


THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES

Tarjamah: Negative TranslationSHADEN M. TAGELDIN 

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Sometime during the nineteenth century, so the dominant scholarly story goes, across the middle passage that transported it from premodernity to modernity, Arabic slowly forgot one term for translation—نقل (*naql*)—and remembered another: ترجمة (*tarjamah*). This recollection itself was partial, remembering only one face of *tarjamah*—“translation” or “interpretation”—and slowly forgetting the other: “biography” or “recounted life.” “[T]ranslation,” Walter Benjamin tells us, “issues from the original—not so much from its life as from its afterlife,” an “afterlife” he defines as “continued life” (71), a perpetual “transformation and a renewal of something living” (73). Benjamin’s theory cheats death, insisting that “[t]ranslation is so far removed from being the sterile equation of two dead languages that of all literary forms it is the one charged with the special mission of watching over the maturing process of the original language and the birth pangs of its own” (73).

Yet *tarjamah*, the word that typically translates “translation” in modern Arabic, estranges life, speaking in the voice of a dead language, Ugaritic: an extinct Northwest Semitic tongue half resurrected through Akkadian and Hittite, then Aramaic, Assyrian, and other Semitic lingua francas now clinging to life at the edges of Arabic. For at its root, *tarjamah* is foreign to Arabic. The noun derives from the Aramaic word *targum*, denoting an Aramaic translation and interpretation of the Hebrew Bible, intended to impart its meaning to diasporized Jews increasingly distanced from Hebrew (Safrai 245, 247–48; Le Déaut 563–65). *Targum*, in turn, derives from the Akkadian root verb *r-g-m*, “to read aloud” (Safrai 244), which harks back to the Ugaritic root verb *r-g-m*, denoting “to say, tell, announce, communicate, inform; to answer; to recite” (“/r-g-m/” 721). At the core of *r-g-m* is speaking aloud, embodied in the person of the *meturgeman* (also *turgeman*) in early Jewish rabbinic culture,

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who—speaking after the reader of Hebrew Torah and holding the text in memory—offered live oral translations, in Aramaic, to assembled worshippers (Shinan 41–42; Safrai 244–46). In its foreignness to Arabic and yet early, uneasy domestication thereto, *tarjamah* reminds us that all translation is less reproduction than rupture and resignification. Over the course of the long nineteenth century Arabic-speaking intellectuals redefined *tarjamah* in the shadow of positivist regimes of language and history: understanding languages (and their signifiers) as life-forms that know birth, growth, decline, and death; recasting word, form, or utterance (لفظ [*lafẓ*]) as the mirror of meaning or content (معنى [*ma'nā*]); and, in short, re-visioning languages within the realm of the empirically knowable, verifiable, decidable.¹ Strangely, as *tarjamah* increasingly moved across a world of languages understood as life-forms, it at once gained and lost, between breaths, its attachment to life as form—that is, to the biographical form in which a life (even one's own) is narrated in the third person: a sense of the term that figured in premodern Arabic usage, though not necessarily in the lexical record, from at least the eleventh century onward.²

A word of foreign origin turned naturalized citizen of Arabic, enfolding the hidden transcript of “biography” told in the third person, and haunted by the figure of the translator-interpreter (ترجمان [*turjumān*, recalling *turgeman*]) who vexes the categories of the familiar and the foreign, the Arabic term *tarjamah* lays bare the unnaturalness of assumed categories and identities. *Tarjamah* stages the relationships of any given language to itself, of one language to another, and of translation to original as a life knowable only in its negation, a life that enfolds death, a life understood as continuity-in-death. As such, *tarjamah* is negative translation, insisting on the nonidentity of words, meanings, and the persons and peoples who invoke them, within and across languages.

The Buried Lives of *Tarjamah*, from Premodernity to Modernity

Every remembrance of a word's “life story,” of course, is also a forgetting of other possible

