directly from several Oriental languages, Oriental translators mined existing collections to produce wide-ranging anthologies whose broad coverage encouraged comparative gestures with Western traditions but also across Asian ones. The result was a pliable translational language that was less concerned with formal aspects of metre and more with memorable images and a direct poetic voice. Particularistic claims about cultural and ethnic specificity were balanced by universalist ones about the common language of love and emotions.¹⁴

Some Oriental translators were Eastern Orientalists themselves. This was the case of Adolphe Thalasso (1858-1919), a 'Levantine', probably Ottoman Greek, born in Istanbul, who moved to Paris and became a playwright, theatre historian (*Molière en Turquie*, 1884, *Le Théâtre Persan*, 1885; *Le Théâtre libre*, 1909), and author of a book on Ottoman art (1909). In 1885 in Istanbul, Thalasso had founded a short-lived *Revue Orientale* and published studies and facing translations of 'Oriental love poetry' by his circle of Turkish, Armenian, and European 'Orientalist' friends.¹⁵ In his introduction to *L'Amour Asiatique*, the excitement of discovering traditions further East is striking. By contrast, we know little about Edward Powys Mathers (1892-1939, Fig. 1) besides that he was the son of a newspaper proprietor, was educated at Oxford and lived in London, where he translated Oriental poetry and wrote cryptic crosswords.

In the explicatory essay he reluctantly appended to *Eastern Love*, Powys Mathers pointed to the success of his translation of Mardrus' complete French version of *The Book of the Thousand and One Nights* as motivation for his ambitious project.¹⁶ He emphatically declared himself



Figure 1. Powys Mathers as J. Wing? Sketch of E. Powys Mathers with a slightly Oriental physiognomy by Esther Sainsbury (facing the frontispiece of *Eastern Love*, vol. 12, London: John Rodker, 1928)

an amateur and stated what the anthology *Eastern Love* was *not*. It was not a work of scholarship: ‘I can lay claim to a very small smattering of Sanskrit and Arabic.’ Nor was it a first-hand translation – he professed partiality for the ‘government official or soldier or trader with a flair for colloquial language’ over the ‘Oriental scholar’. And it was not a study in the Eastern psychology of sex, a point I return to below. His qualifications for the task were ‘a very sincere love of Oriental literature in translation and, again, of course, in translation, a fairly large acquaintance with it’, largely from the French.¹⁷

Powys Mathers’s criteria for selection were, beside his personal taste, that a poem had not been translated *into English* before and that it should have been composed originally ‘in the language of some Eastern country, by a native of that country’, a striking demand for ‘authenticity’ among his own sea of relay and pseudo-translations. The third criterion was that

a poem should be either ‘entirely typical’ or ‘entirely contrary to type’. In other words, it should evoke either responses of ‘Surely no European would have thought of that’ or ‘How utterly English!’, suggesting a see-saw movement between unfamiliarity and familiarity.¹⁸ This arguably went hand in hand with his preference for ‘plain text’, i.e. translations unaccompanied by explanations and notes. Unlike the bulk of Victorian translators before him, Powys–Mathers employed *vers libre* or rhythmic prose more often than rhyme and disavowed strict metres, qualities that are typical of the ‘modernist’ style that he wrote within. He introduced *enjambments*, subtracted words and introduced new verbs, as these three examples show, one from a sophisticated urban Urdu poet and one a song from Annam (Cambodia):

JOY fills my eyes, remembering your hair, with tears,
And these tears roll and shine;
Into my thoughts are woven a dark night with raindrops
And the rolling and shining of love songs.

From the Hindustani of Mir Taqui (eighteenth century)

Powys Mathers, *Garden of Bright Waters*¹⁹

The familiar images of Urdu poet Mir Taqi Mir’s couplet – starlike tears, hair black as night – are broken up by parataxis and defamiliarized through synaesthesia (‘thoughts woven with raindrops’, ‘love songs rolling and shining’ like tears). The poetic ‘I’ of the ghazal becomes that of the poet, lending the poem a confessional, pathetic tone.

My body is a parrot
screaming for joy over a nut,
a peacock-fish floundering to the sun
because it is too great
to be hurt by any;
since he has fastened his boat to our stake
and walks up the path to me,
my body is a laden cabbage-palm
weeping with fruit.

Powys Mathers, *Eastern Love*²⁰

This song relies on colourful and sonorous similes that become copular phrases (‘My body is a parrot’, ‘my body is a laden cabbage-palm’); charm accrues from the simplicity of diction and voice.

