

## **Metaphors and Translation**

### Some Notes on the Description of Pain in a Twelfth Century Persian Poem

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**Abstract** The question of the translation of the figures of speech is a debated and complex field of studies. In the present work, after a brief introduction, I propose to ponder on the translation of some figures of speech (metaphor, comparison and hyperbole) from Persian into Italian, taking as a source and representative text a passage from the poem *Khosrow o Širin* by Neẓāmi Ganjavi (12th century). This is a text of extraordinary imaginative and creative power, which represents a hard challenge for a translator, especially at a rhetoric level. Through the analysis of some verses that describe the pain of Princess Širin, I will try to verify methods, possibilities, strategies and defeats for their translation into Italian.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Manifesting Pain. – 3 Conclusions.

**Keywords** Classical Persian poetry. Figurative language. Metaphors. Translation. Sadness.

## **1 Introduction**

Questions concerning translation appear to me as questions that, first of all, touch on the motivation and meaning given to the work, especially when translating texts composed centuries ago. This is an a priori inquiry, and without it a translator is like a mariner without a compass. Once the translator has clarified his motivation and the meaning he attributes to a translation project, he places himself in an intellectual position that has a decisive influence on the choices he makes. This position, I believe, has much greater impact than theoretical choices or ideal (or ideological) approaches which claim to offer a priori technical solutions and/or methodological guidance. Clear evidence of this distance between ideal and action lies in numerous studies on translation (and especially on the translation of metaphors, comparison and hyperbole which mainly interests us here), where the outcome of published works is analysed, and choices taken by translators are evaluated and classified on the basis of various theories, only rarely raising hypotheses which are alternative to

what is being described.<sup>1</sup> Critical work is of course always a posteriori, and tends to describe and classify choices made by translators, placing them in a theoretical framework that is the one adopted by the scholar who is writing. On the other hand, there exist countless scientific contributions concerning the theory and practice of translating figures of speech, which profoundly explore the linguistic and cognitive structures underlying the construction of figurative language;<sup>2</sup> these works intend to provide the translator with the foundations for theoretical considerations that he/she can then apply to the act of translating.<sup>3</sup> As a whole, therefore, one may say that both the critical approach – a posteriori and tied to the result of the translation – and the theoretical approach – a priori and tied to the process – certainly provide tools for reflection and stimulate the translator’s awareness, but they do not represent a concrete possibility of guiding the translator’s work or defining the outcome in suitable terms (that is, not only concerning ‘how’ but also ‘why’ certain choices may be proposed).<sup>4</sup> This is not only because, obviously, the linguistic and cultural context represented by a literary work is always new and different, and would therefore call for *ad hoc* considerations rather than generalisations, but also because the motivation and meaning of the act of translating that guide the translator remain, in most cases, a territory which no theoretical approach is able to explore.<sup>5</sup> Concerning the theoretical approach, one

1 Staying strictly within the limits of Persian literature, one can mention as an example: Khosroshahi, Sadighi 2017; Ordudari 2008; Sedighi 2014, 205-14; Behnamnia 2016, 199-206; Panahbar 2016, 49-63; Mohaghegh, Dabaghi 2013, 275-82.

2 To mention only one recent collection of essays where the issue has been dealt with in an ample and significant manner, from both a theoretical and practical point of view, see Miller, Monti 2014.

3 A vast array of reference material on this topic exists. For example, see articles by Kovceses, Steen, Arduini and Shuttleworth in the volume Miller, Monti 2014, all dedicated to the translation of metaphors; and see also Mandelblit 1995, 482-95; Maalej 2008, 60-81; Safarnejad 2014, 107-18; Jaber 2008, 195-210; Piccioni 2013, 354-62; Burmakova, Marugina 2014, 527-33; Al-Hasnawi 2007.

4 This observation fits in with the fundamentals of translation studies, as Nergaard (1995, 13) says in her “Introduction” to *Teorie contemporanee della traduzione*, remembering that Holmes (1988, 66-80), in his article “The Name and Nature of Translation”, had been the first to propose “Translation Studies” as the most appropriate definition for a discipline with two goals: the first, that of describing the phenomenon of translation according to personal experience (descriptive translation studies); the second, that of laying down general principles able to explain such phenomena (theoretical translation studies). Bassnett (1980) too, after having reviewed the history of the evolution of translation theory, from the Romans to the present day, offers an analysis of specific problems associated with literary translation (of poetry, prose and theatre), showing how translation theory and comparative analysis can also be useful for practical purposes.

5 As an example, see the interesting observations, based on actual examples, in Marchesini 2017, 45-69.

must also take into account a diachronic aspect: ideas about translation are going through constant change, and are powerfully influenced by social and cultural change, so that nineteenth century axioms, though they can provide us with valid material for discussion,<sup>6</sup> are still remote from a vision arising in the globalised society of the 21st century. Finally (and this is another slippery *coté* of the discussion which does not always receive the attention it deserves), it seems inappropriate and even misleading to try to level out on a hypothetical standard the way the translated text is received by the reader; this too in fact is an important variable to be taken into account, and an unknown factor that in any case limits the planning of any general solution decided on beforehand.<sup>7</sup>

Taking all these questions together, those who dedicate themselves to translating poetry start at an even greater disadvantage, as they find themselves facing an endless panorama of theoretical dissertations on the function, value and limits (even in terms of legitimacy) of such a task.<sup>8</sup> Even more complex and critical is the position of the translator, when the text is not only poetry, but belongs to a world which is totally other, not only in time and space, but also because of the culture and civilisation it expresses. I refer actually to classical Persian literature, which is my field of competence and the terrain where I shall try to develop the considerations that follow. Despite the serious and controversial points of difficulty which an ancient poetic text presents, there is no lack of examples of people still able to give translation of classical texts the value of a fundamental contribution to knowledge of the literary heritage of another culture.<sup>9</sup> To accept the challenge posed by translation, in view of the solidity and richness of analyses and criticisms by linguists and specialists in Translation

6 One need only think, for example, of the many references, also in contemporary studies, to the fundamental work by Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Ueber die verschiedenen Methoden des Uebersetzens*, Berlin 1813, which is still today acknowledged as a milestone and source of inspiration for reflection on the main general issues involved in translation (Seruya, Justo 2016).