narratives. If such is true of the fortunes of *tarjamah*, it is no less true of the broader story told of conceptions of translation in Arabic. According to Elliott Colla and Rana Issa, *tarjamah* and its root verb *tarjama* (ترجم) came to supplant other terms more widely used to denote interlingual translation well into the nineteenth century, in particular the verbal noun *naql* (“transport,” “transmission,” “transcription,” “copying”) and its root verb *naqala* (“to transport,” “to transmit”; also “to transcribe,” “to copy”). In Issa's reading, the modern Arabic translation of the Bible—mediated by the nineteenth-century Syro-Lebanese intellectuals Buṭrus al-Bustānī and Fāris (later Aḥmad Fāris) al-Shidyāq in collaboration with English and American missionaries—spurred the Arabic-speaking world to abandon *naql*, for centuries the favored term for “translation,” for *tarjamah*. The “new word” *tarjamah*, Issa writes, “recollected translation's connection to the biblical Targums as well as to the Abbassid [sic] movement of translation that was spearheaded by Christians and Jews for the benefit of Islamicate Arab thought” (19). As I read Issa, *tarjamah* interrupts the hegemonic self-sufficiency of Arabic and Islam with the now-foreignized, once-native languages and religions that preceded them and underscores the debts of Arab-Islamic thought to Christian and Jewish translators. Moreover, she suggests, displacing *naql* with *tarjamah* not only stages “the Bible as a competing foundational text that could, in adjacency to the Qur'an, become a legitimate source for Arabic concepts and semantics in the modern era” but also “foregrounds translation as a movement through time” (20).

Issa astutely underscores the foreignizing energies of *tarjamah*, as well as the term's capacity to unsettle the selfsameness of Arabic and a Qur'anic monopoly on its grammar by summoning its linguistic and scriptural antecedents and neighbors from shadow into light. Yet both the verb *tarjama*, in the sense of “to translate,” and the noun *turjumān*, denoting the translator-interpreter, appear in sayings attributed to the Prophet Muḥammad dating to 632 CE, and the noun *tarjamah* appears as early as 791 CE in al-Khalil ibn Aḥmad al-Farāhīdī's *Kitāb al-'Ayn; The Source*, considered

the first Arabic dictionary (see “Tarjama”; “Turjumān”; “Tarjamah”).³ Turning to the nineteenth century, one finds Muslim intellectuals like the Egyptian Rifā‘ah Rāfi‘ al-Ṭaḥṭawī vexing Issa’s intimation that Christian thinkers like al-Bustānī and al-Shidyāq (although al-Shidyāq later converted to Islam) deliberately supplanted *naql* with *tarjamah*. Writing in 1834, al-Ṭaḥṭawī more than once invokes *tarjamah*; of his 1827 rendering of Joseph Agoub’s *La lyre brisée* (1825; *The Broken Lyre*) from French into Arabic, for example, he declares, اعنتيت بترجمتها (“I took care with its translation [*bi-tarjamatihā*]”); *Takhlīṣ* 62), and in the introduction to his 1850s translation (serialized in 1867) of François de Salignac de La Mothe-Fénelon’s *Les aventures de Télémaque, fils d’Ulysse* (1699; *The Adventures of Telemachus, Son of Ulysses*), he declares his purported

المحافظة على الأصل المترجم . . . ناموس الأصل والفرع محفوظ
وقانون الترجمة الحقيقية ملحوظ
 (“Muqaddimat al-Mutarjim” 23)

preservation of the translated original [*al-aṣl al-mutarjam*] . . . the law of root and branch maintained, and the law of true translation [*al-tarjamah al-ḥaqīqah*] attained.

Conversely, as Rebecca C. Johnson notes, *naql* was “the word most commonly used for both transmission and translation” in the nineteenth-century Syro-Lebanese archive, accenting “the mobility of texts and language across time as well as space” (30); it was crucial to al-Bustānī’s argument for the transmission of knowledge from antiquity to modernity and to al-Shidyāq’s translation of the Gospels, which reinterpreted them as contradictory transmissions rather than authentic revelations (47). To assume, then, that *naql* largely eclipsed *tarjamah* in premodernity or that *tarjamah* largely eclipsed *naql* in modernity is to overstate the break of the nineteenth century, or, perhaps, to misrecognize the corpse in the corpus.