Having a translation or re-translation as ‘source text’ seems to have granted the Oriental translator a peculiar freedom. Listening for a missing ‘original’ gave prominence to sonorous images (hibiscus, parakeet, the parrot, the weeping cabbage-palm, the ubiquitous bamboo),

as if striving to (re)create sounds that one had not heard. This is what the following statement also suggests: ‘The bamboo flute music to which [Laotian songs] are sung has a certain affinity with the Burmese and Siamese and Malay song accompaniments, but is very different from, and much more pastoral than, Annamite or Chinese music.’²¹ How would Powys Mathers have known? How would we readers know? And yet we strain our ears. It was perhaps this quality that attracted so many early-twentieth-century composers, both in France and in England, to these translations, an example of the inter-artistic effect and influence of ‘Eastern poetry’ on European modernism.²² This freedom easily slid into creating an imagined original, be it a pastiche of existing verses or a whole fictive persona, as with Powys Mathers’ creation of the modern Chinese poet Julius Wing.²³

2. A SHIFTING EAST

In Oriental translators’ anthologies, ‘Eastern poetry’ is a remarkably flexible, mobile, and capacious category that tears William Jones’ idea of the lyric at the seams. Thalasso’s Introduction to his *Anthologie* states that all Oriental poetry derives from either Hebrew, Chinese, or Sanskrit, yet the anthology itself is much more heterogeneous and wide ranging. Its truly impressive scope carries the imprint of multiple French, British, Russian, and Ottoman trajectories of imperial expansion, Orientalist scholarship and ethnographic exploration across the whole of Asia, alphabetically ordered by language (Table 1).²⁴

This remarkable range of languages and regions comprises both courtly and popular forms without assimilating them to a universal Lyric ideal. Whenever possible, Thalasso added historical-biographical notes and attributed and dated the poems. The result was no generic Orient but a mosaic of different peoples, histories and traditions, with Turkmen, Afghan, Georgian or Mongolian poets alongside the comparatively better-known Arabic, Persian and Japanese.²⁵ It was therefore very far from Asian culture as a holistic project for intellectuals like Rabindranath Tagore and Okakura Tenshin, or the various political projects around pan-Asianism that emerged in the same period.²⁶

For Powys Mathers, ‘Eastern’ was less beholden to geographical location and more selective and idiosyncratic. His anthologies mix and move back and forth between countries, literary traditions and epochs.²⁷ *Eastern Love* includes the Maghreb (Morocco and Algeria), ‘Arabia’, Turkey and Persia, but skips the Caucasus and Inner Asia, includes only

Table 1. Eastern in A. Thalasso's *Anthologie de l'amour Orientale* (1906)

Afghanistan	Cambodge	Kafiristan	Siam
Altai	Chine	Kazacks	Syrie
Anatolie	Circassie	Khurdistan	Tatares
Annam	Corée	Kirghiss	Thibet
Arabie	Daghestan	Mandchourie	Turkestan
Arménie	Géorgie	Mongolie	
Belouchistan	Hindoustan	Nèpaul	
Birmanie	Japon	Perse	

Sanskrit and Bengali for India but dwells extensively on South East Asia (Annam, Cambodia, Lao) and East Asia (Korea, China and Japan).

These are good translations, elegant to read and less convoluted than scholarly, literal or Victorian ones. Following Pound's lesson, they have removed 'the crust of dead English'. While the arrangement by country suggests variety and variation, the translations create a common 'Eastern idiolect' for courtly poetry (prosaic, longer lines), songs (simple) and popular or erotic tales from Arabic to Sanskrit, from Turkey to Laos, from Chinese to Bengali. Only toponyms and images tell us whether we are in Arabia (the desert, the palm) or in South East Asia (bamboo). Authorship is acknowledged, individual style is not. The paratexts are so brief and decontextualized that they remain empty signifiers, giving a semblance of historicity but hanging onto nothing.²⁸ Historicity is acknowledged but also suspended by presenting this material as a vast and continuous repertoire, so that a nineteenth-century poet becomes contemporary to a fifteenth-century one. All the emphasis is on aesthetic effect (or ribald interest for the tales), with the result that they become less grounded and more portable artifacts.²⁹

Miraji's East (or *Mashreq*) draws heavily on Powys Mathers's, as the titles of his translation essays show ('Songs of the Geishas', 'Songs of the Love nights of Laos').³⁰ As I argue in the final section, for Miraji, too, Eastern poetry was a discovery and was intimately linked to his project of expanding the Urdu poetic idiom.³¹ To paraphrase Drury's argument about Victorian translations, for Miraji 'the expansion of translation to include languages that are not themselves part of the tradition of [Urdu] literature – languages with their own, independent traditions – tests and transforms [Urdu] poetry'.³² It is likely for this reason that Miraji's 'East' includes Sanskrit, Bengali and Maithili poetry (Urdu's forgotten internal

Indic self or other) but excludes poetry closest to its own Persianate tradition—hence, no Arabic, no Persian, no Turkish: those traditions would not help Urdu extend its diction and imagination.

Though linked by a translation loop going from Istanbul to Paris to London to Lahore, the East of Adolphe Thalasso, Edward Powys Mathers and Miraji, then, was not only an unstable geographical signifier but also carried different agendas and inflections. For Thalasso, Eastern poetry made visible and ‘registered the existence’, as he put it, of a complex and vast world, a mosaic of people and literary traditions that exceeded his own multilingual tastes. For Powys Mathers, the East was the result of intense literary reading; it was about sampling and aesthetically savouring a new repertoire of images collected under the sign of ‘love’. For Miraji, it was about opening new worlds and new vistas for himself and his Urdu readers, re-orienting and worlding them beyond the limits of the traditions to whom they would be familiar or exposed through colonial education (the English tradition exemplified by Palgrave’s *Golden Treasury*, 1881).

