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#### **Author**

Rahimieh, N

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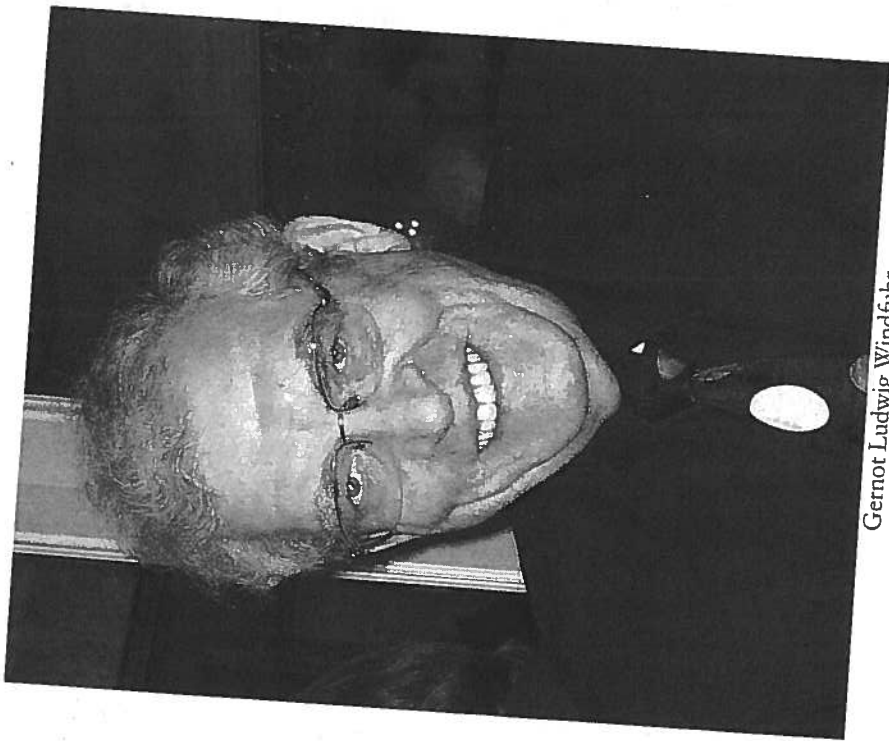
# Iranian Languages and Culture

Essays in Honor of

Gernot Ludwig Windfuhr

Edited by  
Behrad Aghaei  
M. R. Ghanoonparvar

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Gernot Ludwig Windfuhr

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### *Publisher's Note*

This volume of essays is the seventh festschrift to be published by this press. It is dedicated to Professor Gernot Ludwig Windfuhr, as a tribute to an accomplished scholar who has been among the pioneers in the field of Iranian languages in the United States and around the world.

The first volume in this series, published in 2000, was dedicated to Nikki R. Keddi; it was followed by five other volumes, dedicated respectively to Hafez F. Farmayan (2002), Hanns-Peter Schmidt (2003), posthumously to Arthur Upham Pope and his wife and collaborator, Phyllis Ackerman (2005), Peter J. Chelkowski (2007), and Amin Bahani (2012).

There are many other scholars whose contributions to the field of Iranian studies ought to be recognized and as I have promised in the past, I shall continue to play my part in making these volumes of essays available to the students of Iranian studies.

A. K. Jabbari,  
Publisher

ciples themselves enmeshed in other criteria."<sup>3</sup> In Doug Robinson's *Translation and Taboo* I found other challenges to translation theory's relation to the practice of translation:

We think about translation in narrow, restrictive, conceptually confusing, and contradictory ways and find it difficult to break out of these ways and think about translation differently because we have been *programmed* to think about it through them; and our bodies resist any move beyond our programming and indicate their displeasure with our "deviant" or "rebellious" behavior with somatic anxiety signals, a tightness in the throat or chest, a racing pulse, etc.<sup>4</sup>