That corpse is *tarjamah-as-life*. For *tarjamah* itself is in a state of *naql*, and *naql*, for all its presumed nativity to Arabic, encodes a notion of translation hardly as simple or straightforward as it seems. Every so-called copy or reproduction, *naql* tells us, is both a transfer and a transport,

hence also a displacement. Thus, *tarjamah* appears “copied” across the span of centuries, from the seventh to the twenty-first. Yet *tarjamah* now is nonidentical to *tarjamah* past; its past and present meanings are not equivalent. Somewhere along the way, *tarjamah-as-life* died on the tongue and the pen, despite its presence in modern dictionaries, and *tarjamah-as-interpretation*—or hermeneutic translation—*tout court* survived, its other lives buried within. Indeed, glossing the verb ترجم (*tarjama*) in his groundbreaking modern Arabic dictionary of 1867, محيط المحيط (*Muḥīṭ al-Muḥīṭ*; *The Ocean That Encircles the Encircling Ocean*), al-Bustānī foregrounds its principal modern signification, “to translate”:

تَرْجَمَ اللِّسَانَ . . . فَسَّرَ كَلَامَهُ بِلِسَانٍ آخَرَ فَهُوَ مُتَرْجِمٌ وَالكِتَابَ نَقْلَهُ مِنْ
لِغَةِ إِلَى أُخْرَى . . . التَّرْجِمَةُ وَالتَّرْجِمَةُ التَّفْسِيرُ أَوْ هِيَ إِبْدَالُ لَفْظَةٍ أَوْ
عِبَارَةٍ بِلَفْظَةٍ أَوْ عِبَارَةٍ تَقُومُ مَقَامَهَا لِأَنَّ التَّفْسِيرَ هُوَ الكَشْفُ عَنِ الشَّيْءِ
بِلَفْظٍ أَسْهَلٍ وَأَيْسَرَ مِنْ لَفْظِ الأَصْلِ . وَالتَّرْجِمَةُ أَيْضاً ذِكْرُ سِيرَةِ شَخْصٍ
وَإِخْلَاقِهِ وَنَسَبِهِ . . . التَّرْجِمَانُ وَالتَّرْجِمَانُ وَالتَّرْجِمَانُ المَفْسَّرُ لِللسانِ
كِتَابَةً أَوْ شِفَاهاً . . .

(161)

He translated the language [*Tarjama al-lisāna*] . . . [that is,] he interpreted its words [*fassara kalāmahu*] in another tongue, so he is a translator [*mutarjim*], and the text [in question] he transported [*naqalahu*] from one language to another. . . . *Tarjamah* and *tarjimah* are interpretation [*tafsīr*] or the substitution of an utterance or an expression with an utterance or an expression that takes its place, for interpretation is the elucidation of something with a turn of phrase [*lafẓ*] easier and simpler than the phrasing of the original. *Tarjamah* is also the recollection of the biography of an individual, his moral character, and his lineage. . . . The *turjumān* and *tarjamān* and *tarjumān* is the interpreter of the tongue, whether in writing or orally. . . .

Only later in the passage above does al-Bustānī note that the related verbal noun ترجمة (*tarjamah*) signifies not only an interlingual and intralingual translation or interpretation but also a biographical account. Al-Bustānī was a key exponent of the long-nineteenth-century Arab intellectual نهضة (*nahḍah*; “revival”), in which translation played a crucial role—and an intellectual force, alongside

others of his generation, in the transformations that marked modern Arabic lexicography.⁴ His maneuver bears out Colla's and Issa's contentions that nineteenth-century Arabic discourse relegated the premodern Arabic use of *tarjamah* to denote "biography" to the margins, crowning interlingual and intralingual "translation" the term's dominant modern meaning (Colla 140–42; Issa 19–20). Yet al-Bustānī's nod to the biographical sense of *tarjamah* sounds not only its death rattle but also the long last gasp of its life. His dictionary exhumes *tarjamah*-as-life, buried between the lines of premodern lexicons that barely register that usage, and slows its expiration, reviving past in present. Biographical *tarājim* would appear into the twentieth century, penned by such public intellectuals as the Syro-Lebanese Jurjī Zaydān (1902–03) and the Egyptian Muḥammad Ḥusayn Haykal (1921–22, 1929), and as late as 1956 the Egyptian literary scholar Shawqī Ḍayf would invoke الترجمة الشخصية (*al-tarjamah al-shakhṣiyyah*) to denote "autobiography" in Arabic, tracking its movements from the ninth century to the twentieth.⁵ Modern revivals of *tarjamah*, however, are riddled with breaks from premodern form, reflecting the pressure of modern European conceptions of "life," time, and biographical representation—and negotiating the value of cultures east and west in the shadow of imperialism. Writing of Haykal's *tarājim* of European figures, for example, Maya I. Kesrouany argues that his translating "I" infiltrates the third-person transmission (*naql*) of "exemplary" European lives, impersonating those lives to voice its own literary-political aims (see 156–67, esp. 160–63).

