

Reading *Lolita* in Persian

Paul Sprachman

Professor Emeritus, Rutgers University

It would be difficult to find a more challenging novel to translate into Persian than Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*. As the medium of the values, ideas, and beliefs of the various people who use it, Persian does not seem to have much in common with the language of the original. Over the centuries, keepers of the classical Persian literary canon have not been particularly welcome to writing with sexually explicit content, writing that is often termed *alfiyeh-shalfiyeh*, a debased form of expression unworthy of serious or scholarly study.¹ In addition, erotic literature in general is not often a subject for public discussion or criticism in the language. While the Internet abounds in medical, legal, and theological advice on sexual matters as well as with pornographic content intended for Persian users, it is still not considered good manners to speak bluntly about the aesthetics of eroticism—much less sex—in mixed company.²

¹For a detailed description and examples of *alfiyeh-shalfiyeh* writing, see the author's *Erotic Persian* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda, 2020), xii, xxiv, 70–76. The present article grows out of “Erotic Persian in Exile,” the penultimate chapter of that book.

²The inhospitable climate for erotica in today's Iran is comparable to the prudish atmosphere in

Paul Sprachman taught English at the University of Isfahan, worked as a researcher at Columbia University, and taught Middle Eastern studies and Persian at Rutgers University. Sprachman is the translator of numerous works from Persian to English including *A Man of Many Worlds: The Memoirs of Dr. Ghasem Ghani* (Mage, 2006); *Journey to Heading 270°* by Ahmad Dehqan (Mazda, 2006); and *Chess with the Doomsday Machine* (Mazda, 2008) and *A City under Siege: Tales of the Iran-Iraq War* (Mazda, 2010) by Habib Ahmadzadeh.

Further complicating rendering *Lolita* are the complexities of Nabokov's writing. This is true, of course, for translation of the novel into any language, be it Persian or one more tolerant of explicitly erotic literature like French. Even today, some six-and-a-half decades after *Lolita* came out in Paris, Nabokov's unique brand of English poses a challenge to readers and interpreters of the novel. The scrupulous translator has to convey what David Lodge calls the author's "extraordinary stylistic virtuosity, his metaphorical inventiveness, and complex deployment of an entire thesaurus of other rhetorical devices."³

The purpose of the present article is to shed some light on modern Persian's capacity to convey a modern work of erotic literature. The focus of this article is a recent translation of *Lolita* by Dr. Akram Pedramnia,⁴ which, given the traditional aversion to and contemporary abhorrence of erotic writing in Persian, could not be published in her native Iran. It was brought out, instead, in 2014 by the Kabul-based publisher Nashr-e Zaryab.⁵ This raises the obvious question of why translate *Lolita* into Persian when most of the intended audience for such a work resides in Iran, where it is criminal to sell or read the book. Dr. Pedramnia's introduction addresses the question by citing Nabokov biographer Brian Boyd, who says it is high "time that [this work] be translated accurately, explicitly, and faithfully into one of the great literary languages of the world (Persian)."⁶ Dr. Pedramnia's is not the first Persian translation

the United States during much of the last century. *Lolita*, both as a novel and a film, has often been subject to censorship. The book initially came out in Paris because no American publisher Nabokov consulted would touch it. Stanley Kubrick had to tone down the erotic relationship between Humbert and Lolita in his 1982 film (Paris: Pathé), and, according to Caryn James, Adrian Lyne's 1997 (Paris: Pathé) remake had trouble finding an American distributor because of the film's depiction of that relationship. See James, "Revisiting a Dangerous Obsession," *New York Times*, 31 July 1998. Even today, nearly seven decades after Nabokov gave birth to her, Lolita lives in popular culture as the archetypal victim of adolescent sexual abuse. The jetliner ferrying underage females to Jeffrey Epstein's sex lairs has been called the "Lolita Express."

³Maurice Couturier, "A Forty-Year Journey in Nabokovland," *NOJ/HOЖ: Nabokov Online Journal* III (2009): i-xviii. Quote on p. ix.

⁴Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*, trans. Akram Pedramnia (Kabul: Nashr-e Zaryab, 2014).

⁵In her introduction to the translation, Dr. Pedramnia notes that parts of the translation were first posted online (see www.shahrvand.com/archives/41218). Nabokov, *Lolita*, trans. Pedramnia, 10.