Robinson's call to break out of the established modes of thinking about the work of the translator brought me up against Modarressi's own approach to translating his works, articulated in his concept of "writing with an accent," which favored emphasizing the foreign or defamiliarizing English, and, as I will explore later, was rooted in his own somatic and psychological experience of Persian. Working from an unpublished manuscript, since Modarressi had not had time to edit and refine the Persian original for publication,<sup>5</sup> drew me deeper into the types of anxieties Robinson highlights and I could not successfully repress. I realized that I had to grapple with my relationship not only to how I would translate from Persian into English but also how to relate Modarressi's notion of "writing with an accent" to the Persian original. To borrow from M. R. Ghanooonparvar, I had to translate the novel into English to understand it in Persian.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> George Lang, "La Belle *Altérité*: Towards a Dialogical Paradigm in Translation Theory, Canadian Review of Comparative Literature March/June 1992: 239.

<sup>4</sup> Douglas Robinson, *Translation and Taboo* (DeKalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois U P, 1996), XI-XII.

<sup>5</sup> Ironically the Persian original was published two years after the translation.

<sup>6</sup> In his *Translating the Garden* (Austin: U of Texas P, 2001), Ghanooonparvar writes: "[...] I must confess that occasionally there have been Persian texts I have had to translate into English in order to comprehend them" (6). In this instance, Ghanooonparvar addresses his experience of Persian texts which are inaccessible because of particular uses of language. In my case, the comprehension moved beyond the

## Translating Taghi Modarressi's *Writing with an Accent*

Nasrin Rahimiéh

My experience of translating the late Taghi Modarressi's last novel, *Azraye khatvat neshim*<sup>1</sup> (The Virgin of Solitude<sup>2</sup>), which he completed before succumbing to chronic lymphoma in April 1997, brought me face to face with many issues literary translators encounter, among them the choice between emphasizing the "foreign" or producing a text more palatable for the target audience of the translation. When Modarressi's wife, Anne Tyler, commissioned me to translate his last novel, I believed it important to consult theories of translation and reacquaint myself with the ways in which translators' choices have been discussed among theoreticians of translation studies. In my review of these paradigms I discovered an ambiguity that would be later confirmed in the work of translating Modarressi's novel and was identified by George Lang: "Translators have always had to decide whether to sublimate or to accentuate the otherness of SL [source language], however beholden they may have been to the principal criterion applied to translations, *felicitas*. Alterity and fidelity are in fact not antonyms; instead, they represent two reconcilable hermeneutic prin-

<sup>1</sup> Taghi Modarressi, *Azraye khatvatneshim* (Bethesda, Maryland: IBEX, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Taghi Modarressi, *The Virgin of Solitude*, trans. Nasrin Rahimiéh (Syracuse: Syracuse U P), 2008.

Prior to working on this translation I had understood what Modarressi called writing with an accent only in connection with his experience of the English language. However, translating and editing Modarressi's novel made me grasp other dimensions of this concept rooted in the linguistic and cultural displacement he experienced vis-à-vis his mother tongue as well as English. These experiences were also linked to an existential alienation, manifest in all of Modarressi's literary works, not confined to his relationship to language and communication.

Modarressi's ties to Persian language and literature remained of paramount importance to him long after he had settled in the United States as a child psychiatrist and had shifted his focus away from writing novels. When Modarressi returned to writing after a long hiatus he wrote novels in Persian and subsequently translated them into English. The position he occupied as an insider and outsider in relation to his native Persian and his adopted English placed him in a constant movement between "deterritorialization" and "reterritorialization" of Persian and English, creating a type of "minor literature" in the sense defined by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari: "A minor literature doesn't come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language."<sup>7</sup> By reflecting on my work as translator and editor of Modarressi's novel I would like to illustrate how Modarressi became "a nomad and an immigrant and a gypsy in relation to [his] own language."<sup>8</sup> I will also highlight the connections I deciphered between Modarressi's nomadic relationship to language and his work as a child psychiatrist in the area of pre-verbal communication. Thinking beyond the programmed and the paradigmatic I could shuttle between the Persian and the English as I realized that I was engaged in a dual task of "translating" both the Persian and the English for different communities of readers. Anne Tyler's involvement in this process, her insights into the editing of the original, and our exchanges about the novel and its many characters enabled me to

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apparent meaning of plot, characters and action of the novel and encompassed Modarressi's broader relationship to language and communication.