In the liminal modernity of the long-nineteenth-century Arab *nahḍah*, then, whose positional vertigo of othered selfhood it uncannily voices, *tarjamah* in its biographical sense survives beyond its death certificate in the dictionaries as well as in significant works, albeit in a translated form nonidentical with *tarjamah* past. As it turns out, *tarjamah*-as-life is arguably more marginal in the premodern lexical record, although more abundant in the archive. For while the use of *tarjamah* to denote "biography," Dale F. Eickelman notes, is widely attested in Arabic works from at least the eleventh century

onward (see Gutas et al.), this is "neither the earliest nor the most common" sense of *tarjamah*, as Tarek Shamma observes (4).⁶ On *tarjamah* as biography, in fact, premodern lexicons seem largely silent, foregrounding instead the senses of "interpretation" and "translation"—and the figure of the translator-interpreter, the *turjumān*. Witness, for instance, the fourteenth-century dictionary المصباح المنير (*al-Miṣbāḥ al-Munīr*; *The Illuminating Lantern*) by the Egyptian lexicographer Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn 'Alī al-Muqrī al-Fayyūmī (d. ca. 1368), who defines the verb *tarjama* as follows:

وترجم كلام غيره اذا عبر عنه بلغة غير لغة المتكلم واسم الفاعل
ترجمان

(35)

He interpreted or translated [*tarjama*] the speech of another [besides himself]; that is, he expressed it in a language other than the language of the speaker. The noun indicating the doer of the action [*ism al-fā'il*] is *turjumān*. . . .

Curiously, al-Fayyūmī says nothing of the verbal noun *tarjamah* as "biography" (nor, for that matter, as "interpretation" or "translation"); rather, he foregrounds the verb *tarjama* and defines it in one sense alone, that of interlingual interpretation or translation: speech "in a language other than the language of the speaker." Another noun, however, does shadow the verb *tarjama*: the figure of the *turjumān* (pronounced in various ways, also *tarjumān* or *tarjamān*). In defining that term grammatically, as the doer of the action denoted by the verb *tarjama*, al-Fayyūmī implies, perhaps, a more restrictive sense of *turjumān* than that advanced by some of his predecessors and successors. Where others gloss the *turjumān* as an "interpreter" of discourse more generally (in one's own language as well as in others), al-Fayyūmī insists on the *turjumān* as an arbiter of foreignness. The *turjumān* renders the speech of another person in a language foreign to the original speaker.

Colla is thus right to suggest that premodern Arabic intimately links the act of interpretation or translation that the verb *tarjama* denotes to the human actor who performs it: the *turjumān* (141).

Indeed, under the headwords *tarjama* and *rajama* (رجم) in the thirteenth-century dictionary *لسان العرب* (*Lisān al-‘Arab; The Arab Tongue*), compiled by the North African scholar Ibn Manẓūr (d. 1311), the noun *turjumān*—defined first as *المُفَسِّرُ للسان* (“interpreter of the tongue,” that is, language; 1: 426) or simply as *المُفَسِّرُ* (“interpreter,” “exegete”; 3: 1603)—frames the verb. One discovers the action through the actor; one reaches the meanings of *tarjama*—and offstage, *tarjamah*, the act of interpreting or translating and the reading produced—through the *turjumān*, by learning that the latter is *الَّذِي يُتَرْجَمُ* *الْكَلَامِ، أَي يَنْقُلُهُ مِنْ لُغَةٍ إِلَى لُغَةٍ أُخْرَى* [yutarjimu] discourse, that is, transports it [yanqu-luhu] from one language into another language”; 1: 426), or by traveling a circuit from the *turjumān* to the action, where *قَدْ تَرْجَمَ كَلَامَهُ إِذَا فَسَّرَهُ بِلِسَانٍ آخَرَ* (“one has translated one’s words if one has interpreted or explained these in another tongue”; 3: 1603), and back: *وَمِنْهُ التَّرْجَمَانُ* (“thence *al-tarjamān* [the interpreter or translator]”; 3: 1603). And in *القاموس المحيط* (*al-Qāmūs al-Muḥīṭ; The Encircling Ocean*), the fourteenth-century lexicon compiled by the Persian scholar Majd al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Ya’qūb al-Fayrūzābādī (also Firūzābādī; d. 1415) on which al-Bustānī based his modern *Muḥīṭ al-Muḥīṭ*, the *turjumān* eclipses the verb *tarjama*, in that (unlike in *Lisān al-‘Arab*) *turjumān* is now the headword and *tarjama* is embedded in its definition, with *tarjamah* again offstage (83). In sum, to borrow the words of W. B. Yeats, on the lexical stage on which *tarjamah* flickers as something of an absent presence, we cannot “know the dancer from the dance” (245). If *tarjamah* as “biography”—as a “life” told—makes no direct appearance in many premodern lexicons,⁷ the “life” of the *turjumān* assuredly does.