⁶"وقت آن بود (این اثر) دقیق، صریح و بی پرده و با حفظ امانت داری به یک از زبان های بزرگ ادبی (فارسی) ترجمه شود." After back translating Pedramnia's citation, I was unable to find this quote in Boyd's works *Vladimir*

of *Lolita*. The extraordinarily prolific translator and journalist Dhabib Mansuri (1897–1986) produced a version of the work that is so marred by additions and omissions it cannot be called a translation in any sense of the term.⁷

At first glance, the difficulties involved in translating *Lolita* into literary Persian seem almost insurmountable. This is especially the case when one considers that preeminent scholars of the target language do not consider erotic written expression—no matter how high its putative redeeming social or artistic value—to be literature at all and classify it as a degenerate type of written expression known as *alfiyeh-shalfiyeh*. But the challenges the Persian translator faces go beyond the limitations of the language itself. Studies of how *Lolita* has fared when translated into such languages as French, Hebrew, and Swedish often comment on the challenges the author’s English presents. According to Nitsa Ben-Ari, Hebrew translator Yosef Varhaftig’s inability to “cope with the complex literary mechanisms and artifice of the text” result in an undue emphasis on *Lolita*’s “pornographic aspect.” Translators of *Lolita* into more culturally proximate and congenial languages than Persian have also commented on what a minefield Nabokov’s prose can be.⁸

Nabokov: The Russian Years (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), or *Stalking Nabokov: Selected Essays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011). Be that as it may, “Persian” is certainly Dr. Pedramnia’s parenthetical addition to the quotation, especially when one considers that Boyd’s comprehensive list of completed or in-the-works *Lolita* translations includes the following: “Greek, Turkish, Latin American (Mexican, Venezuelan, and Uruguayan), India[n] (Or[i]ya, Bengali, Assamese, Malayalam, and Gujarati), and five Arabian editions” (*American Years*, 404). These translations joined others in less “exotic” languages like French, German, Italian, Dutch, and Swedish, which Nabokov’s wife, Véra, drawing on her remarkable linguistic range and the help of informants, managed to check against the original. See Stacy Schiff, *Véra (Mrs. Vladimir Nabokov)* (New York: Modern Library, 1999), 240–41.

⁷See *Mizgerd* 21; Gol Mohammadi, “Negahi be zendagi va asar-e valdemir nabakuf,” *Shahrvand* (30 October 2014). Mansuri’s rendering is rarely found in book form today; however, a facsimile of the translation has appeared recently at fooji.ir/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/دانلود-رمان-لولیتا.pdf. An artist’s portrait of a seductive Sue Lyon on the original book cover suggests Mansuri’s translation came out after Stanley Kubrick’s 1962 film.

⁸See Nitsa Ben-Ari, *Suppression of the Erotic in Modern Hebrew Literature* (Ottawa, ON: University of Ottawa Press, 2006), 257–59, commenting on Yosef Varhaftig’s translation of *Lolita* (Tel Aviv: Ankor, 1959). In *Nabokov’s Eros*, Couturier lists some of the misinterpretations of the original in Eric Kahane’s French translation. Maurice Couturier, *Nabokov’s Eros and the*

Given the bias against sexually provocative writing in Persian, it would seem Dr. Pedramnia's efforts would be for naught; but the prospects of producing an accurate, explicit, and faithful translation of *Lolita* are not as bleak as they may seem. Responding to those who saw his book as pornographic, Nabokov maintained there are no obscenities in *Lolita*; thus, translators would not have to resort to vulgarity to describe sexual arousal and satisfaction.⁹ He himself had to admit, however, that "certain techniques in the beginning of *Lolita* (Humbert's journal, for example)" initially attracted many readers to the novel because they assumed it was a "lewd" book.¹⁰ Andrew Brink, a student of obsession in modern literature, goes further: "Readers who looked to *Lolita* for pornography were partly gratified although ultimately disappointed. The crudity of pornography is refined to a sophistication no living writer could emulate."¹¹

In other words, little in the novel would require the services of a censor in places where erotic writing is publishable. To be sure, Nabokov does write about sex, but, as Robert Roper points out, "[it] is mostly odorless and unlubricated, and indirectly realized."¹² The relative freedom to produce erotic writing in most Western countries, however, is not the unalloyed blessing it might seem at first blush. In his introduction to Maurice Couturier's *Nabokov's Eros and the Poetics of Desire*, David Lodge identifies the paradox that the lack of censorship, rather than fostering authors' creativity, has the opposite effect. In his view, censorship can be a boon to imaginative writing, because it "present[s] a stimulating

Poetics of Desire (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014). Kahane compared his efforts to a "debilitating act of lacemaking" (Schiff, *Véra*, 227).