<sup>7</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan, *Theory and History of Literature*, 30 (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1986), 16.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

release myself from the straitjacket of having to conform to a narrow method. When I listened to Anne read aloud from my translation I could hear something beyond the specific choice of words and phrases which reminded me of Modarressi's own attentiveness to what exceeded the verbal. As I ruminated on Modarressi's works in fiction and psychiatry I was reminded of the epigraph he had chosen for his third novel, *The Book of Absent People*. Citing verses from the twelfth-century mystical tale by Farid al-din Attar, *Conference of the Birds*, Modarressi invokes a journey necessitating the acquisition of a new mode of communication:

Oh, may your journey to the border of Sheba be happy.  
May your speaking the language of birds with Solomon be happy.  
Hold back the demon in chains and in prison  
So you will be the keeper of the secret like Solomon.<sup>9</sup>

The demon I had to hold back in my immersion in Modarressi's work was to step outside the boundaries of the manuscript I was translating to better grasp the many accents, registers, and layers in his life and work. I pored over letters he had written to me, remembered telephone conversations we had had, and anecdotes he had shared with me.

The obliqueness of Modarressi's relationship to Persian and English is captured in a story I heard him tell on the occasion of my last visit with him at his home in February 1997. One evening during that visit, Taghi Modarressi, Anne Tyler, and I had been talking about Modarressi having continued to write his fiction in Persian rather than experimenting with English. He maintained on this occasion, as he had done in the past, that there was no other language in which he could write fiction. In his typical self-deprecating manner he repeated that he could barely handle his mother tongue, Persian, let alone English as his own medium of literary expression. He made fun of his own occasional slips in Persian, which reminded him of Iranian compatriots who after a short period of stay in North America or Europe returned to Iran and appeared to have forgotten much of their

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<sup>9</sup> Modarressi, *The Book of Absent People* (New York: Doubleday, 1986), np.

native tongue. The Modarressi recalled an anecdote from a visit to Iran they made together and their encounter with an Iranian who had lost his grip on Persian after a recent move to the US. The anecdote I heard that night recalled a gathering in Tehran the Modarressis had attended years earlier.

In the course of a conversation in Tehran, a recent returnee from the US struggled to remember the Persian word, *khoroos*, rooster. After many attempts at coming up with the right Persian word, the man found an ingenious solution: he turned to his fellow Iranians and said, I am looking for the Persian word for the hen's husband. "What do we call him in Persian?" he asked.

This anecdote had particular resonances for Modarressi. On one level, it captures the affectations of the westernized Iranians who have become a type in modern Persian literature. Hasan Moghadam's 1922 comic play *Ja'far Kahn az farang amadeh* (Ja'far Khan is Back from Europe) offers up an amusing example of an Iranian character whose spoken Persian is peppered with foreign words that have apparently dislodged his native Persian. This is how Ja'far Khan speaks when he first appears on stage: "Oh, *erfin* we made it. But what a trip! But what dust and germs we inhaled! (Dusting off his shoes and hat, he places his hat on the table and turns to his puppy) *Ici, Carotte!*"<sup>10</sup> We find the same type in Mohammad Ali Jamalzadeh's famous short story, "Persian is Sugar."<sup>11</sup> Like his literary predecessors, Modarressi viewed the sudden loss of language on the part of Iranians who traveled to the West as puzzling and laughed it off as a sign of a condition well recognized in modern Persian as

<sup>10</sup> Hasan Moghadam, *J'afar kham az farang amadeh*, ed. Hasan Javadi, Middle Eastern Series 6 (Piedmont, CA: Jahan, 1984), 8-9.