3. *EASTERN LOVE*

The rubric that allowed Thalasso and Powys Mathers to collect and publish together such diverse literary forms was not the lyric, but love. Love allowed contradictory and complementary arguments about universality and national, linguistic or ethnic particularity, about communicability and foreignness, to be made in one and the same breath.³³ Using the familiar metaphor of reading poetry as a stroll through a flower garden, in his introduction Thalasso first emphasized the attractions of his anthology in terms of variety and particularity through a detailed list of flowers, each with its own ‘strange’ beauty and heady scent:

It is not without some pride that, taking my reader by the hand, I lead her through beds and unknown massifs where bizarre flowers grow, outlandish, never seen, never inhaled. Strange in their forms, which bring out the adorably monstrous beauty of Afghan orchids, the marvellous contours of Hindu lotuses, the slender and svelte line of lilies of Anatolia; strange in their colours, which better bring to light the red joy of Arab pomegranates, the softened hues of Isfahan roses, the purple splendors of Japanese irises; strange in their sweet, penetrating scent, heady like the incense of circassian hyacinths, the pepper of Armenian carnations, and the depressing bouquet exhaling from Chinese tuberose.³⁴

But then Thalasso turns around to instead make a plea for the universality of the emotions and experiences of love. Here cultural differences and disparity between ‘civilized’ and ‘partly savage’ are erased in favour of the unity of the ‘human heart’ and the ‘grand law of Nature’:

To breathe in all these flowers, each blooming with a feeling from the heart, we can see once more, and not without selfish joy, that the love that tortures us or makes us happy is the same there, among partly wild peoples (*peuples en partie sauvages*), as among us civilized peoples (*peuples civilisés*). . . . Those who wrote these songs of love are not Arabs, Persians, Hindus, Kurds, Baluchis, or Kafirs: they are human hearts, hearts very similar to our own, hearts that far, far away in Asia have our own desires and tears, and enjoy and bleed for the same joys and with the same blood as our hearts do.³⁵

While enabling communicability and producing familiarity, this framing foregrounds a universalizing plotting of human emotions and a universalizing view of poetry as the direct expression of the human heart that bypasses hurdles of translatability and translation. Literary specificities, cultural differences, formal mediations and linguistic games fade out of sight, or are transposed into a particular scent and colour. Yet Thalasso, like Powys Mathers, can also claim that different kinds of Oriental poetry express specific kinds of love: Arabic and Hindu poems ‘aim for the soul’, Armenian and Persian poems ‘slip into the heart’, while Afghan poetry ‘attacks the heart no more than the soul’. Yet, ‘[w]hether Arabic or Persian, Armenian or Hindu, all love verses tremble with the desire of possession or mourn their failing ecstasies’ and ‘consider the kiss of the bodies as the only possible physical manifestation of the union of the souls’.³⁶ Both the authoritative comparative statement and the complementary aims of love poetry among these different peoples and poetic traditions are worth noting here. The reader (or rather the female reader, *la lectrice*) of the anthology could sample them all, in their particularity but also as part of a whole. Is this one definition of world poetry?

The underside of this poetic definition of Eastern love was an interest in the psychology and physiology of sex among different peoples, particularly ‘savage’ or ‘semi civilized’, that was very popular in Europe at the time and mixed ‘scientific’ observation of body physiology and local customs with prurience at their ‘impudicity’ and ‘perversion’. *Eastern Love or Kisses* (as in *Baisers d’Orient*, by Jean Hervez, 1921) here stood squarely for sex.³⁷ While Powys Mathers’ translations are refreshing in his attention to the aesthetic and formal aspects of the poems – one of the reasons, I suspect, why Miraji picked them – , some of the accompanying

essays carry more than a whiff of these murky ethnologies.³⁸ The essay accompanying ‘The Love Nights of Laos’, for example, translates Hervez almost verbatim.³⁹ It includes sentences like:

The Laos or Shans are an indolent, laughter-loving people, fond of gambling and cockfight, not unwarlike, but orderly and trustworthy; their women have considerable influence and enjoy equal freedom with men. . . The Laos are perhaps the only civilised artistically erotic people left in the world.⁴⁰

The phrase ‘perhaps the only civilized artistically erotic people left in the world’ suggests an ethnological framework (a people in a primitive state of nature) offset by the qualifiers ‘civilized’ and ‘artistic’ that foreshorten the civilizational distance.⁴¹ Hervez in turn quotes Thalasso’s poetic translations, interweaving them with ‘scientific’ and experiential accounts of travellers, doctors and early anthropologists. Needless to say, this association of ‘Oriental poetry’ with prurient sexology has been extremely tenacious, as the titles and exotic/erotic covers of many later editions of these translations attest.