⁹Boyd calls Nabokov's demur "coy." *American Years*, 256. He assumes the author was well aware his writing was provocative but achieved its effect without indulging in the mind-numbing prose and techniques of pornography, which Nabokov himself said "mate[s] obscenity with banality." Vladimir Nabokov, *Novels 1955–1962*, ed. Brian Boyd (New York: Literary Classics, 1996), 294. Echoing Boyd, Lennard calls Humbert's "learned, passing references" to the arcana of erotic fiction "sly." John Lennard, *Vladimir Nabokov Lolita* (Tirril, UK: Humanities-Ebooks, 2008), 1194–203. Will Farina's (2010) essay explores Nabokov's coyness in studying what he calls "the aesthetics of vulgarity" in *Lolita*. Will Farina, "Vladimir Nabokov and the Vulgar Aesthetic" (Outstanding Honors Thesis, University of South Florida, 2010).

¹⁰Nabokov, *Novels*, 295.

¹¹Andrew Brink, *Obsession and Culture: A Study of Sexual Obsession in Modern Fiction* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1996), 118.

¹²Robert Roper, *Nabokov in America: On the Road to Lolita* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 141.

challenge to writers, to which they respond by finding subtle ways to convey their meaning indirectly or more courageously by gradually testing and extending the limits of socially acceptable explicitness.”¹³ Too much freedom, according to Lodge, “can cause the writer almost as much anxiety as working under censorship.”¹⁴ This may be one bright light in the gloom caused by the Draconian censorship of writing in Afghanistan and Iran. Dr. Pedramnia probably felt no such anxiety and may have derived a measure of satisfaction in discovering culturally acceptable ways of expressing the openly erotic parts of Nabokov’s novel. But, as will be shown, finding anodyne alternatives to provocative language can rob *Lolita* of what makes it a supremely original work of art.

The Persian translator of *Lolita* has another advantage over other translators, dubious though it may be. In both Iran and Afghanistan, a wide age gap between men and their wives, some of whom are children (termed in Persian *kudak hamsar* or *dokhtaran-e zir-e sen*), is not exceptional.¹⁵ The story of a thirty-seven-year-old man marrying a girl one-third his age would have been familiar to readers of Persian. At the same time, many readers both before and after the 1979 Iranian Revolution would despise any middle-aged man who robbed a thirteen-year-old of her childhood and kept her in sexual enslavement for his own gratification. Whatever the case, Humbert’s crime lies outside of the scope of the analysis in this paper. The present assessment of Dr. Pedramnia’s translation judges it using Boyd’s three-fold criteria of accuracy, explicitness, and faithfulness to the original. It focuses on how much the need to maintain what is termed “modesty of written expression” (*‘effat-e kalam*) in Persian limits how the eroticism of *Lolita* is conveyed.

¹³Couturier, *Nabokov’s Eros*, vii.

¹⁴Couturier, *Nabokov’s Eros*, vii.

¹⁵The disparity exists in Iran not just because the marriage age for girls, as Azar Nafisi points out, was lowered to nine after the 1979 Revolution. Azar Nafisi, *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (New York: Random House, 2003), 39. Prior to that, men commonly wed girls one-third their age. At the time of this writing, the post-Revolutionary situation seems to be changing—at least on the legislative front. The Iranian parliament has recently passed a bill forbidding marriage for any girl under the age of thirteen and any boy under the age of sixteen (*Tasvib*). Anecdotal evidence from a BBC report (*Ezdevāj-e zir-e sen*) indicates that the age gap between grooms and brides in Afghanistan continues to be wide.