7 Reception of a text is in fact closely connected to the cultural background and to the competence on poetry of the reader and it is of course impossible to work on a translation imagining a standard reader, even though in practice, throughout the process, whether consciously or not, one never ceases doing so.

8 For Persian poetry, the main text of reference that is extremely sceptical of any possibility of translating poetry is certainly Šafi'i Kadkani (2001), the axioms of which have been taken up and further developed by Fani (2014) and more extensively discussed by Hillmann (2018, 39-90).

9 A case worthy of note in this sense is the recent anthology (Zipoli 2016) which - alongside a rich introduction and many explanatory notes - collects the translation of a large and significant body of obscene Persian poetry, from the 10th to the 20th centuries. This is the result of careful philological work on texts (many difficult to find and complicated to interpret) which for the first time makes available to the Italian reader, in an elegant and effective manner, a collection of poems of obscene inspiration from the classical Persian tradition, true masterpieces of narrative and stylistic perfection.

Studies, which at times seem to lead to an insurmountable impasse, means to continue a profitable dialogue on the theme.

Translation of a classical poetic text as a whole takes the shape of an investigation, philological and interpretative, which starts from the certainty that in other literature there is something to listen to, understand and transmit, through a constant quest for balance between the original text and final rewriting.<sup>10</sup> The basis of such a balance seems to me to have been described perfectly by J. Berger in these words:

Because true translation is not a binary affair between two languages but a triangular affair. The third point of the triangle being what lay behind the words of the original text before it was written. True translation demands a return to the pre-verbal. We read and reread the words of the original text in order to penetrate through them, to reach the vision or experience which prompted them. We then gather up what we have found there and take this quivering almost wordless 'thing' and place it behind the language into which it needs to be translated. And now the principal task is to persuade the host language to take in and welcome the 'thing' which is waiting to be articulated. (2016, 7-8)<sup>11</sup>

We shall therefore keep as our point of reference this 'triangle', in order to describe below some strategies adopted when translating the figures present in a series of illustrative verses.

## 2 Manifesting Pain

In recent years, I dealt with the translation of a famous twelfth-century poem, *Khosrow o Širin* by Neẓāmi Ganjavi (1141-1209),<sup>12</sup> a text that began and became the founding model of the genre of the Persian romantic poem, a work that became the object of countless imitations in following centu-

<sup>10</sup> Concerning the concept of translation as rewriting, see the fundamental article by Lefevere (1985, 215-43), which first introduced the concept and term of rewriting, referring to those processes, including translation, by which an original text is reinterpreted, altered or manipulated. According to this theory, the criteria of rewriting are dictated by the ideology of the translator (of which the translator himself may well be unaware) and by the dominant poetics of the time.

<sup>11</sup> These words by John Berger bring to mind, in a more modern fashion, Walter Benjamin's idea that the true purpose of translation is to free the "pure language" enclosed in the text, that is what is hidden behind the words, what has not been made explicit by the original author, in other words, the secret essence, the ineffable, to reawaken the echo of the original (Benjamin 1962, 39-52).

<sup>12</sup> Neẓāmi 2017.

ries and has met with unparalleled fortune in the context of Persian culture right until our times.<sup>13</sup> It is a very complex text, also weighed upon by a philological tradition that has never been completely solved. It was composed by an illustrious twelfth-century poet, a Ḥakim (scholar) who poured into the poem much of the science and wisdom he possessed, besides his extraordinary human sensitivity and his vision of Life and Man. The text covers a wide range of contents, going well beyond the plot of the story, being a 'Classic' of Persian literature,<sup>14</sup> with all the responsibility such a definition implies in view of a translation. Going back to the initial question of this contribution, and defining the motivation and sense I gave my work on *Khosrow o Širin*, in my turn I would use a 'figure', taking another look at the image of the mirror proposed by D.-H. Pageaux: translation is a mirror and the more polished it is, the better it will reflect the image of the original text (cf. Pageaux 2001, 50). What keeps the mirror polished is philological attention, patient interpretation, honest negotiation with the original, the attempt to recreate the intention of the text, what the text says or suggests in relation to the language in which it was expressed and the cultural context it was born in (Eco 2004).

An aspect of the work of translation that – through over six thousand verses – never ceased to manifest itself problematically, was how to render the rhetorical devices of the poem, especially the issue of translating figurative language, comparisons, metaphors and hyperboles.<sup>15</sup> The founding premise, not only theoretical but also empirical, is of course that the rhetorical system of a text is no mere ornament on top of the discourse, but

13 For the historical and literary context of this work, see Orsatti 2006; see also the introduction to the Italian translation in Neẓāmi 2017, XI-XXXIII.

14 There is no need to spend time speaking of the classic nature of Neẓāmi's work, one need only remember how even Italo Calvino, in his essay *Perché leggere i classici*, includes *Le Sette Principesse* (The Seven Princesses) translated by Alessandro Bausani (the only complete Italian translation of a text by Neẓāmi available at the time) among the works he lists and describes, commenting: "Accostarci ai capolavori della letteratura orientale per noi profani resta il più delle volte un'esperienza approssimativa, perché è tanto se attraverso le traduzioni e gli adattamenti ce ne arriva un lontano profumo, e sempre arduo risulta situare un'opera in un contesto che non conosciamo (Calvino 1991, 65). Cf. McLaughlin's translation: "Tackling masterpieces of Oriental literature is usually an unsatisfactory experience for those of us who are uninitiated, because it is so difficult to obtain even a distant glimmer of the original through the translations and adaptations; and it is always an arduous task situating a work in a context which we are not familiar with" (Calvino 1999, 56).