4. MIRAJI’S EASTERN SONGS

The fact that Miraji’s essays and translations of ‘Eastern poetry’ are in fact pretty literal translations from Powys Mathers is, at first, disappointing.⁴² Learning that he did not study at length the poetic traditions of Laos, Korea, China and Japan but simply copied them, may diminish Miraji’s enterprise in our eyes.⁴³ But then, in this case as in Powys Mathers’, who also does not always acknowledge his sources, thinking in terms of plagiarism does not take us very far. Rather, we can appreciate how Miraji took on the authoritative tone of Powys Mathers’ essays to instruct and enlighten his Urdu readers: ‘Poetry was a compulsory part of the Korean government exam’; ‘Japanese Geisha songs are sung with a 3-stringed instrument called *samisen* [*shamisen*]’. The fact that Miraji placed the explicatory essays *before* the translations or interspersed them with the poems translated stresses his didactic aim, in complete opposition to Powys Mathers. By going beyond Britain, Europe and the West, he made these readers more worldly while he himself acquired authority in the process, as the occasional general statement about poetry also suggests.⁴⁴

The ‘Songs of the Nights of Lao’ show how Miraji enacted his own translation strategies. Powys Mathers had translated these verses ‘to give some idea of the quality of strong and crude imagination which

informs the folk-songs of the Laos or Shans'.⁴⁵ The first, surprising, thing to notice, given Miraji's lack of prudishness and open expression of sexuality, is that he downplays the sexual poems and leaves out the bawdiest ones (like the first, 'If the girl does not want us/we will take the mother,/and give joy to all').⁴⁶ Sexual referents are toned down: 'Let all of us who loved her/paint great red phalloi/upon the catafalque' becomes 'Come, all of us who desired her/make a great form (*shakal*) on her epitaph in the colour of the heart.' In the last two lines, 'and she could never/lie down alone' becomes 'and she could never *be* alone.'⁴⁷ Powys Mathers'

You said you wished
the lacquer and the sandal tree
to grow into a parasol [...]
but you did not say
you wished yourself
to cover me.⁴⁸

becomes:

تمنے کہا تھا کہ تم چاہتے ہو
کہ سنڈل اور سفیدے کے پیڑ
میرے لئے
[...] بن جائیں
لیکن تم نے یہ نہ کہا تھا تم چاہتے ہو
کہ تم خود مجھ پر چھا جاؤ۔

(You said you wanted
the sandal and safeda tree
for me
to become umbrellas [*chhatriyān*] [...]
But you did not say you wanted
to lay [*chhā jā'o*] yourself upon me.)⁴⁹

The alliteration between *chhatriyān* (umbrellas) and *chhā jā'o* (lay upon) sounds less explicitly sexual than the English verb 'cover'. Miraji leaves out Powys Mathers' titles that connect the song-poems to the sexual night ceremonies described in the introduction, with the gendered pronouns indicating the ritual exchanges between men and women ('woman alone', 'man alone', 'man and woman together' become generically *tum*/you and *ham*/we), thereby muting the ethnographic tone.

Arguably Miraji tones down the exotic, too. Some fruit and trees' names are maintained, though *anār* and *dālcīnī* sound less exotic in Urdu than 'pomegranate' and 'cinnamon apple' in English. In fact, Miraji often

leaves out specifics: a red hibiscus becomes ‘a plant’, a red parakeet ‘a small red animal’, and the Mekong simply becomes ‘a river’.⁵⁰ Elsewhere, Miraji chooses familiar over exotic terms: ‘pagoda’ becomes *mandir* (temple) and ‘dragon’, *nāg* (snake), though the Hindu undertones of these words could work for Urdu readers as a kind of ‘internal exotic’.⁵¹ The multi-sensorial saturation of sounds, colours and exotic toponyms and objects is one of the repeated pleasures Powys Mathers’ poems offer, and though Miraji simplifies some of the images, they remain striking and unusual, like the thin stems of young onions or the ‘red, green and blue stars’:

The girls of Luang-Prabang
have equal thighs
as clean as gilded pillars
and equal breasts like gold bowls,
and long fingers
like slender onion stems.
Their eyes are black stars or blue stars
or green stars above round moons,
once we have breathed their breath
no flower has any scent for us.
We could find nothing as beautiful
across five thousand lives
as the girls of Luang-Prabang.⁵²

Powys Mathers had remarked that ‘these [Geisha] songs for the samisen are technically free’, or that the Laotian songs ‘have no rhymes and the metre is utterly irregular; their merit does not consist in their prosody, but in their imagery, which is always graceful and generally unexpected.’⁵³ Miraji seems to have embraced this point even more enthusiastically. Writing about the Geishas’ songs, he adds:

They are more like Urdu village songs. More difficult to translate than other Japanese poems, they have a clearer structure (*khāqa*) than the other poetry, and greater feeling and subtlety of thought. Since their women composers are, like the authors of village songs, not from the educated classes, these songs have more *natural simplicity* (*qudratī sādagī*).⁵⁴

When writing about Laotian songs, Miraji slips into Urdu critical vocabulary:

These songs of Lao do not stick to any rhyming scheme (*radīf-kāfiya*) or metre (*baḥr*). If any flow (*ravānī*) is produced it is outside any rules (*beqā’yda*). The beauty of these songs is in their imagination (*takhayyul*), which is always graceful (*ḥasīn*) and usually unexpected (*ghair-mutawaqqo*).⁵⁵

