

TRANSLATING THE UNSAYABLE: EXPLORING TRANSLATION POETRY AS A LITERARY GENRE

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Abstract:

This paper examines translation poetry as a distinct literary genre, considering how it functions at the intersection of original poetic creation and cross-linguistic mediation. The multiple challenges posed by poetry translation—its attention to sound, rhythm, imagery, culture-specific meaning, and aesthetic form—are surveyed alongside theoretical frameworks from translation studies and poetics. Key issues such as translatability, fidelity versus creativity, form vs. content, and the translator's role as creative agent are analysed. The discussion then situates translation poetry within the broader field of literary genres: how it both inherits features of poetry and translation, yet acquires its own distinct identity. Examples and case studies illustrate the methodological and aesthetic decisions translators make, and how these decisions shape reception in target cultures. The paper argues that translation poetry cannot simply be treated as secondary to original poetry or as derivative translation, but must be recognised as a hybrid, generative literary form with its own stakes. It concludes by reflecting on the implications for literary criticism, translator practice, and cross-cultural literary exchange.

Keywords: Poetry, Translation, Cross Culture, translator's role, identity, hybrid, generative, etc.

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Introduction:

In the realm of comparative literature and translation studies, poetry occupies a privileged yet problematic status. Its compactness, density, musicality, lexical richness, cultural embeddedness and formal constraints make it arguably the most demanding genre for translation. As several scholars have observed, translating poetry is frequently described as “impossible” or at least uniquely difficult relative to prose. ([rrlinguistics.ru][1]) Yet, despite—or because of—these difficulties, poetry translation has generated sustained theoretical interest, producing significant reflection on what it means to mediate poetic texts and what is lost and gained in the process.

When we speak of translation poetry, we take as our object those poems rendered from one language into another, and we consider them not merely as auxiliary texts (translations of original poetry) but as literary artefacts in their own right — a genre that bridges

original poetic creation and translation practice. In this sense, translation poetry occupies a liminal space: it partakes of the original poem's aesthetic, but it is also shaped by the demands and possibilities of the target language, culture, audience and translator. This hybridity raises important questions: How does a translation preserve or transform poetic form? To what extent can meaning, tone, rhythm, sound, cultural reference and form be preserved? What is the role of the translator—merely mediator, or creative co-author? And how should translation poetry be situated within literary genres and criticism?

This paper sets out to explore translation poetry as a literary genre: first by defining its contours and conceptualising its features; then by reviewing the major challenges and strategies in translating poetry; next by exploring how translation poetry differentiates itself as a genre; and finally by reflecting on

implications for practice and criticism. Through this examination we aim to show that translation poetry is not simply a derivative or secondary phenomenon but deserves attention as a generative literary form in its own right.

Literary genres are often defined by a combination of formal, aesthetic, and cultural-historical features. Poetry, broadly defined, is “a literary work in which the expression of feelings and ideas is given intensity by the use of distinctive style and rhythm.” ([globalpoetics.org][2]) In poetry the arrangement of language — lexical choices, sound, metre, stanzaic form, imagery — is integral to the effect of the poem, not merely its semantic content. When a poem is translated into another language, the translator must deal not only with meaning but with form, with sound, with aesthetic effect and cultural specificity. The translation thereby becomes more than a linguistic conversion—it becomes a creative act.

In this sense, translation poetry can be characterised as a hybrid genre: it is at once translation (a rendering from one language into another) and poetry (an original literary creation with aesthetic value). It thus raises the question: is translation poetry simply “poetry in translation” (i.e., the target-language version of a foreign original) or does it stand as a separate genre with its own conventions, expectations, and aesthetics? Some scholars argue the latter: that translation poetry is not wholly reducible to either category but merits its own theoretical consideration. The chapter “The Translation of Poetry” in **The Oxford Handbook of Translation Studies** emphasises that poetry translation “involves cognition, discourse, and action by and between human and textual actors in a physical and social setting.” ([OUP Academic][3]) Thus translation poetry is not simply text-to-text but embedded in cultural, social and aesthetic networks.

The interlingual nature of translation poetry refers to its existence between two languages and cultures. A

translated poem carries the essence, rhythm, imagery, and emotional depth of the source text, yet it must find new expression within the structural and aesthetic boundaries of another language. This process involves not only transferring words but also re-creating the poem’s artistic spirit in a different linguistic system. Since no two languages share identical sounds, idioms, or poetic conventions, the translator must creatively balance fidelity to the original with naturalness in the target language, ensuring that the poem retains its emotional and artistic resonance. The aesthetic or poetic dimension of translation poetry emphasizes that the translated text must stand as an independent poem with artistic value in the target language. It should evoke emotion, rhythm, and imagery that feel natural and powerful to its new readers, rather than existing only as an explanatory version of the original. A successful poetic translation captures the creative spirit and emotional intensity of the source while adapting its form and style to the conventions of the target culture. Thus, the translated poem becomes a complete artistic creation—authentic, expressive, and resonant—capable of moving readers just as the original does.