As Colla astutely notes, foreignness too is encoded in the premodern DNA of *tarjamah*, the term that would become the primary equivalent of “translation” in modern Arabic. “[W]hether in English [or in] Arabic,” he remarks, “the vocabulary of translation/*tarjama* is borrowed from other languages[.] In that borrowing, to maintain an image of the word in its original, is in a sense to *decline* to perform the act of translation most narrowly defined” (142). Indeed, the long controversy over

the root of the verb *tarjama* from which *tarjamah* derives, as well as of the noun *turjumān* to which it is related, testifies to the disjointed lineage of *tarjamah* in Arabic. Ibn Manẓūr indexes *turjumān* under both the quadrilateral root *tarjama* [t-r-j-m] and the trilateral root *rajama* [r-j-m], flirting with foreignization in the first instance and domestication in the second (1: 426, 3: 1603). Al-Fayyūmī, in turn, wonders whether the *tā’* [t] that helms the verb *tarjama* is supplemental or integral to the verb and concludes the latter (35–36)—a conclusion al-Fayrūzābādī upholds (83). Remarking on al-Fayyūmī’s perspective, Colla suggests that “[m]odern scholars of Semitic languages agree, telling us that *tarjama* is borrowed from the Aramaic (or Syriac) *targm*, meaning ‘to interpret’” (142). As for al-Bustānī, he classes the verb *tarjama* under *tā’*, after al-Fayrūzābādī, but teeters (as Ibn Manẓūr implicitly does) on the brink between its potential foreignness—noting its possibly “Chaldean” provenance—and its potential Arabness, citing the alternative root *rajama* (161–62). Indeed, as Hannah Scott Deuchar has noted, al-Bustānī’s *Muḥīṭ* distinguishes between *tarjamah* (“the interpretation or ‘*tafsīr*’ of a foreign term, and the provision of its equivalent in Arabic”) and *ta’rīb* (“Arabization”) by defining the latter as “the preservation of a foreign word more or less in its original form, but made to submit to Arabic grammatical and morphological rules” (190). She cites the example of the Greek *philosophia* turned Arabic *falsafah* (190–91), which the Syro-Lebanese intellectual Jurjī Zaydān adduced in a lively 1908 public critical debate on *tarjamah*, *ta’rīb*, and how best to “render foreign concepts in Arabic” (190), whose exchanges were published in three of Cairo’s foremost journals: *الهلال* (*al-Hilāl; The Crescent Moon*, which Zaydān edited and published), *المقتطف* (*al-Muqtataf; The Digest*), and *المنار* (*al-Manār; The Lighthouse*). Reading Colla’s suggestion that the term *tarjamah* “maintain[s] an image of the word in its original” with Scott Deuchar’s discussion, I propose that the term *tarjamah*—as an “Arabization” that retains the phonemes of the Aramaic *targum* even as it gives them new Arabic shape—offers us a vision of translation that holds foreignness in view.

The Foreignness of the Native, the Artifice of the Natural

Foreignness clings to the figure of the *turjumān*, particularly as it shape-shifts from its premodern to its early modern guises. As Colla and E. Natalie Rothman attest, between the thirteenth and the nineteenth centuries the *turjumān* or *dragoman* became an important diplomatic-commercial mediator between the Islamicate and European worlds and their languages (Colla 145; Rothman 4).⁸ Thick traffic between Venice and the Ottoman Empire linked Venetian *dragomanni*—citizens of Venice, “urban elites of Venice’s Adriatic and eastern Mediterranean colonies” (Rothman 25), and Catholics of “Genoese, Pisan, and Venetian” descent long established in Istanbul (26)—to Ottoman *tarājim*, who often hailed from “ethnic and religious minorities” (Colla 145): Armenians, Jews, Greeks, and European converts to Islam. Such translators “were feared,” Colla argues, because they represented “the terror of knowing that there is no such thing as neutral mediation” (145); “their role,” writes Rothman, “far exceeded rendering a speaker’s message in another language” (4). The life of the *turjumān* that sidles up to *tarjama* and *tarjamah*—and the lexical and real-historical brush with foreignness of both the word *turjumān* and the personhood it names—frame modern *tarjamah*-as-translation, reminding us that its imagined positivist transparency (al-Bustānī’s “simpler” language) is anything but.

