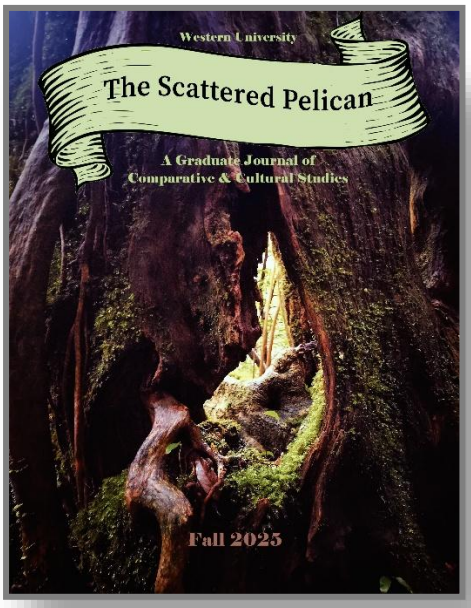
Issue #9 – Translations



The Scattered Pelican

Graduate Journal of Comparative Literature

FALL 2025

ISSN: 2369-5404

Editorial Board 2024-2025:

Find us online at **www.thescatteredpelican.ca**

Correspondence & Inquiries: **Contact@thescatteredpelican.ca**

Contact Editor-in-Chief: **Editor@thescatteredpelican.ca**

Comparative Literature Program
The Department of Languages and Cultures
Western University
Canada

TRANSLATING TRAVEL: PSYCHOLOGICAL, TEMPORAL AND LINGUISTIC DISPLACEMENT IN ABBAS MAROUFI'S *SYMPHONY OF THE DEAD*

Sogand Shenavar
Sapienza University of Rome
shenavar.2167626@studenti.uniroma1.it

Translation has always been an act of travel, a movement across languages, cultures, modes of perception and a delicate endeavor. Translation demands a delicate balance: the translator owes a debt to the original author to preserve and convey their intentions across linguistic and cultural boundaries. A key challenge is how to transfer meaning efficiently without loss. This issue is particularly significant when the text is nonlinear and revolves around the psychological experience of displacement or travel as a temporal transition. In Abbas Maroufi's novel *Symphony of the Dead*, time is fluid, the characters move freely across temporal boundaries, from past, to present, and to future, where they are always in transit. The task of the translator of such works is to build a bridge between linguistic, cultural, and social boundaries that are predominant in both the original and the target language. This essay aims to highlight some of these difficulties and convey that, regardless of how thoroughly one prepares for such travels, something will always be lost.

Utilizing a non-linear narrative, the fluidity of movement is presented masterfully in the way the author does not explain or mark the time of the narrative, but gives subtle cues for the reader to decipher this temporal transition. This stylistic choice then reflects psychological travel, a movement inward, memory-driven, and temporally unbound, which stems from the broken boundaries that are evident in the characters' psyche. Several factors intensify the complexity of translating such works, one being the fact that the Persian language does not have gendered pronouns, making the experience more captivating, especially when the tale is told through the mouths of many, across a time and space that has engulfed the entirety of the narrative in its sphere, since the story can go on for pages before the reader can decipher who the speaker is, allowing for an ambiguity in the narrative that heightens the interpretive role of the reader. Consider the following passage:

گفت: «حالا دیگر فرقی ندارد. خودم را رها کرده ام اب مرا ببرد. تو که خبر از دل من نداری.»
اما داشتم. ادمی شده بود که حال و اینده‌اش را رها کرده بود و به گذشته‌ها چسبیده بود. (Maroufi 248)

He said: “It doesn’t make a difference now. I have let myself go to be swept away by the tides. You have no idea what is happening to me.” But I had, he had become someone who had let go of his present and his future. Someone who was clinging to the past.”

The narrator here is the ghost of Soormelina, who was Aidin’s love interest, recalling a conversation she once had with Aidin. Gendered pronouns like “he” and “his” are inserted due to necessity, which removes the narrative’s ambiguity that can be found in the Persian text. This is not a minor shift as in the original text, the reader must go on the journey of the narrative cautiously and alert to be able to conclude and distinguish the nature and the characters of the passages they’ve read. Here, the translator is forced to bear the interpretive labour for the reader, which reduces the ambiguity and the narrative tension of the original text. Lawrence Venuti in *The Translator's Invisibility* (1995) argues that such choices “risk domesticating the text, prioritizing fluency and reader ease over the foreignness of the source” (Venuti 18). Thus affecting the reader’s experience by making decisions that would clarify what was once ambiguous.

One solution could be using gender-neutral pronouns such as “they” and “them”, however, this brings forth another layer of distortion, as it implies a specific cultural and linguistic stance that is not present in the Persian language. Sally McConnell-Ginet in *Gender and its relation to sex: The myth of ‘natural’ gender* explores how in the English language gendered pronouns are used in the “contexts where referents provided are of mixed sex or not sex-differentiable” (McConnell-Ginet 5). Confirming that when the referent gender is irrelevant or indeterminate, English doesn’t have a specific pronoun. Whereas in the Persian language, the absence of gendered pronouns provides a shield of ambiguity in the text. Further challenges can arise in cases of translating psychological displacement and the blurring of imagination and reality. In one scene, for example, a character appears to recount a visit to Moscow:

من دو سه روز همه ی اینها را تحمل میکردم و میدانستم که می اید.

میپرسیدم:« کجا بودی پسر؟ با اخم و تشر هم میپرسیدم.»

«رفته بودم مسکو.»

گفتم چه خبر بود؟

گفت سراسر جنگ بود و توی آن یخبندان و آتش بود که زبانه می‌کشید (Maroufi 50).