The mediator or translator plays a crucial creative role in the process of poetry translation. Rather than being a neutral transmitter of words, the translator actively interprets, selects, and reshapes meaning to suit the linguistic and cultural context of the target audience. This often involves compromises—sacrificing certain elements of sound or form—to preserve the poem’s emotional and aesthetic essence. At times, the translator may innovate, introducing new imagery or rhythm to recreate the poem’s impact. In doing so, the translator becomes a co-creator, participating in the generative act of making art that bridges two languages and imaginative worlds. The cultural and cross-cultural dimension of translation poetry highlights how translating a poem involves more than linguistic transfer—it is also a dialogue between cultures. Poems

often contain culture-specific symbols, idioms, traditions, and rhythmic patterns that reflect the worldview of the original society. When translating, the poet-translator must interpret and adapt these elements to resonate with readers from a different cultural background without losing their original flavor. This process transforms the translation into a site of cultural negotiation, where meanings are balanced between faithfulness to the source and accessibility to the target audience, fostering deeper intercultural understanding and appreciation.

The reception dimension of translation poetry focuses on how a translated poem is understood and appreciated within the target culture. Every culture has its own literary traditions, poetic styles, and reader expectations that shape the way a poem is interpreted. When a poem is translated, it enters a new literary environment where its form, tone, and themes may be perceived differently. Thus, translation poetry is not merely a direct transfer of the original text but a re-situated creation that gains new meanings and significance within the target culture. Its success depends on how well it connects with the aesthetic sensibilities of new readers.

By viewing translation poetry as a genre, rather than as merely “poetry translated”, we open up analytic possibilities: we can ask about its conventions, its standards of evaluation, its aesthetic norms, its place in literary systems, its creative potentials and its constraints. Indeed, scholars have begun to develop linguistic models for assessing poetry translation—such as the systemic functional linguistics (SFL)-based model of lexicogrammar, phonology, graphology and context. ([Brill][4]) This suggests that translation poetry demands genre-specific analytic frameworks.

Translating poetry presents particular challenges that exceed those of prose translation. The difficulties can be grouped in several inter-related pairs: form vs. meaning; sound/music vs. sense; culture-specific

reference vs. target comprehensibility; translator’s fidelity vs. creativity. Below these categories are explored in turn.

While in prose translation the primary aim may be to convey meaning (semantic and pragmatic fidelity) and perhaps a sense of style, in poetry the very form of the poem (lineation, metre, rhyme, alliteration, enjambment, visual shape) is part of its meaning and effect. As one study notes, poetry translation must “pay attention to the forming of texts... because poetry is bound by rhythm, dimension, rhyme, and the arrangement of lines and stanzas.” ([Al-Kindi Publisher][5]) Translators often face the choice: preserve metre and rhyme and risk sacrificing sense or naturalness; or prioritise sense and omit or radically alter form. Some translators attempt compromise, but that entails delicate trade-offs.

Poetry frequently foregrounds sound – not merely as ornament, but as integral to meaning and effect: e.g., echo, assonance, internal rhyme, rhythm, cadence. When moving to another language, these sound features may not map easily, forcing the translator to recreate analogous effects or sacrifice them. Mahmoud Jarrar identifies metaphor and indirection as particularly difficult in poetry translation because metaphor is often deeply embedded in cultural and linguistic patterns. ([rllinguistics.ru][1]) The translator must decide whether to preserve a translation of metaphor, create a new metaphor in the target language, or resort to literal meaning.

Poems frequently embed culture-specific images, idioms, historical or mythological references, lexical puns or neologisms. Translating them requires cultural mediation: will the translator domesticate (make it understandable to the target culture) or foreignise (preserve the source culture flavour even at the risk of reader difficulty)? As Al-Kadery’s study on Arabic poetry translation shows, this is a central strategy decision and has implications for loss of meaning.

Additionally, poetry tends to use highly concentrated language — no redundancy, each word bearing weight. One study points out: “Newmark ... stated that poetry is the most personal and concentrated of all literary works. There is no redundancy.” ([Al-Kindi Publisher][5]) Thus any word lost or changed in translation may break the chain of associations, sound, rhythm and image.

Because of these constraints, the translator of poetry is more than a mediator and often behaves like a co-creator. They must re-imagine the poem in another language and might adjust imagery, structure, or even content to capture what is felt rather than what is said. The notion of “authorship-in-translation” has been explored in translation studies, for example in relation to modernist poet-translators. ([intralinea.org][6]) Evaluative frameworks thus often recognise that a translation of a poem cannot be judged purely on literal fidelity; instead the aesthetic success as a poem in its own right must count.