<sup>11</sup> Mohammad Ali Jamalzadeh, "Persian is Sugar," in *Once Upon A Time*, trans. Heshmat Moayyad and Paul Sprachman (New York: Bibliotheca Persica, 1985, 31-43). The story is about a return journey an Iranian makes from Europe to his native Iran. Upon his arrival, he is thrown into jail along with two other patriots. They are joined by a local man whose attempt to communicate with his cellmates leave him frustrated. One of the cellmates speaks a Persian interspersed with French words, while another cellmate speaks a Persian heavily inflected with Arabic, making it impossible for the local to understand them. In contrast, the narrator addresses the confused man in Persian, providing him with solace and a sense of shared linguistic and national community.

*gharbzadegi*.<sup>12</sup> But there was another layer of associations manifest in Modarressi's discussion of his own Persian, which I understood better in the process of translating *The Virgin of Solitude* and in my own experience of my mother's Alzheimer's. The loss of language, which Modarressi signaled in his recitation of the anecdote and is made evident in the Persian text of his last novel, is not an affected or conscious self-representation as a Westernized Iranian, but rather is an inevitable outcome of using a language in isolation away from the native context. This process is more gradual and results in transformations associated with slippages, mistakes, and losses.

Beyond the immigrant's relationship to his mother tongue I had sensed something of Modarressi's anxiety about how his illness or perhaps age and distance had affected his language. In my denial of any vulnerability on Modarressi's part, I had dismissed any possibility that he had more than a "perfect" command of Persian and focused instead on the culturally-specific affectations I could handle through humor. Recently what I had successfully brushed aside in that last encounter with Modarressi has been brought home to me in the erosion of language my mother is experiencing because of early Alzheimer's. As I observe my mother's search for words she can no longer recall but describes in circuitous ways I have become conscious of a different imperative to communicate when familiar words and names fade away and are replaced by approximations. It no longer surprises me to hear my mother ask me what we call an object or an individual she cannot name. This need to find "translations" is by no means limited to the experience of crossing from one language into another and is part and parcel of the process of communication. My mother's gradual loss of language has forced me to think about other layers of estrangement and loss in the anecdote Modarressi told me and evident in his literary works. Modarressi's trajectory as a writer and his decision to study psychiatry illuminates his preoccupation with the alienation of the human subject from the self, the community, and by extension language and culture.

<sup>12</sup> The term was first coined by Ahmad Fardid and it gained wide currency through the writer Jalal Al-e Ahmad's treatise of the same title in which he critiques Iran's cultural, political, and economic dependence on the West. He describes this dependency in terms of a disease, translated into English as *westitis*, *westistrukeness*, or *occidentosis*.

Modarressi made his literary debut with the publication of his first novel, *Yakolia and Her Loneliness*, in 1955. He completed its writing within three months while he was a medical student at University of Tehran and had taken a small position at a bank to support himself during his studies. A newly established publishing house, Nil, published the novel for which was awarded *Sokhan* Magazine's literary prize that same year. Modarressi left Iran in 1959 to continue his studies in medicine, specializing in child psychiatry and becoming a professor at the University of Maryland. Interestingly, Modarressi's passion had been for literature which he had hoped to study at university. However "when it came time to enter university, he failed competitive exams in literature but passed the test for medical school and soon found himself attracted to psychiatry. 'I felt there was a real connection between psychiatry and writing.'"<sup>13</sup> The link between writing and psychiatry was muted during the years Modarressi devoted to settling into his new life and profession. The only significant literary work he published during that time was *Sharif Jan*, *Sharif Jan* (1961), a novel about the life of a traditional landowning family in a small town. It was not until after the 1979 revolution and the mass migration of Iranians to the US that Modarressi found himself drawn back to writing fiction. He resumed writing novels in Persian and published *Ketab-e adamha-ye ghayeb* (*The book of Absent People*), and *Adabe-ziyart* (*The Pilgrim's Rules of Etiquette*), in 1986 and 1989. Both novels appeared almost simultaneously in Iran and the US. The Persian originals were published in Iran, and his English translations of them appeared in the US.