A culturally acceptable rendering of the original's eroticism comes in Dr. Pedramnia's translation of the novel's iconic first line: "Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins."¹⁶ In back translation, her version reads: "Lolita, lamp of my life, fire of my sexual organ."¹⁷ Choosing the anodyne "sexual organ" (*andam-e jensi*) in place of something more suggestive mutes the erotic undertones of Humbert's combustible loins. This rendering clearly weakens the translation's claim to being as explicit as possible. Pedramnia could have used *keshaleh* ("crotch") or *keshaleh-ye ran* ("upper thighs and crotch") instead of "sexual organ." She was certainly aware of *keshaleh*'s erotic potential; she uses it to render the phrase "the hot hollow of [Lolita's] groin," the destination of Humbert's "muscular thumb."¹⁸ Pedramnia also uses *andam-e jensi* for "loins" when it appears later in the text, and it has the same deadening effect on Nabokov's prose that it does in her translation of *Lolita*'s opening line. In the passage identifying the ideal connoisseur of "nymphets," those lissome girls between nine and fourteen who excite Humbert "so abominably," he says, "You have to be an artist and a madman, a creature of infinite melancholy, with a bubble of hot poison in your loins and a super-voluptuous flame permanently aglow in your subtle spine (oh, how you have to cringe and hide!)."¹⁹ In Persian (through back translation), he says: "You must be an artist or mad or one of limitless melancholy with a scalding bubble of poison in your sexual organ and the permanent and blazing rays of lust in your spine/backbone (oh, how you have to cringe in a corner and hide)."²⁰ Perhaps to lower the heat of the passage, "super-voluptuous," a

¹⁶Nabokov, *Lolita*, trans. Pedramnia, 19: "Lamp of my life" preserves the original's alliteration of the *l* sound to which Nabokov was often drawn. Later in the novel, he speaks of "the leap in my loins" (Vladimir Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, ed. Alfred Appel, Jr. [New York: Vintage, 1991], 23), which, in Pedramnia's translation (35), becomes *tahrīki dar andam-e jensi-am* or "an arousal in my sexual organ." Mansuri's translation of the first line is more circumspect, avoiding "loins" altogether: "O Lolita, light of my life, O you from whom my legs get their power" (Nabokov [s.d.]: 13). (ای لولیتا، ای روشنائی حیات من و ای کسی که پاهایم از تو قوت می‌گیرند).

¹⁷All translations are mine unless otherwise stated.

¹⁸Nabokov, *Annotated Lolita*, 63; Nabokov, *Lolita*, trans. Pedramnia, 87: از رسیدن شست عضلاتی. Nabokov's version (Nabokov [s.d.]: 58) ignores this part of Humbert's diary.

¹⁹Nabokov, *Annotated Lolita*, 19; Nabokov, *Lolita*, trans. Pedramnia, 29: باید هنرپیشه باشی یا دیوانه یا بی‌نهایت مالیخولیایی با حبیبی از سم داغ در اندام جنسی‌ات و پرتوهای دائمی و شعله‌ور شهوت در کمربت (اه، بین چطور باید گوشه‌ای کز کنی و پنهان شوی).

²⁰Nabokov, *Lolita*, trans. Pedramnia, 26: بالای سرمان، از لابه‌لای برگ‌های نازک و بلند، خوشه‌ای از ستاره‌ها می‌درخشید؛ آن آسمان لرزان به نظر به اندازه‌ی خود آنگاه زیر پیراهن نازکش برهنه بود. صورتش را در آسمان می‌دیدم، عجیب دور، به گونه‌ای که گویی

phrase common to Persian pornographic sites as *fowq al-‘adeh shahvani* or *fowq al-‘adeh hashari*, is not translated.²¹

Pedramnia’s translation also mutes the eroticism of the original in her literal rendering of Humbert’s first night alone with Lolita’s precursor, Annabel. Humbert describes how he and Annabel retire to a secluded grove where

a cluster of stars palely glowed above us, between the silhouettes of long thin leaves; that vibrant sky seemed as naked as she was under her light frock. I saw her face in the sky, strangely distinct, as if it emitted a faint radiance of its own. Her legs, her lovely live legs, were not too close together, and when my hand located what it sought, a dreamy and eerie expression, half-pleasure, half pain, came over those childish features. She sat a little higher than I, and whenever in her solitary ecstasy she was led to kiss me, her head would bend with a sleepy, soft drooping movement that was almost woeful, and her bare knees caught and compressed my wrist, and slackened again; and her quivering mouth, distorted by the acidity of some mysterious potion, with a sibilant intake of breath came near to my face. She would try to relieve the pain of love by first roughly rubbing her dry lips against mine; then my darling would draw away with a nervous toss of her hair, and then again come darkly near and let me feed on her open mouth, while with a generosity that was ready to offer her everything, my heart, my throat, my entrails, I gave her to hold in her awkward fist the scepter of my passion.²²