This emphasis on the freedom of songs from metrical strictures and their ‘natural simplicity’, as opposed to belaboured sophistication, points to Fatima Burney’s insight about the centrality of *gīt* or song to modernist Urdu poetry and critical discourse as a means to break free from a sophisticated but repetitive tradition and revive it with natural imagery and diction.⁵⁶ Or, as this short verse from Powys Mathers’ ‘Songs of the Geishas’ puts it:

Models
Butterfly,
Or falling leaf,
Which ought I to imitate
In my dancing?⁵⁷

اسلوب
کسی تبتری کی طرح پھڑپھڑاتے
کسی گرتے پتے کی مانند تھرتھرتے
میں کسی طرح ناچوں؟⁵⁸

Miraji’s most direct statement of intention comes at the beginning of the translation of the ‘Songs of the love nights of Lao’:

This essay and the translations that accompany it aim at stating the truth (*ḥaqīqat*) that although from the creation of the world (*takhlīq-e ‘ālam se*) till today the multitude of time and circumstances have brought in extreme differentiation in the kinds of people, despite this fact human emotions (*jazbāt*) are primary (*avvalī*, also primordial), here artificially covered by the gold-threaded curtains of culture (*tahzīb*) and civilization (*tamadūn*), there in the natural and evident (*zāhirī*) guise of nature (*fiṭrat*), and this is the reason why a human being can delight in the poetry of any country. In addition, the other aim is to widen the scope [lit. ‘hem’] of Urdu.⁵⁹

The first part of the statement echoes Thalasso’s universalist claim, but from Miraji’s colonized position it carries a counter-hierarchical slant. Yet poetry comes in many forms, some more ‘gold-threaded’, others more ‘natural’. While not articulating a universalizing lyric ideal, Miraji’s translations of Eastern poems and songs veer, like his own poems (*nazms*), toward the ‘natural’ end. In the last line, the specific aim of Miraji’s translations is clearly stated: not the ‘graceful and unexpected imagery’ and morbid ethnographic curiosity of ‘Eastern love’ but awakening the worldliness of Urdu readers through the universal human capacity to feel, and broadening the diction and imagination (*takhayyul*) of Urdu poetry. Through the medium of English and a practice of disguise that presents others’ commentaries as his own, Miraji’s translations effectively decentre English from the colonial imagination and, in

that sense, decolonize it. This is clear in the essay accompanying his Baudelaire translations, wherein Miraji gleefully quotes European critics stating that French poetry has been much ahead of English poetry for a century at least.⁶⁰

CONCLUSIONS

As other essays in this collection show, the modernist lyric was the product of translators as much as of poets. Translations of ‘Eastern poetry’ were part of the vast ‘heterogeneous repertoire of texts’ (Mufti) that crossed languages, borders and print forms thanks to professional as well as amateur readers and writers. Tracing the sources of the extraordinary range of translations that Miraji undertook and published in Urdu journals in the late 1930s and 1940s first led me to Powys Mathers’ incredibly successful and long-lasting re-translations. These in turn led me to Adolphe Thalasso’s own ambitious anthology, but also further into a ‘hall of mirrors’, as Maddalena Italia terms it, with a dizzying set of European and non-European sources and pseudo-originals. From Lahore to London, London to Paris, Paris to Istanbul, Kabul and further on. This was a remarkable loop that drew upon institutions and trajectories of empire – Orientalist scholarship, scholarly and popular publishing, and the comparative discourse of ethnology and civilization – but also crossed and exceeded them. At each stage of this loop, not just the poems or traditions but the term ‘Eastern’ changed in scope, meaning, and aim. Reading Miraji comparatively with Powys Mathers and Thalasso brings into focus the collaborative or multi-authorial loop of this traffic of translations and re-translations, which together brought the modernist lyric into existence, both East *and* West. Some cases fit squarely within the power-knowledge-representation paradigm of Said’s Orientalism but, particularly in the case of the Eastern Orientalists, to just consider them self-orientalizing mimics seems reductive and misleading. As Miraji shows, translations from East and West could be used to free and decolonize the poetic imagination.

Although lyric was not a term that either Thalasso, Powys Mathers or Miraji used, we saw that particularly Thalasso tussled with a universalistic definition of poetry as the direct expression of emotions and tried to fit poetic and song genres into that mould (like Mir Taqi Mir’s *ghazal* that Powys Mathers translated; see endnote 20). Yet the emphasis on love, or perhaps the sheer variety and range of ‘Eastern’ poetic forms,

seem to have driven the attention of these Oriental translators away from attempts at comparative or universal poetics *à la* Jones or Goethe.

Moreover, for Powys Mathers and Miraji, images and rhythm mattered more than the lyrical self or poetic metres, modes and genres, which is perhaps why the technicalities of translation do not seem to have mattered to them. Other poets would try Urdu and Hindi *haikus*, or agonize about poetic untranslatability. Rather, as with the other poets and translators discussed in this issue, what was at stake for these translators were the different imaginaries that Eastern poems carried, and for Miraji the possibility of a new, simple and unfettered, diction – which is why Powys Mathers' prosaic versions served him so well.⁶¹ Only, rather than Eastern *love*, what interested Miraji were Eastern *songs*.