The concepts of estrangement and alienation are clearly signaled in the title of four of Modarressi's five novels: From the "loneliness" of the first novel to the "absent people" of the second novel, to the "pilgrim's" encounters with the unfamiliar and the unknown, and the "solitude" of the last novel the titles give us a sense of what is to come. The existential condition explored in all of Modarressi's works is nowhere more sharply delineated than in his first novel. *Yakolia and Her Loneliness* draws on biblical themes and tells the story of the protagonist Yakolia's expulsion from Jerusalem at the hands of her father, the king of

<sup>13</sup> Alice Steinbach, "The Secret Life of Babies," *The Baltimore Sun* 10 November 1996, 4J.

Jerusalem. The father is fearful that the daughter's love for a shepherd will adversely affect others and erode their singular devotion to the worship of God. During her wanderings in the desert and through her encounter with a benevolent Satan, Yakolia discovers that her own passion is motivated by a desire to escape the loneliness divinely ordained as the lot of all human beings.

The predetermined isolation and loneliness explored in *Yakolia and Her Loneliness* is evident in Modarressi's subsequent novels. Modarressi also picks up the theme of estrangement in his 1990 essay, "Writing with an Accent." Speaking about a return journey to the US after a visit he had made to Iran, he writes:

On the plane returning from Iran to the U.S., a strange idea kept occurring to me. I thought that most immigrants, regardless of the familial, social, or political circumstances causing their exile, have been cultural refugees all their lives. They leave because they feel like outsiders. Perhaps it is their personal language that can build a bridge between what is familiar and what is strange. They may then find it possible to generate new and revealing paradoxes. Here we have our juxtapositions and our transformation—the graceful and the awkward, the beautiful and the ugly, sitting side by side in a perpetual metamorphosis of one into the other. It is like the Hunchback of Notre Dame trying to be Prince Charming for strangers.<sup>14</sup>

The sense of predetermination with which Modarressi infuses the experience of the immigrant evokes a condition that dominates his fiction and filters into his use of language. The personal language he attributes to immigrants was particularly central to how his ties to Persian and writing were reanimated.

The path Modarressi traveled from his own encounter with English when he first left Iran or the US was initially marked by a language of gestures rather than words. He writes about his initial experiences:

If I wanted to say something, I compared Persian and English words, as dictionaries do. Persian and Eng-

<sup>14</sup> Taghi Modarressi, "Writing with an Accent" *Chameteh* (1992), 9.



ish words arranged themselves in two parallel lines like dancers in a nineteenth century ballroom, bowing to each other and trying to find a mate. I had not yet mastered a linguistic consciousness that I could consider my own. I knew that if I were to comprehend the new culture, it would not be enough to rely on memorized phrases.

It was almost two decades before I managed to resurface from the avalanche of these new experiences. During this period, most of my time was spent on my professional training and on familiarizing myself with my new home. But internally I was silent and I felt no urge to write.<sup>15</sup>

This obsession with finding the perfect partners, with arriving at an elegant linguistic encounter between two languages, betrays a desire for a wholeness and tidy translatability reminiscent of Yakolia's quest for a union that would overcome the inescapable human isolation. In opposition to the perfect pairing of words Modarressi first sought in dictionaries, his work as a child psychiatrist immersed him in a world free from words but rife with the possibility of communication. When he was asked in an interview how he could treat children who do not yet speak, he responded: "But babies can talk [...] In fact, babies are experts in communication... The language of babies is feelings. And babies are able to create or reflect feelings around them. By action, by a smile, by posture, by gesture, they communicate."<sup>16</sup> The language of feelings and gestures provides a means of communication, but as Modarressi points out in the same interview, it relies on approximation, vagueness, and guesswork. Language might well be part of the process of communication between adults and pre-verbal children, but their centrality is less evident. The internal silence Modarressi felt during this time is perhaps linked to the "avalanche" of experiences with non-verbal communication. Interestingly Modarressi does not suggest that his work as a psychiatrist prevented him from having access to Persian. Instead he speaks of a distance vis-à-vis writing in Persian.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>16</sup> Alice Steinbach, 4J.