15 It is again Italo Calvino who, speaking of *The Seven Princesses*, wonderfully sums up the complexity of Neẓāmi's style: "il vertiginoso linguaggio figurato di Neẓāmi assorbe [varie tradizioni] nel suo crogiolo, e stende su ogni pagina una lamina dorata tempestata di metafore che s'incastonano le une nelle altre come pietre preziose d'uno sfarzoso monile" (Calvino 1991, 68). Cf. McLaughlin's translation: "Nezami's heady figurative language blends them [various traditions] all together in his creative melting pot, and he spreads over every page a gilded patina studded with metaphors which are embedded inside each other like precious gems in a dazzling necklace" (Calvino 1999, 58).

is its very consistence. If our thinking (and therefore also that of Neẓāmi) is structured not only according to a logical-empirical model, but also according to a model we might call rhetorical and which places figures at the forefront, these of course become one of the means by which a 'culture' is built, and even more so, a literary culture. Figurative language, in fact, allows one to give shape to knowledge of the world and make it readable and interpretable, blending the practical level with the abstract dimension and vice versa. Therefore, the figure is not only the 'cladding' of speech, it is also an indispensable tool of knowledge and as such cannot be thought of as an 'after' compared to *intellectio* and *inventio*, but as a 'during' (Eco 2004, 35-75). Using or creating a figure means building a way of representing the world that in another linguistic, cultural and conceptual system, can only be 'interpreted'. In view of such evidence, when translating the figures present in a text, we must take into account all the implications involved in such an operation.

The above holds true of course for any linguistic/literary system, but let us now consider some specific features of the cultural context in which the text on which we are basing our exemplification was produced.

Technically, when the poem *Khosrow o Širin* was composed, theoretical reflection on the use of figurative language in poetry was flourishing in the context of Arabic-Persian civilisation. Although we have no way of knowing whether, or to what extent, Neẓāmi was aware of contemporary or previous works on *balāghat* (that is on the science of eloquence in the widest sense) or on *bayān* (the science of figurative language), it is impossible to ignore the fact that the poet belonged to an extremely lively intellectual milieu that must certainly have heard an echo of the treatises on rhetoric by Muḥammad Raduyāni (1088-1113), by Rašidoddin Waṭwāt (d. 1182-3) and the enlightening linguistic analysis on metaphor by Abd al-Qahir Jurjāni (d. 1078).<sup>16</sup> Formalisation of the rhetorical system and considerations on the use and function of figures, in Neẓāmi's time, were already a mature stage in the Muslim world, and in the strictly Persian speaking world, this formalisation was based exclusively on poetry. In a very summary fashion, one can say that in compliance with the idea of *adab*, that is with a literary production, in the wider sense of the term, which had the purpose of teaching and education, the aesthetics of Persian poetry considered use of figures an indispensable device for effective communication of discourse, and only secondarily, for its embellishment. Especially, the science of *bayān* (figurative language), within the wide context of rhetoric, codified the use of comparison and metaphor (the outstanding figures of this science) as means of 'affirmation, exposition, explanation', in other words as an indispensable support for clarity and

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16 Rāduyāni 1949; Rašid-al-Din Waṭwāt 1929; Abd al-Qahir Jurjāni 1954.

comprehension of the message.<sup>17</sup> Figurative language, ultimately, had the purpose of making a text (and especially a poetic text) more perspicuous, clearer, more eloquent and comprehensible. We are dealing with a vision of the poetic text where figure is no longer an ornament, a surplus added to the degree zero of communication, not a deviation from the norm, but a tool to make communication more effective. With reference to medieval Persian texts, such as the poem *Khosrow o Širin*, we find ourselves dealing therefore with practice of poetry which charges figures of speech, and their aesthetic value, with a didactic and pragmatic purpose. In this sense, the position of the translator is subject to strong constraints: this perspective must be taken into account when making basic choices (and later, more specific ones), that is giving due importance to the reason why a certain figure is to be found in a certain part of the text.

Nezāmi's power of imagination in building figures (especially metaphors, similitudes and hyperboles) draws of course on his conceptual map and on his cultural background, but is also a pure act of creation, and at the same time an iteration between these three levels.<sup>18</sup> The description of pain arising from separation from the beloved is one of the themes where Nezāmi's art finds its highest expression.<sup>19</sup> Rendering his text is in very many cases problematic: the semantic areas involved by the construction of images are partly unfamiliar to the Italian reader, for whom the repertoire of classical metaphors, which are the starting point for new expressive developments, is in itself something new, and requires an imaginative effort by itself; beyond this, what appears most difficult to render is the intensity evoked by his metaphors, an intensity which expresses itself through hyperboles. This intensity is at some points expressed using images that are so powerful as to verge on the grotesque, for an Italian reader. This aspect of the great poet of Ganja poses an especially arduous challenge to a translator: it is question of producing a target text that decentralises the reader's glance

17 See article "Bayān" in *Encyclopaedia of Islam* 3rd ed. (Meneghini 2017) and in *Encyclopedia Iranica* (De Bruijn 1988).