In the figure of the *turjumān*, then, twine three cases that inflect the modern Arabic term *tarjamah* with accents arguably less marked in its supposed English equivalent, “translation”: a strongly hermeneutic understanding of translation as interpretation, exceeding the mere transfer of meaning from one language to another; a foreignness to both the “source” and “target” worlds whose languages and epistemes the *turjumān* mediates, captured in the lexical foreignness of the very term *turjumān* (and its quadrilateral “root,” *t-r-j-m*) to Arabic; and an emphasis on the personhood, at once intimate and detached, of the interpreter or translator. Indeed, we might say that the alter ego of *tarjamah* as

biographical “life”—though encrypted in premodern lexicons and ultimately eclipsed in the later twentieth century—haunts *tarjamah*-as-translation as a conceptual ghost. As Dwight F. Reynolds and his coauthors suggest, we might view the biographical valence of *tarjamah* as an extension of the act of interpretation, implied by *tarjamah* writ large, to the “text” of a life:

The *tarjama* as biographical notice may be taken to be a representation of a person, to be distinguished from the physical being; it is an inexact, imperfect copy of a life, just as a commentary cannot represent the original text, or a translation represent the Qur’ān. But it is a key to the person. . . . (42)

As biography, the *tarjamah* passes for one mode of *naql*—replication—yet represents another: transport or displacement. Thus, Colla, citing Eickelman’s gloss of the biographical face of *tarjamah*, notes that the life it captures is distanced: the premodern *tarjamah* eschews interiority, limning the personhood of a religious, political, or scholarly figure through a third-person account of that individual’s moral character and deeds as interpreted by sources of equal moral integrity (141–42). I suggest that like the *turjumān* as living translator, the *tarjamah* as recounted “life” evokes Naoki Sakai’s theorization of the translator as a “*subject in transit*” whose relationships to so-called source and target texts are ever shifting (11, 13): simultaneously hailed by the source text as a “you” and hailing the target text as an “I,” yet also a “bystander” to both, observing the interactions of source and target “languages”—although Sakai questions the notion of bordered “languages,” arguing that they emerge as such through translation (11–15, 52–59). At times that shifting subject, Sakai argues, occupies the first person, at others the second, at others the third—much as a *turjumān* of languages or lives might, the final *tarjamah* masking the changing terms of address.

Shifting though the subject of *tarjamah*-as-biography may be, however, shifty it was not: if the Romance languages imagine translation as treachery (witness the Italian adage “traddutore, traditore” [“translator, traitor”] or the French anxiety that

translations might be “belles infidèles” [“unfaithful belles”]), the Arabic biographical tradition posited *tarjamah* as veridical discourse, a morally credible voice recounting the life of a respected authority.⁹ Still, the conjectural face of *tarjamah* shadows positive knowledge with the specter of its negation, since, as Wail S. Hassan, Colla, and Issa note, the hypothesized root to which some medieval Arabic lexicographers traced the verb *tarjama*, *rajama* (*r-j-m*), may also refer to the casting of stones against Satan, adulterers, and other traitorous souls.¹⁰ That association survives even in al-Bustānī’s definition of 1867:

ولا بعيد ان تكون الترجمة مأخوذة من رجم في الكلدانية بمعنى القى
وطرح او من الرجم في العربية بمعنى التكلم بالظن
(162)

[I]t is not unlikely that [the noun] *tarjamah* is taken from [the verb] *rajama* in Chaldean, meaning “to throw” and “to declaim” or “to propose” [*alqā wa-taraḥa*], or from [the noun] *al-rajm* in Arabic, meaning to *speak ill [of someone] based on conjecture*. . . . (my emphasis)

Under the sign of *rajama*, whether foreign or native, *tarjamah* assumes a wayward life, not a “true” one. If *tarjamah*-as-biography recalls the Islamically inflected Arabic expression *إقطع الشك باليقين* (“Intercept doubt with certainty”), the Arabic etymology hypothesized for *tarjamah*-as-translation does precisely the opposite; it intercepts certainty with doubt.