<sup>17</sup> Modarressi's experience is in sharp contrast to other immigrant writers like Gerda Lerner who speaks about her loss of her mother tongue

What facilitated Modarressi's return to writing fiction was the arrival of the wave of Iranian immigrants and refugees in the wake of the 1979 revolution. It was the reinsertion of Persian, or more accurately the tonalities and affects surrounding the use of Persian that revived his passion for writing:

I found myself sitting once again with my friends, but this time we were not in Tehran. We were in Washington or Los Angeles. Once again, I was the happy captive audience to the fantasies of Iranian social theorists, with their spicy interpretations of daily events in Tehran, Paris, Washington, the Pentagon, even the Oval Office. I was delightfully engulfed in rumors. [...] The excitement was almost unbearable. My feelings were so intense that I began to wake up every morning between four and five a.m., at which time I would drive to my office and work on a story that was actually an invented memoir.<sup>18</sup>

The return to a time that is beyond his own memory highlights the extent to which being immersed in Persian reconnected Modarressi to writing. Not surprisingly Modarressi couples his return to writing with the discovery of what he calls a "new internal voice":

as a result of her emigration from Nazi Germany to the US: "The Nazis robbed me of my mother tongue, but the rest of the separation, of the violent severing of culture, was my own choice. My writing, my intense drive to become an 'American writer' had pushed me into leaving the language of my childhood behind, never counting the cost. Through my writing, I had found the way back, but now the cost seems enormous. The return of the mother tongue has brought some healing of the other losses, but memory is different now. Before, what was lost sank into a deep hole of oblivion—one covered it up and built anew forgetting the cost. Now memory includes what was lost and what it cost and what might have been had I been able to be a writer in my own language. Healing the split between feeling and thought, between the conscious learned faculties and the rich vibrations of the unconscious, I might have 'tapped my way along the guiding rope of language' and found a richer, more poetic form for what I had to say. In translation, one becomes a trickster, too clever by far and too concerned with mastery." Gerda Lerner, "Living in Translation," in *Switching Languages: Translingual Writers Reflect on Their Craft*, ed. Steven G. Kellman (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2003), 286-87.

<sup>18</sup> Modarressi, "Writing with an Accent", 8.

I discovered it, unexpectedly, while listening to the sound of Persian in the streets of Los Angeles and Washington. It was the sound of Iranian refugees, bargaining in American shopping malls. My new voice did not have any content. It was more like rhythmic humming, perhaps a ghost of a Persian accent. It was like the humming we do when we are intrigued by an idea. At times, my mind was silent and the writing came to an unexpected halt. Then I hummed with my internal voice. That melodious Persian sound could sometimes throw light on forgotten scenes, bringing them out of total darkness and allowing me to invent memories of a time when I wasn't even born.<sup>19</sup>

The absence of "content" in this new internal voice and the "humming" quality of it suggest an affective dimension which resonates with his work on pre-verbal communication. It is possible that Modarressi's acute sensitivity to cadences and tones recreated for him an imagined and imaginative space in Persian.

In addition to drawing Modarressi back to writing fiction in Persian, his "internal voice" enabled him to create unique translations of his own novels. His approach was marked by relying on literal translations rather than finding equivalent idiomatic expressions in English. He peppered his English translations of his novels with phrases such as "nobody chopped any chives for him,"<sup>20</sup> "My Khan Papa Doctor was so angry that if you'd stuck him with a knife he wouldn't have bled,"<sup>21</sup> "In Paris, if you hit any dog on the head a hundred painters fall off, big and little, and the Master Assar wouldn't be able to keep up with the dust of a one of them,"<sup>22</sup> or "If the news reaches the mosque, then you'll have to bring an ass to carry all the rumors."<sup>23</sup> When confronted with the proliferation of such literal translations of Persian expressions, the reader unfamiliar with Persian would not necessarily be at a loss for meaning. The context helps the reader decipher a general sense of what is implied. More impor-

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 8-9.