18 It was always Italo Calvino who noticed that: "Le finiture di questo arazzo verbale sono così lussureggianti che i nostri paralleli con le letterature occidentali, al di là delle analogie, delle tematiche medievali, e attraversando la pienezza fantastica del Rinascimento di Ariosto e Shakespeare, vanno naturalmente al barocco più carico; [...] proliferazione di metafore che ricopre fittamente il racconto di Nezāmi sviluppando un germoglio di racconto in ogni immagine" (Calvino 1991, 69). Cf. McLaughlin's translation: "The decoration of this verbal tapestry are so luxuriant that any parallels we might find in Western literature (beyond the analogies of medieval thematics and the wealth of fantasy in Renaissance works by Shakespeare and Ariosto) would naturally be with works of heaviest baroque;... the proliferation of metaphors which encrust Nezami's tale and germinate a hint of narrative in every single image" (Calvino 1999, 58-9).

19 This theme is present in many parts of the text, but especially in two other chapters of extraordinary density, chapters 44 and 50.

from his usual context of signified/signifier, 'introducing' him/her into the conceptual domains proposed by Neẓāmi, by means of choices that highlight in an acceptable<sup>20</sup> manner the authenticity, art and communicative efficacy of the figures proposed.

To exemplify and practically try the above observations out, let us take into examination the first 14 verses of chapter 44 of the poem.<sup>21</sup> Without going into details of the narration, to help the reader find his way, we must first say that in this text, the poet describes the suffering of Širin - the heroine of the poem - on having been separated from her beloved Khosrow, the last Sasanian emperor who, at this point in the story, has ascended the throne and lives in his capital city, having apparently forgotten his beloved. Over half of chapter 44 is dedicated to describing Širin's pain, a description that makes use of a repertoire of images built mainly through metaphors, comparisons and hyperboles, which represent an excellent terrain for reflecting on the question of translation of figurative language in classical Persian poetry.<sup>22</sup>

Following are the original text, my translation and some considerations on the choices I made. In the analysis proposed in this work, what is central is not so much the aesthetic outcome (another whole page of analysis could be opened on this) as the motivations that led to rendering the figures, how the relationship between vocabulary and image was handled, which is what we should pay most attention to when translating metaphors, similitudes and hyperboles. The purpose of the following analysis, therefore, is to propose a practical perspective on certain manners of operating, on the decision-making processes that have led to a specific solution, with the intention of opening a fertile discussion on so crucial yet complex a point in the work of translating a classical text.

20 Umberto Eco wrote: "it should be said that a satisfactory translation must render (that is preserve somewhat unchanged, and perhaps amplify without contradicting) the sense of the original text, to translate means to interpret, and to interpret also means to place a bet that the sense that we recognise in a text is in some way, and without evident co-textual contradictions, the sense of that text. The sense the translator must find, and translate, is not deposited in any pure language. It is only the result of a pure interpretative conjecture [...] the decision is taken contextually, but understanding a context is a hermeneutic act [...]. [...] when passing judgement on a translation, one need to maintain the meta-rule according to which a translation must be faithful; criteria of faithfulness may change, but (i) they must be taken within a certain culture and (ii) must remain consistent within the context of the translated text" (Neegard 1995, 38-9).

21 The limit of 14 verses is exclusively due to the available for this contribution; the verses actually analysed are 13, because the first verse introduces the narrative, and presents no figure of interest for our research.

22 The verses we are examining also contain numerous other figures of speech, for example *tajnis* (a sort of paronomasia), *tekrār* (repetition), *mora'āt-e naẓir* (observance of analogues), which are, of course, deeply incorporated into the textual fabric with figurative language that remains however the focus of our attention.



- 1 [چنین در دفتر آورد آن سخن سنج  
که برد از اوستادی در سخن رنج]
- 2 که چون شیرین ز خسرو باز پس ماند  
دلش در بند و جانش در هوس ماند
- 3 ز بادام تر آب گل برانگیخت  
گلایی بر گل بادام می ریخت
- 4 بسان گوسپند کشته بر جای  
فرو افتاد و می زد دست بر پای
- 5 تن از بی طاقتی پرداخته زور  
دل از تنگی شده چون دیده مور
- 6 هوا بر باد داده خرمنش را  
به آب دیده شسته دامنش را
- 7 گهی از پای میافتاد چون مست  
گهی دستارچه بر دیده می بست
- 8 گشاده رشته گوهر ز دیده  
مژه چون رشته در گوهر کشیده
- 9 ز خواب ایمن هوسهای دماغش  
ز بیخوابی شده چشمش چراغش
- 10 سهی سروش چو برگ بید لرزان  
شده زو نافه کاسد نیفه ارزان
- 11 زمانی بر زمین غلطید غمناک  
ز مشکین جعد مشک افشانند بر خاک
- 12 چو نسرين بر گشاده ناخنی چند  
به نسرين برگ گل از لاله می کند
- 13 گهی بر شکر از بادام زد آب  
گهی خایید فندق را به عناب
- 14 گهی چون گوی هر سو می دودی  
گهی بر جای چون چوگان خمیدی

(Nezāmi Ganje'i 1987-88, 311-12)

1 - [Ecco cosa scrisse nel suo libro quel poeta che misurava le parole e che divenne maestro d'eloquenza.]<sup>23</sup>