NOTES

This essay is an output of the Multilingual Locals and Significant Geographies project which has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No. 670876.

- 1 See Ming Xie, *Ezra Pound and the Appropriation of Chinese Poetry: Cathay, Translation, and Imagism* (London: Routledge, 2015); William Jones, *Poems Consisting Chiefly of Translations from the Asiatic Languages* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1772); Annmarie Drury, *Translation as Transformation in Victorian Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 17; Drury notes that translations from Persian, Irish, Arabic, Sanskrit, Chinese and other languages appeared in the magazine *Fraser's* between 1830 and 1879 (p. 231).
- 2 Drury, *Victorian Translation*, p. 31. This experimentation, Drury argues, was particularly intense with regard to metre.
- 3 Maddalena Italia, 'The Erotic Untranslatable: The Modern Reception of Sanskrit Love Poetry in the West and in India', PhD thesis, SOAS, University of London, 2018. For the notion of 'prismatic translation', see *Prismatic Translation*, edited by Matthew Reynolds (Cambridge: Legenda, 2020).
- 4 'By an unknown author of Camboja', translated by E. Powys Mathers, in *Coloured Stars: Versions of Fifty Asian Love Poems* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1918), p. 56.
- 5 Adolphe Thalasso, 'Cambodje', in *Anthologie de l'Amour Asiatique* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1906), pp. 150-151: < <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5813022q.texteImage> > [accessed 7 May 2020].
- 6 Printed in 1,000 copies on sumptuous rag paper with illustrations by Hester Sainsbury (London: John Rodker, 1928-30). Other Oriental translations by Powys Mathers include: *Coloured Stars: Versions of Fifty Asian Love Poems* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1918), *The Garden of Bright Waters* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1920), *Love Songs of Asia* (London: Pushkin Press, 1944), *Eastern Love Poems* (London: Folio

- Society, 1953), as well as many editions of *Black Marigolds* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1919).
- 7 The paradigmatic case is Powys Mathers' *Black Marigolds*, a composite translation and free rendering of the Sanskrit text *Caurapañcāśikā* or Fifty Stanzas of the Thief, in which notably no black marigolds appear; *Black Marigolds* has never been out of print since its first publication in 1919 and even ended up in John Steinbeck's novel *Cannery Row* (1945); see Italia, 'Erotic Untranslatable'.
 - 8 Miraji, 'Lā'o ke 'ishqiyā rāton ke gīt' (Songs of the Love Nights of Laos'), in *Adabi dunyā*, November 1936, *Bāqiya Mirājī* (Lahore: Pakistani Books and Literary Sounds, 1990), p. 185.
 - 9 Powys Mathers, 'Songs of the Love Nights of Laos', in *Eastern Love*, vol. 10, p. 87.
 - 10 Pre-colonial cosmopolitan literary languages like Persian, Arabic, Sanskrit and Chinese had been transregional and connected significant parts of the world, yet the limits of those languages were the limits of the literary world. China featured in Persian literature, for example, as a place or a type of beauty, not as literature in Chinese.
 - 11 Aamir Mufti, *Forget English! Orientalisms and World Literatures* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), p. 11.
 - 12 Drury, *Victorian Translations*, p. 169.
 - 13 E.g. Ros Ballaster, *Fabulous Orient: Fictions of the East in England 1662-1785* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Srinivas Aravamudan, *Enlightenment Orientalism: Resisting the Rise of the Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); *Scheherazade's Children: Global Encounters with the Arabian Nights*, edited by Philip F. Kennedy and Marina Warner (New York: New York University Press, 2013).
 - 14 See Italia, 'Erotic Untranslatable'.
 - 15 He names his friend and mentor the Afghan poet Rakshan Kayil, and as further contributors 'des Orientalistes turcs, Mehmed Bey Schahtahtensky et Ahmed Bey Salim, et des Orientalistes arméniens, Manassi Effendi et Djanik Effendi', and European and Armenian friends, 'MM. Basile Corpi, John Llewellyn, J. V. Adjémian, O. Tokat, Charles d'Agostino et Archag Tchobanian'; Thalasso, *Anthologie*, p. 11. An issue of the *Revue Orientale* is available digitally: < <https://archives.saltresearch.org/handle/123456789/129101> > [accessed 7 May 2020].
 - 16 Powys Mathers, *Eastern Love*, vol. 12, p. 91. Beside the *Arabian Nights*, Powys Mathers also translated Orientalizing French works such as Flaubert's *Salammô* (1931).
 - 17 Powys Mathers, *Eastern Love*, vol. 12, pp. 92, 93, 91.
 - 18 *Ibid.*, p. 92.
 - 19 Powys Mathers, *Garden*, p. 76, translating Thalasso's:

Au souvenir de tes longs cheveux noirs, le bonheur
 emplît mes yeux de larmes, et ces larmes en
 roulant brillent sur mes joues,
 Et je ne sais pourquoi en les voyant rouler je pense
 à une nuit très sombre, à des gouttes de pluie,
 et à des lueurs de vers luisants (*Anthologie*, pp. 222–223).