<sup>20</sup> *The Pilgrim's Rules of Etiquette* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 17.

<sup>21</sup> *The Book of Absent People*, 19.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>23</sup> *The Pilgrim's Rules of Etiquette*, 96.

tant is the way in which the English language is made strange or put to the service of a "minor literature" whose "first characteristic [...] is that in it language is affected with a high coefficient of deterritorialization."<sup>24</sup> The point is not to fuse English and Persian or to bring them closer to one another, but rather to foreground the limits of translatability. In his *Translating the Garden*, Ghanoonparvar conceptualizes this as "in practice every translation is inevitably a failure, with occasional moments of success."<sup>25</sup>

The trope of the near impossibility of complete cultural transplantation appears in Modarressi's penultimate novel, *The Pilgrim's Rules of Etiquette*, in the image of a quince-orange tree, a graft between a quince and an orange tree. Most Iranians associate the combination of quince and orange, or to be more precise lemon, with a drink made from syrup that amalgamates the quince and the lemon. The graft Modarressi includes in his novel is of his own making. In the process of bridging between Persian and English, between his cultural memories and conveying them to the readers of his English translation, two transformations can be seen taking place. The syrup made of the fruit of two trees, quince and lemon, becomes transmuted into a tree, and the lemon of the original Persian becomes displaced by orange. It would not be surprising to find a linguistic turn that would make the quince-orange syrup into the quince-orange tree in the mind of a transplanted writer and puts into sharp relief the very concept the Iranian protagonist of Modarressi's novel, Hadi Besharat, attempts to communicate to his American colleague:

"To be sure, there are common features between the Easterner and the Westerner, and in certain respects each benefit the other. But in the end their encounters remain barren. It's like the quince-orange tree, which is a graft between a quince and an orange tree, or the mule, which is the result of horse-and-donkey copulation. Of course each has some use. But they themselves are barren and fruitless."<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, 16.

<sup>25</sup> Ghanoonparvar, 2.

<sup>26</sup> *The Pilgrim's Rules of Etiquette*, 8.

Ironically Besharat is equally frustrated in his communication with his fellow Iranians and finds that an unfathomable gap has opened up between him and others. As his country sinks deeper into the chaos of revolution and war, he retreats into his academic study of angels and his primary interlocutor becomes an American colleague with whom he communicates through letters.

For Modarressi, the metaphor of the barren encounter between East and West extended to his own creativity being limited to his mother tongue and the psychic and cultural resonances associated with it. Interestingly in "Writing with an Accent," the barrenness is replaced with "transformation," and "paradox" and the juxtaposition of the graceful and the awkward. Something of the encounter is communicated, but the emphasis is not so much on the content or substance but rather the movement that leads from one linguistic and cultural realm into another and back. To borrow from Deleuze and Guattari: "The problem is not that of being free but of finding a way out, or even a way in, another side, a hallway, an adjacency."<sup>27</sup>

In *The Virgin of Solitude* the search for the way out takes center stage and makes the young protagonist subject to irresistible movement through space and time. The novel is about a young boy, Nuri, who along with his sister moves into his grandparents' house at the age of twelve after his father is killed in a car accident and his mother moves to New York. It is Nuri's life in the Dezashebi house we follow in the novel. Nuri's grandfather is from old aristocracy who has worked his way into the Pahlavi establishment by becoming a Senator. For the young Nuri, his Austrian grandmother is a source of immense mystery. After many years of living in Iran and speaking Persian, even the closest members of the family call her Madame. This is a sign of respect, but it becomes a perennial reminder of her being different. Nuri wants to know more about his grandmother and avails himself of every possible opportunity to steal into her clothing storage room. What he finds there are remnants of Madame's life in Vienna, her past as a cabaret singer. Nuri is too young to put together a picture of his grandmother's youth. Also the Persian Madame has become makes it impossible to think of her as anything but Madame. She speaks a very formal, albeit ac-

<sup>27</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, 7-8.

cented Persian: "She had learned from books to refer to herself as 'your humble servant' and to others as 'Your Honor' or 'Your Excellency.' Even in ordinary speech, she used the old bureaucratic style."<sup>28</sup> The reams of proverbs and verses she has memorized she casually throws into conversation, making it difficult for Nuri to understand and know her.