Some theorists argue that poems may contain irreducibly language-specific features—pun, word-play, culture-bound metaphor, rhythm, metre—that cannot be fully transferred. This raises the question whether a “faithful” translation is feasible or whether any translation inevitably becomes a new poem. The notion of “loss” is frequently invoked. For example, Ma and Wang’s linguistic model emphasise that both form and meaning must be accounted for in translation quality assessment, and implicitly recognise that some aspects may be untranslatable. ([Brill][4]) The challenge then is not to eliminate loss, but to manage it; to choose which features one preserves and which one adapts, always aware of trade-offs.

Given these challenges, translation poetry is a highly reflexive act: the translator must be deeply aware of both source and target language poetic conventions, of cultural frames, of reader expectations, and of the aesthetics of the poem as text and as experience. Thus

the translator’s decisions shape the identity of the translated poem — whether it tilts toward literal rendition, poetic adaptation, cultural domestication or creative transformation.

Having defined translation poetry and explored its challenges and strategies, the question remains: what makes it genre-distinctive? Why treat it as a genre rather than just “poetry translated”? Below are several arguments for its status as a distinct literary genre, followed by some of its distinctive features.

Translation poetry is at once derivative and original: it inherits the source poem’s inspiration, structure, meaning, and yet it must generate a new poem in a new linguistic and cultural context. That generativity gives it its own literary presence: the translated poem is read as a poem in the target language, with its own effect, audience, history and reception. This hybrid status situates it as a genre that is not simply second-rate to the original but creative in its own right.

In original poetry, the author is clear; in translated poetry, the translator often bears creative responsibility. This dual authorship is part of the genre’s identity: readers and critics may enquire not only about the original poet’s intention but the translator’s choices. The sense of translator-as-poet is a hallmark of translation poetry. Criticism of the genre thus often addresses translation quality and aesthetic success, not just linguistic fidelity.

Because translated poems inherit (or respond to) the formal features of the source poem (metre, rhyme, imagery, cultural signifiers), the translated poem must negotiate these constraints in the target language. In doing so it reveals a genre-specific aesthetic agenda: the translation must succeed as a poem in the target language, while remaining in a relation to the source. Thus the genre has its own aesthetic parameters: adequacy (to source) + literary success (in target).

Translation poetry mediates between literatures, languages and cultures. It is often instrumental in

introducing foreign-language poetries to new audiences, influencing target-language poetic practices, and shaping literary reception. Thus the genre plays an important role in global literary ecology, not just as text but as cultural artefact and mediating institution. This institutional/ reception dimension contributes to its genre status.

Because translation poetry is distinctive, critical norms for assessing it differ somewhat from those of original poetry or standard translation. Critics may ask: Does the translated poem work as a poem? Does it convey the source aesthetic? How does it handle form, sound, culture, and reader reception? Models such as the SFL-based model referenced above illustrate such genre-specific evaluation. ([Brill][4])

Historically, translation poetry often emerges in moments of cross-cultural exchange (e.g., colonial contexts, global modernism, post-colonial literatures). The genre thus inherits and reflects larger cultural movements. Its history contributes to its genre identity: a translator may not simply translate; the translated poem becomes part of the target culture's literary history. For example, the book **Transcultural Poetics: Chinese Literature in English Translation** highlights how translations of Chinese poetry into English involve aesthetic and cultural mediation that shapes English-language poetic practice. ([Routledge][8])

Together, these factors affirm that translation poetry deserves genre recognition: it is not merely derivative but creative, not simply translation but literary, not just form-transfer but aesthetic mediation.

Conclusion:

Translation poetry occupies a unique and vibrant place in literature: at the confluence of languages, cultures and aesthetic traditions. It is neither simply translation nor simply poetry but a hybrid genre that demands its own theoretical attention, practical awareness and critical frameworks. The translator of poetry is at once translator, cultural mediator and creative poet; the

translated poem must stand as an artefact of aesthetic value in its own right, even as it engages in dialog with a source text. The challenges of form, sound, culture, meaning and reception render translation poetry distinctively difficult but also rich in potential. When we treat translation poetry as a genre, we recognise its generative capacity: the possibility of new poetic voices emerging through translation, of cross-cultural aesthetic fertilisation, of readers encountering poetries beyond their own language horizon.

In an age of increasing global literary exchange, translation poetry becomes ever more significant: it fosters literary diversity, enables cross-cultural empathy, and expands the imaginative reach of readers and writers alike. For scholars, translators and readers, acknowledging the particularities of translation poetry means embracing not only the difficulties of translation but the creative opportunities it offers. In doing so, we affirm that translation poetry is not a lesser cousin of original poetry but a vital, generative branch of the poetic tree—capable of standing on its own in the literary landscape.

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