2 - Appena Širin si separò da Khosrow, il suo cuore finì in catene e la sua anima prigioniera del desiderio: 3 - dai suoi occhi, mandorle umide, scorreva acqua di rose che versava profumo sul volto, fiore di mandorlo. 4 - Come accade al montone quando viene ucciso, ella cadde a terra piegata, con le mani che colpivano i piedi: 5 - il suo corpo aveva perso ogni forza per sopportare il distacco, il suo cuore si era subito stretto come l'occhio di una formica. 6 - La passione per Khosrow aveva gettato al vento il raccolto della sua vita e aveva lavato con le lacrime la sua tunica: 7 - a volte cadeva a terra come ebbra, a volte si legava una benda sugli occhi infiammati dal pianto, mentre 8 - una fila di perle scorreva dalle sue ciglia che infilavano quelle perle, una ad una. 9 - I suoi pensieri appassionati non si assopivano mai, così per la mancanza di sonno i suoi occhi erano lampade accese; 10 - la sua statura slanciata di cipresso tremava come foglia di salice. Con la sua disperazione Širin mandava in rovina il prezzo del muschio e abbassava quello del cuoio: 11 - in preda al dolore si contorceva a terra e i suoi capelli spargevano tutt'intorno profumo di muschio; 12 - come rosa canina sbocciata, con le unghie affilate si strappava dalle bianche guance di rosa petali rossi di tulipano. 13 - Le lacrime erano latte di mandorle sullo zucchero delle sue labbra e a loro volta le labbra, come giuggiole, mordevano le nocchie dei suoi polpastrelli. 14 - A volte come palla correva impazzita in ogni direzione, a volte se ne stava ferma, piegata come mazza da polo [...]

1 - [Here is what that poet, who measured his words and became a master of eloquence, wrote in his book.]

2 - As soon as Širin was separated from Khosrow, her heart ended in chains and her soul, a prisoner of desire: 3 - from her eyes, wet almonds, rose water flowed pouring scent on her face, almond flower. 4 - As happens with the ram when he is slaughtered, she fell to the earth bent over, her hands hitting her feet: 5 - her body had lost every power to withstand detachment, her heart had immediately shrunk like the eye of an ant. 6 - Passion for Khosrow had cast to the winds the harvest of her life and had washed with tears her tunic: 7 - at times she would fall to the ground as if drunk, at times she would tie a blindfold over her tear-swollen eyes, while 8 - a row of pearls would flow from her lashes which threaded those pearls, one by one. 9 - Her passionate thoughts never rested, so due to lack of sleep her eyes were lit lanterns; 10 - her slender cypress stature trembled like a willow leaf. With her desperation, Širin made the price of musk collapse, and lowered that of leather: 11 - overcome by pain, she

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23 In the translation, we also give the numbering of the verses to make it easier to find them.

would twist on the ground, and her hair all around would spread the scent of musk; 12 - like blooming dog rose, with her sharp nails she would rip red tulip petals off white rose cheeks. 13 - Her tears were almond milk on the sugar of her lips and her lips, in their turn, like jujube, bit the hazelnuts of her fingertips. 14 - At times, like a ball, she would run madly in every direction, other times she would stay still, bent, like a polo mallet [...]

Verse 2, hemistich II The first metaphor we meet, at the opening of the chapter after the first introductory verse, describes the heart in chains and the soul (or life *jān*)<sup>24</sup> seized by passion. In this case, we are dealing with a metaphor which is familiar to the Italian reader, who can easily recognise in the figure built by Neẓāmi an expression which is present and widespread in our poetic repertoire. The literal translation adopted, therefore, seems to omit nothing of the poet's message, and efficaciously introduces the emotional state of Širin when she is abandoned by her lover, her heart and soul prisoners of an all-embracing passion. Pain and love, the intensity of a suffering that is directly proportional to the intensity of feeling, the impossibility of escaping from the pain of these emotional states, these will in fact be the themes of the whole chapter.

Verso 3 This verse is an admirable example of condensation of figures of speech: we find here, in hemistich I, the metaphor of the wet almond (*bādām-e tar*), which represents the crying eye of the beautiful Širin<sup>25</sup> alongside a *mora'at-e nazir*<sup>26</sup> built using the semantic context of water (*āb*, *tar*, *golāb*, respectively 'acqua' [water], 'umido' [damp], 'essenza di rose' [rose essence]), as well as a play on words between *āb-e gol* (water of the rose, meaning tears)<sup>27</sup> and *golāb* (perfumed rose essence, again with the meaning of perfumed tear); furthermore, in hemistich II, we find the syntagm *gol-e bādām*, which is the metaphor for the white and smooth face of the princess (*bādām* 'mandorla', in the first hemistich, on the other hand, represented her eyes). In this case we are dealing with a description before which the reception by an Italian reader finds itself without tools for interpretation, because metaphors built on almond flower and fruit are less familiar to us than they are to a Persian reader, who lives in a territory

24 We should remember that in Persian the word *jān* indicates both referents, 'soul' and 'life'.

25 It should be remembered that almond eyes were a paradigm of beauty in Medieval Persia.

26 *Mora'āt-e nazir* (observance of analogues) is a very frequent figure in Persian poetry, defined as the accumulation in a single verse of words belonging to the same semantic field.

27 *Āb-e gol* (rose water) as metaphor for a tear also arises because of the bloodred colour which generally denotes a tear as an expression of pain. *Gol* in Persian is also a general term for flower, but in an erotic-anacreontic context, like the one we find in this part of the book, it represents the red rose.

where this tree has always been widespread.<sup>28</sup> The metaphor of the almond flower, indicating the white cheeks of the girl on the basis of a similarity in colour – white – and substance – smoothness and softness – creates a play on words with almond as ‘eye’ (metaphor based on a formal analogy) of hemistich I, with a tangle of references that seem not to be immediately intelligible even to the present day Persian reader, as Servatīyān, editor of one of the most reliable editions of the poem, felt the need to dedicate an explanatory note to this verse (Nezāmi Ganje’i 1987-88, 869). In this case, due to the complexity of the image, it was decided to add, in translation, the tenor of the metaphors (eyes and face) without explicitly stating the reasons for the analogy and leaving the reader to make the effort of picturing in his mind the image created by Nezāmi, decoding its references and connections. Compared to the figures of the previous verse, a partial paraphrase was provided here to make up for the lack of shared references between the poetic tradition of the source language and that of the target language.