As Nuri grows older he develops a fondness for Madame's bizarre Persian and enters into a different relationship with her. Toward the end of the novel, when Madame becomes ill, she begins to lose control of her Persian:

She reached out to hug Nuri, but stumbled. "I am glad you came, my dear. Whenever you catch a fish out of water it is fresh. Did I say it right? Please correct me, if I made a mistake. When you catch a fish, what do you do with it?" Nuri did not answer. Madame continued, "My knowledge of Persian is shrinking by the day. But don't worry. Thanks to selfless and generous friends I'll learn it again." She spoke hurriedly, "How funny that I have forgotten Persian sayings and poems."<sup>29</sup>

Madame clings desperately to her knowledge of Persian and to prove her complete commitment to her new home, she converts to Islam. This conversion, like the graft between a quince and an orange, does not rescue her from an isolation that has become part of the fabric of her being. Her accented and artificial Persian attest to this impermeable alterity.

Replicating the flavor of Madame's Persian in my English translation was not as complicated as the choices I had to make when I was faced with puzzling inconsistencies in the language of the narrator or characters who are represented as native speakers of Persian of the era just before the 1979 revolution. I will illustrate this point by way of an example.

This case is linked to an expression in Persian I recalled differently from what I encountered in the Persian manuscript of the novel. The expression refers to a character collapsing onto a chair, or falling apart. I had remembered that in Persian the saying was to fall apart like plum jam, plum being a fruit that would

<sup>28</sup> *The Virgin of Solitude*, 13.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 341.

typically not retain its full shape when it is cooked. But in the novel, the expression was rendered as "falling apart like sour cherry jam," (*morabbaye albatu*). The similarities between the words for plum and sour cherry in Persian, *alu* and *albatu*, could well explain the replacement of one word with another. When dealing with these types of issues in the course of translating Modarressi's novel, I was reminded of how central the sounds of Persian were to his rediscovery of a voice in Persian. If this sudden immersion in Persian provided Modarressi with the impetus to hear an internal voice in Persian, it also was a voice that echoed distance and dislocation. Not surprisingly the distance manifests itself in words getting transposed, dates becoming blurred, or customs being forgotten. Like the passage Hadi Besharat stumbles on in book, Modarressi's Persian reveals the limits of the native speaker's knowledge and mastery of his own language: "It is clear to the knowledgeable that each language possesses secrets, mysteries and special complexities not apparent even to those who speak it..."<sup>30</sup> Modarressi's relationship to English was marked by a different level of impenetrability. Whether he wrote in Persian or translated his own writing into English, he remained an outsider and occasionally had to pause and wonder what the word was for a hen's husband. Communicating these levels of deterritorialization to the readers of his novels, be it in Persian or in English, Modarressi invites us to ponder an experience not unlike that invoked in the verses by Mowlana Jalal al-din Rumi recalled in *The Pilgrim's Rules of Etiquette*:

With the next fit, I'll die from being human.  
I'll grow angel wings and feathers.  
Once again, I'll soar above the angels  
And I'll become that which is beyond imagining...<sup>31</sup>

As reader, editor, and translator of *Azraye khalvat neshin*, I could not have imagined the transformative potential of these experiences. Translating the novel became the work of grieving and coming to terms with my loss. And the translation helped me

<sup>30</sup>*The Pilgrim's Rules of Etiquette*, 139.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, 5.

grasp how all forms of communication entail translation and an accompanying sense of disjuncture and loss.

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