- 20 Powys Mathers, *Eastern Love*, vol. 12, from Thalasso:
- Je vis toute seule et je suis jeune fille. . .
 J'écris de longues lettres et ne connais personne à
 qui les adresser. . .
 Dans mon cœur parlent les choses les plus tendres. . .
 Je ne puis les répéter qu'aux bambous du jardin.
 Et, debout, attentive, derrière la porte, en soulevant
 la natte
 Je regarde tout le jour l'ombre des gens qui passent. . . (*Anthologie*, pp. 70-71).
- 21 Powys Mathers, *Eastern Love*, vol. 12, p. 139.
- 22 Among the many musical works that drew upon Powys Mathers' translations are: Bainbridge Crist, *Coloured Stars: From the Chinese* (includes: The Emperor, English Girl, Leile, 1921); Granville Bantock, *The Red Lotus* (ca. 1920); Aaron Copland, *Alone* (Arabic text by John Duncan, translated by E. Powys Mathers) and *Pastorale: Words Translated from the Kafiristan*; Norman Peterkind, *Garden of Bamboo*; source: BL online catalogue. Among those that took inspiration from Thalasso are: Léo Pouget's *Chants d'amour orientaux, poème de Adolphe Thalasso* (1906); René Lenormand's *Soleil: Douze mélodies pour piano et chant* (1923); and Georges Sporck's *Poème orientaux (Je veux qu'on mette sur ma tombe)*, translations of poems by Shah Selim (1924); source: BnF online catalogue.
- 23 See Powys Mathers, *Eastern Love*, vol. 12, pp. 120-122. I thank Maddalena Italia for this information.
- 24 Despite introducing Sanskrit poetry (including the Vedas, the *Rāmāyana* and *Mahābhārata*, *Śakuntalā*, etc.) in the Introduction, the only poetry of Hindustan that Thalasso includes is Urdu poetry, which had already been translated into French by Garcin de Tassy. For Altai (Turkmen) poetry, Thalasso drew on Turko-Mongolian manuscripts in the Ottoman Imperial Library in Tildiz-Kiosk Palace following information provided by his friend and private doctor to the Sultan (Greek), Spiridion Mavrogény Pacha, who 'tried to establish the original text of a Turkish war song of which M. Gustave Laffon, French Consul in Andrinople, sent me a French verse translation'; Thalasso, *Anthologie*, p. 58.
- 25 E.g. for the history of Armenian poetry he draws on the article by T. Yergat on 'Le Mouvement littéraire arménien' in *Revue des Revues*; for Georgian poets, on Eugénius, *Tableau historique de la Géorgie* (St Petersburg, 1803); Thalasso, *Anthologie*, pp. 95, 201. For Japanese poetry, Thalasso cited works by the Orientalist L. de Rosny (*Des affinités du japonais avec certaines langues du continent asiatique* and *L'Anthologie japonaise*) and a study by Motoyosi-Saizau on 'La Poésie au Japon' that had appeared in a periodical (*Revue des Revues*) and the French translation of a Spanish book, *L'Âme japonaise*, by E. Gomez-Carrillo, translated by Charles Barlhez; *Ibid.*, p. 232.
- 26 See Rustom Bharucha, *Another Asia: Rabindranath Tagore and Okakura Tenshin* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016); *Pan-Asianism: a Documentary History*, edited by Cemil Aydin (Blue Ridge Summit: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011).
- 27 Most of the volumes of *Eastern Love* are devoted to a single language or region, but some, like vol. 12, mix China, Annam, Japan and Arabic (I have deliberately maintained his mixing of places and languages).