Verse 4 This verse presents a similitude that is closely tied to Nezāmi’s Islamic religious context, that is the ritual slaughter of a ram that took (and takes place) both during the feast of sacrifice (*īd al-adhā*) and in Islamic propitiatory slaughtering in general. The metaphor of the slaughtered ram (*guspad-e košte*) is alien to the Italian reader; although in recent decades Muslim rituals have certainly become more familiar than in the past, the details of the killing, implicit in the image, are certainly unknown. Sacrifice, however, is a practice that also belongs to the cultural context of Christianity, so, even though all typically Islamic religious references may be lost, for us too the image recalls the idea of a love for which one is ready to sacrifice one’s own life. On this basis, the translation was kept on a literal level, also because the linguistic elements present in the verse permitted perfect reconstruction, even in Italian, of the evoked image, that is of Širin bled dry and knocked over by pain, trembling like a dying animal, as she shakes hands and feet. Concerning this verse, what raised doubts was the effect produced by a shocking image that with its references to blood, to trembling death throes, conferred a rather powerful ‘animal’ touch to the verse. Despite the universal association between love and death, the image proposed by the verse is gory and in strong conflict with the figure of Širin as described hitherto – a composed woman of perfect beauty. Despite this, it seemed important to preserve the image without any filter, since in classical Persian poetry, the ram with its slit throat is a common metaphor for the lover led to death by love.

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28 It should be noted, as a general indication, that neither the almond flower nor the fruit ever appear in Petrarch’s *Canzoniere*, which can be considered a good reference point in order to identify the set of similitudes or metaphors more familiar to the Italian reader.

So it was decided to let the reader clash with the metaphoric creativity of Neẓāmi, even if this meant submitting him to the very powerful effect conveyed by the image.

Verse 5 In this verse, the poet goes from describing pain expressed ‘physically’ by the metaphor of the slain ram, to affirming (as in hemistich I) the absolute weakness that prostrates the abandoned lover. Reinforcing the image of such weakness, hemistich II presents a similitude between the heart (*del*) of Širin and the eye of the ant (*dide-ye mur*) through the explicit tertium comparationis of narrowness/smallness (*tangi*). This similitude too contains a touch of intentional exaggeration: the ant being already a symbol of smallness and fragility, Neẓāmi introduces the eye of the ant, something absolutely invisible, thus going beyond the limits of classical metaphor and crossing the frontier of hyperbole.<sup>29</sup> Here too, literal translation does not hinder understanding of the image, indeed to the description of pain, it adds a note of total helplessness.

Verse 6 In this verse, we find a new image stemming from the natural world: the metaphor of *xarman* (‘il raccolto’ [harvest]) which in the Persian poetic convention brings to mind everything that, in an illusory fashion, people believe they have put together in their lives (assets, stability, wisdom, certainties...). The desire (*havā*) that Širin feels for Khosrow casts to the wind (*bād*) and throws away all the ‘harvest’ of her life, while the pain manifested by the tears that, like a river, flow uninterruptedly, from her eyes (hemistich II) wash her clothing, purifying her. Loss and suffering are the steps demanded by true love, the trials one must overcome. When translating this verse, we decided to split up the ‘harvest’ metaphor replacing it with the syntagm ‘il raccolto della sua vita’ [the harvest of her life], since the image is not familiar in Italian, and there was the risk the message might not be understood. If on the one hand the determination ‘della vita’ [of life] subtracts conciseness and density from the sentence, on the other hand it lets the reader immediately grasp the sense of the verse and grasp the analogy between the wind scattering ears and grains put together with effort and the blind force of desire that in an instant erases the false security of existence. In hemistich II, ‘aveva lavato con le lacrime la tunica’ [she washed with tears her tunic] was left literally, since pain, expressed by crying, as purification is a concept which belongs to our culture too. However, our culture lacks the function of water for ritual

<sup>29</sup> This is confirmed by a search on Ganjoor, a large database dedicated to Persian poetry, which shows how the syntagm *dide-ye mur* appears only a few times (3) in the texts of Khorasanian and Iraqi style poets, whereas it begins to appear more frequently (a few dozen times) in the XVII century poets belonging to the more sophisticated Indian style (especially Šā‘eb-e Tabrizi and Bidel-e Dehlavi).

ablutions, present instead in the Islamic world and implicitly in the verse:<sup>30</sup> this reference is therefore lost in translation on a reader unfamiliar with Muslim rituals.

Verse 7 In this verse, we find a similitude which is very important in defining the nature and the effects of the pain Širin suffers due to separation from her lover, the comparison with a drunken person (*chun mast*) unable to stand on his feet. In Persian poetry, a person in love is conventionally described as ‘drunk with love’, but considering the Islamic context, such drunkenness is charged with a surplus of meanings related to the taboo on any alcoholic drink, according to the religious law. At the same time, the association of drunkenness with a state of ecstasy is common among Persian (and not only Persian) mystic poets. In translation, the additional meanings tied to the Muslim religious tradition could not be conveyed, however love seen as the utmost inebriation (inebriation as a metaphor of love) is a concept conventionally accepted in our literature too and can be communicated directly by literal translation. In hemistich II, Širin ties a blindfold (*dastārche*) over her eyes, but in translation a determination was added to ‘eyes’, that is ‘infiammati dal pianto’ [tear-inflamed]; we preferred to split up the allusion of Neẓāmi’s expression in order to avoid loss of sense, and to ensure that reading flowed on without raising doubts concerning the reason behind that blindfold over her eyes. The need to explain this image is also confirmed by the editor’s note which reveals how even a Persian reader needs clarification on this matter.<sup>31</sup>

Verse 8 Description of Širin’s crying, of the ceaseless flow of her tears, in this verse exploits the classic metaphor of tears as pearls (*gowhar*) and of eyelashes as the threads (*rešte*) on which the pearls of tears are threaded. Tears as pearls are a conventional metaphor for the Italian reader too, whereas eyelashes that become threads supporting pearls/tears (and hence an ornamental element of pain itself) represent an unaccustomed image. Despite this, the image proposed by Neẓāmi is simple, if one pictures the dynamics of the phenomenon, so no need was felt to add anything to the literalness of the translation. Here Neẓāmi, besides the idea of ceaseless crying, wishes to evoke the fact that this crying is a precious part of Širin’s beauty. The two levels – descriptive static (tears as ornament of the eyelashes and hence of the face) and dynamic (dripping of tears like pearls coming off the thread of the eyelashes) – blend

30 Here we note that, in the preceding verse, there was an image recalling blood (an impure substance for Muslims) contrasting with the purification operated by the water of tears in this verse. Tears may be of blood, if they are the symbol and expression of pain, or else of water and an instrument of purification, as in this case.