NOTES

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1. As Sacks’s reading of the reimagination of language in the *nahḍah* suggests, historical time became the time of language as such, now understood to have a life and to confront the prospect of death (95–97). On language as the image of empirically knowable “life,” see Tageldin.

2. Gutas et al. cite this time frame; Ḥasan, linking *tarjamah* to related biographical genres, dates it to the first to second centuries AH, or seventh to eighth centuries CE (18–19, 30–31).

3. Given Issa’s argument, my focus is on documented early Islamic usage. More broadly, however, the “new word” *tarjamah* is not so new. As Shamma notes, the “earliest attested occurrence in Arabic” of a related noun appears “in the poetry of pre-Islamic Arabia in the form of ‘*mutarjim*’ (c. 525 CE), which in the context meant ‘someone who interprets or explains,’” and “in another poem (c. 600 CE),” the noun *turjumān* steals into documented usage “in the rare plural form ‘*tarajim*’ (التراجيم),” or *tarajim*, referring to “‘the innkeeper’s servants,’ and also to interpreters, as ‘wine sellers were non-Arabs who needed someone to explain their speech to people’” (3). Notice, even here, the ghost of foreignness interrupting Arabness.

4. On the implications of al-Bustānī’s *Muḥit* for modern Arabic, see Zachs and Dror; on the engagements and discontinuities of al-Bustānī’s lexicon and others with premodern antecedents, see al-Musawi, “Republic” 276–80. On the efflorescence of lexicography in medieval Arabic, see al-Musawi, “Medieval.”

5. See also Ḥasan’s study, published in 1955. Tellingly, Ḥasan calls even modern European biographies *tarajim* (see 9–12) and classes the Egyptian intellectual Ṭāhā Ḥusayn’s الأيام (1926–67; *al-Ayyām; The Days*) and similar modern Arabic works among التراجيم الذاتية (“autobiographies” [*al-tarajim al-dhātīyyah*]; 26). Following yet complicating Ḥasan, Kesrouany reads the early-twentieth-century autobiographies, autobiographical novels, and bildungsromans of both Ḥaykal and Ḥusayn as modern *tarajim* (155–209).

6. According to Eickelman, *tarjamah* in the biographic sense appears “in the titles of three works” by al-Tha’alibī (961–1038), and Yāqūt’s معجم الأديباء (*Mu’jam al-Udabā’; Dictionary of the Literati*) “refers to earlier scholars who compiled *tarāḍim*” (Gutas et al.). Compare Reynolds et al. 49n16.

7. While the nineteenth-century English Orientalist Edward William Lane, for example, often cites more than one premodern Arabic dictionary as sources for the definitions in his comprehensive مد القاموس: *An Arabic-English Lexicon* (1863; *Madd al-Qāmūs: An Arabic-English Lexicon; Expanding al-Qāmūs: An Arabic-English Lexicon*), he adduces only scattered references (“*passim*”) in the Cairo-based Indian scholar Murtaḍā al-Zabīdī’s eighteenth-century dictionary تاج العروس (*Tāj al-’Arūs; The Bride’s Tiara*), alongside “other works of post-classical times,” as his sources for *tarjamah* as a “*life*, or *biography*, or *biographical notice*, of any person” (Lane 302).

8. Per Colla 143, *dragoman*—in Rothman’s parlance, “a foreignizing loanword” (4)—enters English from Arabic through medieval Latin and Old French and Spanish.

9. See Colla 142. See also Gutas et al., where Eickelman notes that the *tarjamah*, though not narrated chronologically, provides specific dates for events. Polizzotti ascribes the phrase “les belles infidèles” to “the seventeenth-century French critic Gilles Ménage” (49).

10. See Hassan x; Colla 142; Issa 20. The bearing of this root on the verb *tarjama* is controversial. Rashwan notes Ramzi Baalbaki’s call to redefine *r-j-m* through non-Arabic sources. Albright insists that “the Arabic and Hebrew stem *rgm*, ‘to stone,’” bears no relation to Akkadian and Ugaritic words denoting speaking or saying,

“whence *targumannu*, ‘interpreter’” (31), while Rabin argues that *tarjama* descended from Hittite, not Akkadian, since in all Semitic languages except Ugaritic, where *rgm* means “to speak,” *rgm* means “to speak against someone” (135), recalling the Hebrew, Aramaic, Arabic *rgm* “to stone” (135n9).

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