- 28 Even when, in the terminal essays that Powys Mathers so resisted writing, short biographies are given in chronological order, as is the case with Arabic poets, there is no comment on historicity; Powys Mathers, *Eastern Love*, vol. 12, pp. 108-114.
- 29 For 'Forty Hokku of Kikaku', selected and translated from *Les Haïkaï de Kikakou* by Kuni Matsuo and Steinilber-Oberlin, Powys Mathers gives only the dates of the poet (1658-1708) but adds titles, 'to save the reader from constant reference to notes' (*Eastern Love*, vol. 12, p. 53).
- 30 Also, 'China's Poet Laureate: Li Po', 'Some Chinese Poems' (Confucius), 'New Chinese Poetry', and 'Chinese Beloveds'; Miraji, *Mashreq aur Maghreb ke naghme* (Karachi: Aaj Books, 1999), pp. 223-256; *Bāqiyā Mirājī*, pp. 139-143, 230-252, 253-270.
- 31 His translations include: the Minnesänger, Walt Whitman ('America's Poet Laureate'), Pushkin ('Russia's Poet Laureate'), François Villon ('France's vagabond poet'), Thomas Moore ('An Eastern poet from the West'), John Masefield, Charles Baudelaire ('A French vagabond poet'), Chandidas ('The first poet of Bengal'), Edgar Allan Poe ('America's Imagist poet'), Sappho ('The foremost woman poet of the West'), Stéphane Mallarmé ('France's Imagist poet'), Amaru, Catullus ('A romantic poet from Rome'), D. H. Lawrence ('England's messenger poet'), Li Po, 'Ancient poetry of Korea', 'Songs of the Geishas', 'Songs of the Love nights of Laos', 'New Chinese Poetry', 'Chinese Beloveds', 'Vidyapati and his Songs', 'In the eyes of Rasa', Heine ('Germany's Jewish poet'), the Brontës, 'Songs from different countries'; Miraji, *Mashreq aur Maghreb, Bāqiyā Mirājī*. By translating so many American poets, Miraji was broadening the remit of poetry in English, too.
- 32 Drury, *Victorian Translations*, p. 3.
- 33 Thalasso had already published an 'Anthologie de l'Amour Arabe' and 'Anthologie de l'Amour Turc' in the *Mercur de France*; Thalasso, *Anthologie*, p. 13.
- 34 *Ibid.*, p. 20.
- 35 *Ibid.*, p. 21.
- 36 *Ibid.*, p. 29.
- 37 The chapter titles in Jean Hervez, *Baisers d'Orient* read: Love kissing and its perversions; Tonkin kissing, Kissing in Cambodia and Laos, etc. (Paris: Bibliothèque des Curieux, 1921, cover page). While claiming to 'describe' different practices, Hervez dwelt at length on 'perversions', with statements like: 'The Far East enjoys the sad privilege of being one of the most powerful sites of pederastic vice' (p. 49); or 'Kissing among the Annamite race is before and above all a generally misplaced contact of mucosa. There is no other people in the world which present as much danger of physical contamination'; *Ibid.*, pp. 19, 39. Volume 1 of Powys Mathers' *Eastern Love* contains a section entitled *A Garden of Kisses* taken from an Algerian work originally written in Arabic. While these are vignettes about flirting rather than sex, the signifier invokes a similar titillation.
- 38 Even more than in the poems, this aspect is foregrounded in Powys Mathers' translation of Arabic, Turkish, and Persian tales and texts of *ars amandi*, vols. 3, 4 and 11 of *Eastern Love*.
- 39 Hervez, *Baisers*, pp. 19-20.
- 40 Powys Mathers, *Eastern Love*, vol. 12, pp. 135, 137.

- 41 *Ibid.* p. 137. Miraji translated this sentence verbatim: ‘Dunyā men širf lā’o ek aisī qaum hai jo muhazzib hone ke sāth fankārāna ṭarīq par aishparast hai’ (*Bāqiyā*, p. 162) – who knows what Urdu readers made of it.
- 42 E.g. ‘Songs of the Geishas’; Miraji, *Mashreq*, pp. 434–435 is identical to Powys Mathers, *Eastern Love*, vol. 12, pp. 144–145.
- 43 I have only been able to trace some of the sources of Miraji’s translations of Eastern poetry. Miraji’s essays on Pushkin’s and Baudelaire’s poetry are equally impressive – did he lift them from somewhere else, too?
- 44 ‘After a poem, whatever epoch it may be from, comes into existence, it becomes part of the life of the people (*awām*)’; Miraji, *Mashreq*, p. 432.
- 45 Powys Mathers, *Eastern Love*, vol. 10, p. 79.
- 46 *Ibid.*, p. 85. For Miraji’s exploration of sexuality, see Geeta Patel, *Lyrical Movements, Historical Hauntings: On Gender, Colonialism, and Desire in Miraji’s Urdu Poetry* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002).
- 47 Powys Mathers, *Eastern Love*, vol. 10, p. 87; Miraji, *Bāqiyā*, p. 166, emphases added.
- 48 Powys Mathers, *Eastern Love*, vol. 10, p. 96.
- 49 Miraji, *Bāqiyā*, pp. 169–170.
- 50 Powys Mathers, *Eastern Love*, pp. 92, 85, 103; Miraji, *Bāqiyā*, pp. 169, 174.
- 51 Powys Mathers, *Eastern Love*, p. 97; Miraji, *Bāqiyā*, p. 170.
- 52 Powys Mathers, *Eastern Love*, p. 86; Miraji, *Bāqiyā*, p. 164.
- 53 See Powys Mathers, *Eastern Love*, vol. 7, pp. 103, 138.
- 54 Miraji, *Mashreq*, p. 433.
- 55 Miraji, *Bāqiyā*, p. 163.
- 56 See also David Lunn, ‘Across the Divide: Looking for the Common Ground of Hindustani’, *Modern Asian Studies*, 52.6 (2018), 2056–2079.
- 57 Powys Mathers, *Eastern Love*, vol. 7, p. 109.
- 58 Miraji, *Mashreq*, p. 434.
- 59 Miraji, *Bāqiyā*, p. 159.
- 60 Miraji, *Mashreq*, p. 133. See also my ‘World Literature, Indian Views, 1920s–1940s’, *Journal of World Literature*, 4.1 (2019), 56–81.
- 61 This is a different imagination of the song and the people from the contemporary and more overtly political one of the Indian Progressives, who mobilized village songs and folk tunes for choruses against Fascism, the Bengal famine of 1943 and World War II. Miraji’s choice of Powys Mathers’ exotic songs, rather than songs of toil, exploitation or struggle, distinguishes him from the Progressives.