31 (Neẓāmi Ganje’i 1987-88, 870).

together in a simple but highly evocative image.<sup>32</sup>

Verse 9 In this verse, the image of amorous passion and of pain due to separation is enriched by another connotation: fantasies and yearnings of love never cease, they are not subject to the pause of sleep and hence the eyes of the beautiful Princess always stay open, like lit lanterns. Here we have a personification of feeling, *havashā-ye demāgh-aš* 'I suoi pensieri appassionati [her passionate thoughts] and a metamorphosis of the ever open eyes of the lover, to whom sleep is denied, into a lit lantern that lights up Širin's very face (*šode chašm-aš cherāgh-aš*). The reason for these associations is common to hemistich I and II, and is related to 'sleep' (*xwāb*), with a reversal from negative to positive: lack of sleep (*bixwābi*) is negative for the ordinary person, but becomes a specific state characterising the figure of the lover. An attempt was made to convey this reversal in translation, with the intention of transmitting the idea, present in the original, of a passion that knows no rest.

Verse 10 Another metaphor opens this verse, *sahi sarv-aš* (her slim cypress, that is her tall and slender body) which is described as 'trembling' like a willow leaf (*cho barg-e bid larzān*). The cypress represents the body of the beloved in classic Persian poetry; however, with this meaning, the image is foreign to our poetry, so in translation the metaphor was expanded by adding 'stature' ('la sua statura slanciata di cipresso' [her slender cypress stature]). However, the comparison of Širin's body with willow leaves has been left unaltered, also supported by the fact that the willow tree in Italian is accompanied by the adjective 'weeping', which fits well with the description hitherto given of the sad lover. Hemistich II, however, with an image which then extends to the two following verses [11 and 12], proposes with an extreme conclusion two complex hyperboles, to which the Italian reader is totally unaccustomed. Not only was a paraphrase needed, it also took a footnote to explain its meaning: *šode z u nāfe kāsed nife arzān* 'con la sua disperazione Širin mandava in rovina il prezzo del muschio e abbassava quello del cuoio' [with her desperation, Širin made the price of musk collapse, and lowered that of leather], where the musk gland (*nāfe*) is in competition (rivalling but being defeated) in colour (blackness) and scent with Širin's hair, and the market for quality leather (*nife*)<sup>33</sup> is driven to collapse by the softness of the skin that Širin rips off her face.

32 In this verse, we also have intense alliteration, with a sevenfold repetition of the ancipite palatal vowel 'e' at the end of a word; I was unable to reproduce, in the translation, the rhythm conferred to the verse by this assonance.

33 In this hemistich we are also dealing with a *tajnis* (a kind of paronomasia) between *nāfe* and *nife*, which in the original adds a play on words to the density and conciseness of the image.

Verse 11 In continuity with the previous verse, Neẓāmi here begins to split up the image, creating a fantastic aetiology that explains why the market for *nāfe* (musk gland) is collapsing due to Širin: ‘in preda al dolore si contorceva a terra e i suoi capelli spargevano tutt’intorno profumo di muschio’ [overcome by pain, she would twist on the ground, and her hair all around would spread the scent of musk]. In this verse, it was felt necessary to add the term ‘profumo’ [scent] associated with the direct translation from Persian, ‘muschio’ [musk], since the original *mošk*<sup>34</sup> evokes, by itself, a black substance of animal origin, with a very precious scent. *Mošk* in classical lyric poetry is a conventional term of comparison (or metaphor) for the black and scented hair of the beloved.<sup>35</sup> In Italian, however, the term ‘muschio’ [musk] does not immediately evoke blackness and scent; hence the need to introduce in the translation the motif of associating the image of hair to that of musk.

Verse 12 In this verse, always connected to hemistich II of verse 11, Neẓāmi builds a fantastic aetiology to explain the reason for the fall in the price of high quality leather (*nife*): he describes Širin scratching her face, and pieces of very white and delicate skin coming off and becoming red with blood (softness and colour are the elements that determine the quality of leather, and it loses value before the precious pieces of skin which Širin rips off her face). The image is played mainly on a level of colour: the dog rose (*nasrin*) is white (or pale pink) and has very delicate petals (like Širin’s skin before being blemished by scratches); the tulip (*lāle*) is red and reminiscent of the colour of blood like the petals of a rose (*barg-e gol*). In translation, an attempt was made to privilege the level of colour, deviating from strict literalness and mixing up the elements of the verse slightly: ‘come rosa canina sbocciata, con le unghie affilate si strappava dalle bianche guance di rosa petali rossi di tulipano’ [like blooming dog rose, with her sharp nails she would rip red tulip petals off white rose cheeks]. The outcome cannot be said to be satisfying, especially for the term *nasrin* (‘rosa canina’ [dog rose]) which recurs twice in the original (in translation only once being also a compound word) but as a metaphor it is unknown to the Italian reader, perhaps evoking the white colour of the flower, but failing to convey all the other meanings of delicacy it has accumulated in the Persian lyric tradition when referring to the white/pink skin of the beloved.