“I would tolerate all of this for a few days and knew he would eventually be back.

I would ask: “Where were you boy?” With a frown and a condescending tone.

"I had gone to Moscow." I asked how it was, he said it was an all-consuming war, fire blazing amidst the frozen terrain."

The travel described is not physical but a representation of psychological escapism or a metaphor for internal conflict. One translation might suggest that a quick journey has taken place, when in fact this is a psychological journey. The same issue arises in an opposite case when translating an actual physical journey, for instance, at a point the character Orhan had taken a trip to Astra to see two fortune-tellers, looking for an answer to his problem, upon receiving the answer, he makes the trip back home in haste. This journey has transformed into a spiritual movement, although a physical relocation is taking place as well. The tone is poetic, and there's a rhythm to the movement which is untranslatable. The mentioned text reads:

و من دویدم پیاده‌ها را دویدم و سواره‌ها را زجر کشیدم. گردنه‌ی حیران را که همه‌اش خاکی و پیچ در پیچ بود
پشت سر گذاشتم و تا خانه دویدم (Maroufi 341).

"And I ran, I ran past those on foot and suffered those riding. I passed the Heyran mountain pass which was full of twists and turns and covered in dirt, and ran to home."

The image is surreal: is Orhan running or does the emotional urgency of his return make it feel as though he is, since for him the boundaries of mind and body have blurred, because he is on the move, both physically and psychologically? This problem is followed up by another issue, the mountain pass, Heyran, which means "astonished" or "bewildered", adds another layer of symbolic meaning, which is difficult to preserve in English without extensive explanation. The terrain itself mirrors the character's internal state: winding, difficult, and disoriented. How can the translator convey that Orhan suffered because, as he was in a car traveling, there were others on horseback trekking much slower and their speed caused him suffering? The rhythm and the poetic language of the original text would also be lost in the Heyran mountain pass because the geographic location is circular and twisted, the name translates to the neck of Heyran which essentially means nothing in the target language. Thus, the translator must decide whether to leave this ambiguity intact or to clarify it through additional paratextual elements. Antoine Berman, in *The Experience of the Foreign* (1984), discusses this tension as part of the ethical responsibility of translation, calling it the "treason of the very experience of strangeness" (Berman 38). To preserve the strangeness, a solution presents itself in the form of Footnotes, which, while helpful, functions as a double-edged sword. Footnotes provide context, yet they also interrupt the reader's immersion and pre-empt interpretive discovery.

In conclusion, translating *Symphony of the Dead* and works with similar characteristics that employ nonlinear narratives and are full of fragmentation and stream of consciousness is not just a matter of linguistic transfer but an act of movement across time, language, and perception. The novel's non-linear temporality, gender ambiguity, and metaphorical landscapes challenge any straightforward translation, and in attempting to help, the translator risks altering the reader's journey through the text, thus disrupting the experience designed by the author. Each interpretive decision the translator makes alters the reader's trajectory through the narrative, either leaving the reader stranded or depriving them of exploring the text through their perception and interpretations. Thus, translation becomes a kind of travel: transformative, disorienting, and inevitably marked by loss. But similar to all journeys, it also offers the possibility of discovery—not only of another culture but of the limits and capacities of language itself, much like anything that could be lost through travel and transition, no translation comes without the price of loss. Loss is inevitable, whether it affects how readers recognize characters, perceive boundaries of time and space, interpret symbols, or experience the musicality of the text.

WORKS CITED

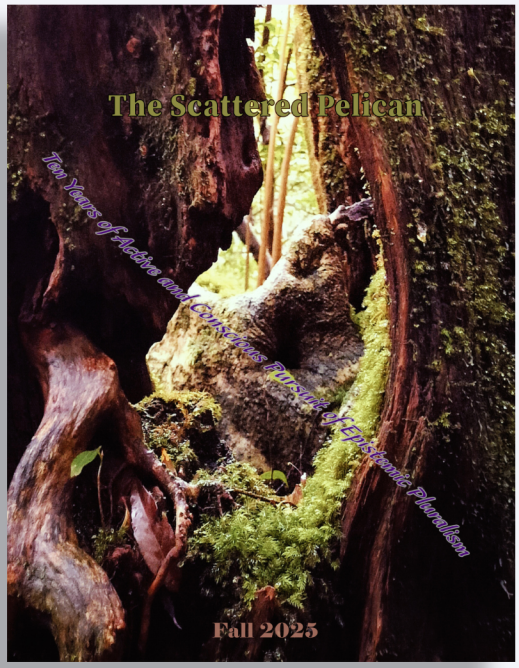
Berman, Antoine. The Experience of the Foreign: Culture and Translation in Romantic Germany. SUNY Press, 1992.

Ma'roufi, Abbas. سمفونی مردگان *[Symphony of the Dead]*. Tehran: Qoqnus Publishing, 2015.

McConnell-Ginet, Sally. "Gender and its relation to sex: The myth of 'natural' gender." Corbett, Greville. The Expression of Gender. Hubert & Co. GmbH & Co. KG, Göttingen, 2014, 3–39.

Venuti, Lawrence. The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation. Routledge, 1995.

The Scattered Pelican is committed to a comparative approach that embraces pluralism and inhabits the spaces or aporias of/in/between/ among discourses, ideologies, or methods of criticism; playfulness as a leveling perspective that resists the privileging of certain objects of study based on origins, genres, forms, or media; and an active and conscious pursuit of scholarship that enlarges the space of the discipline of comparative literature through deep engagement with a broad range of objects of study, novel applications of critical theory, and primary texts in their original languages.



The Scattered Pelican

ISSN: 2369-5404

Fall 2015 - Fall 2025