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34 The black and scented essence is produced by small glands under the belly of the male gazelle (*Moschus moschiferus*) who uses them to mark his territory by rubbing against rocks.

35 In this connection of musk-hair, the tertium comparationis is not only the scent, but also the intense blackness, which however is lost in translation in order not to overload the phrase.



Verse 13 In this verse, the description of pain is enriched with new images. In hemistich I we still find the theme of crying: at times [Širin] from the almonds (eyes) brings water (tears) to the sugar (lips). The translation chosen for hemistich I brings to the fore not only painful crying, but also the sweetness of Širin<sup>36</sup> who even in her desperation expresses her 'sugary' nature. In hemistich II we have a different manifestation of pain: Širin with the jujube (mouth) bites the hazelnuts (fingertips). In the original, the expression is extremely elliptical: since Neẓāmi draws on consolidated metaphors (almonds/eyes, water/tears, sugar/lips, jujube/mouth, hazelnut/fingertip), a literal translation would be missing all the connections needed to understand the image. To avoid explanatory notes and allow the reader not to interrupt once more the long description, we chose to split up the metaphor adding specification supplements ('lo zucchero delle sue labbra' [sugar of her lips], 'le sue labbra come giuggiole' [her lips like jujube], 'le nocciole dei suoi polpastrelli' [the hazelnuts of her fingertips]).

Verse 14 In this, the last verse we analyse, the poet draws on metaphors from the traditional game of polo, widely practised by Persians since ancient times. Persian poetry has drawn some of its most frequent images from polo, and Neẓāmi here makes use of this semantic field to describe Širin who, overwhelmed by pain, rolls on the ground like a ball (*guy*) or bends, broken by suffering, taking on the curved shape of a polo mallet (*chougān*). The Persian text clearly shows the irreconcilable contrast between a ball racing in every direction (*har su*) and the block of a spine curved like an unmoving mallet (*bar jāy*). For an Italian reader, the image of polo playing and the shape of the mallet traditionally used in Persia are unusual, however the words used by Neẓāmi are sufficient to picture the contradictory image typical of an equally restless mood, of a pain that drives one to move in every direction seeking relief, yet at the same time deprives the lover of all energy, bending her down with the weight of suffering. The translation has therefore been literal, taking only the liberty of the adjective 'impazzita' [adverb madly] following the verb 'correva' [run], which it was thought could emphasise the feeling of inner conflict caused by the pain afflicting Širin and underlined in Persian by the presence of the same expression of time, *gāh-i* (at times) at the beginning of both hemistichs. In this case, literalness did not deprive the reader of any element required to understand the image, even though the semantic field in which it was developed is foreign to the target culture.

36 In Persian the word *širin*, when used as an adjective, indicates anything having a sweet flavour.

### 3 Conclusions

As we have seen, though within the limits of these fourteen verses, we are working with images that, when first read, have an estranging effect on the reader: they nearly always draw on a repertoire of comparisons and metaphors that are foreign to our lyric tradition and identify connections between tenor and vehicle, or between first and second term of comparison, which demand an interpretative effort. On the other hand, it seemed inevitable for us, at the end, to preserve the translation of the figures implied in the description of the state of pain as literal as possible, and this for an obvious reason. The motive is tied to the distance, not only cultural but also temporal, from Neẓāmi's text: this distance does not afford us a comprehension and perception of the figures sufficient to allow us to find suitable equivalents for the present day Italian reader.<sup>37</sup> Staying as faithful as possible to Neẓāmi's words, while at the same time pointing out the rhetoric and semantic connections among the elements through some translating strategies, allowed us to offer the reader the images of the original text in the most favourable way for a subjective representation.<sup>38</sup> Literalness when translating figures of speech, if it is based on careful and profound philological investigation, is in many cases the only possible choice for opening up to the reader a glimpse – however imperfect and limited – of how the author of the original text described the world through his verses. When we do so, we build new metaphors in Italian, forcing the verbal apparatus to take on the task of stimulating the addressee to conceive a new image that did not exist as such before the metaphor produced it.<sup>39</sup>

In our specific case, when one finishes reading this chapter (or even just some of its first verses), what remains, it seems to me, is the possibility of acknowledging the universality of Širin's pain: this acknowledgement comes true, for those reading the text in translation, as they enter a new poetic imagery and let themselves be guided towards a possible attune-

37 Translating contemporary prose is a completely different matter: here the search for semantic or rhetorical equivalents is not only in many cases possible, but actually determines the degree of communicative efficacy of the translation itself.

38 The multi-faceted nature of poetic metaphor is well known: having recourse to unconventional, implicit or allusive uses of language, poetic metaphors demand an interpretative effort from the reader. Less determination of metaphorical expressions, in fact, provides those who interpret them with less clues to guide decodification, thus admitting the plausibility of manifold interpretation. Poetic metaphor, in fact, tends to combine – compressing them – multiple basic metaphors, giving life to expressions that are semantically denser and hence more complex to decipher. And this, we believe, is how it should remain in translation.

39 In italics, our free paraphrase of the definition of metaphor which Umberto Eco gave in his article: "Ekfrasis, ipotiposi e metafora", in Miller (2014, 6).

ment with Neẓāmi's description. When such an attunement is activated, Neẓāmi's expressions, instead of appearing merely unfamiliar, become a new descriptive possibility for that universal feeling that is pain for separation from the beloved. Literalness when translating, in this sense, is rewarding, because it shows – beyond the specifics of communication codes – the expression of a feeling that is shared by men of every place and time. Perhaps the third element of the triangle evoked by Berger is precisely this one: bringing out, in different linguistic expressions, the humanity that we all share.

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