از خودش پرتوی کم رنگ می تاباند. پاهایش، پاهای زیبا و گرمش، خیلی به هم نزدیک نبودند، و وقتی دستم روی آنچه در جست و جویش بود قرار گرفت حال مبهم و ترسناکی، نیمی لذت و نیمی درد، بر آن حالت های کودکانه چیره شد. او کمی بالاتر از من نشست، و هر بار که در آن حال سرمستی بی مانندش به نقطه ای می رسید که می خواست مرا ببوسد سرش را با حرکتی آرام و سست که کمی اندوه زده می نمود خم می کرد و من دستم را میان زانوهای برهنه اش فشار می داد و دوباره فشار را کم می کرد، با سوتی از صدای نفسش که به صورت من می خورد. برای رهایی از درد عشق، نخست سفت لب های خشکش را روی لب های من می مالید، سپس طغلی من با پرتاب عصی موهایش به عقب از من فاصله گرفت، و دوباره در همان تاریکی به من نزدیک می شد و می گذاشت که دهان بازش را بمکم. با بخشندگی تمام، آماده بودم هر چه داشتم به او پیشکش کنم. قلب، گلو، دل، و روده، حتی چوگان پادشاهی غرورم را در مشت عجیبش گذاشتم تا نگه دارد.

²¹See “Kus kardan do-ta parastar-e fowq al-‘adeh-ye hashari-seks,” (5 June 2015), i. Persian slang for “horny,” *hashari*, appears in two modern travesties: Sadegh Hedayat, *Tup-e Morvāri (The Pearl Canon)* (Lexington, KY: Mazda, 1986), 142, and Ahmad Shamlu’s *Diary of an Auspicious Journey to Various States of Amrigh* [sic], (Tehran: Mazyar, 2005), 46. The term is used to describe people so sexually ravenous they attack every creature, male or female, that comes into view.

²²Nabokov, *Annotated Lolita*, 16–17.

In back translation, this becomes:

Above us, between the long and thin leaves, a cluster of stars shone; that vibrant sky seemed as naked as Annabel in her thin dress. I saw her face in the sky, strange remote, as if a faint light was shining from it. Her legs, her beautiful and warm legs, were not too close together, and when my hand was situated on what it was searching for a vague and frightful expression, half pleasure and half pain, prevailed over those childish expressions. She sat a little higher than I and in that peerless state of ecstasy whenever she reached the point she wanted to kiss me, she would bend her head down with a slow and gentle motion that seemed woeful and press my wrist between her bare knees and lessen the pressure again, with a whistling sound her breath would hit my face. To escape the pain of love, she would first rub her dry lips hard over mine, then my poor little child with a nervous backward toss of her hair would draw away from me, and again in that darkness would come near and let me suck on her open mouth. With complete generosity I was prepared to offer all I had to her. Heart, throat, stomach, and intestines, I would even place the scepter of my self-regard [*ghorur*] in her strange fist to hold.²³

Apart from the omission of “her quivering mouth, distorted by the acidity of some mysterious potion” (omitted, perhaps, because of the challenge in finding a likely Persian equivalent) and the mistranslation of “with a sibilant intake of breath came near to my face,” Pedramnia’s version faithfully follows the original. “Scepter of my self-regard (*chowgan-e padshahi-ye ghorur-am*),” literally “the royal polo mallet of my pride,” however, blunts Humbert’s arch “scepter of my passion.” The more

²³Nabokov, *Lolita*, trans. Pedramnia, 26: بالای سرمان، از لایه‌لای برگ‌های نازک و بلند، خوشه‌ای از ستاره‌ها: دور، به گونه‌ای که گویی از خودش پرتوی کمرنگ می‌تاباند. پاهای زیبا و گرمش، خیلی به هم نزدیک نبودند، وقتی دستم روی آنچه در جست‌وجویش بود قرار گرفت حال مبهم و ترسناکی، نیمی لذت و نیمی درد، بر آن حالت‌های کودگانه چیره شد. او کمی بالاتر از من نشست، و هر بار که در آن حال سرمستی بی‌مانندش به نقطه‌ای می‌رسید که می‌خواست مرا ببوسد سرش را با حرکتی آرام و سست که کمی اندوه‌زده می‌نمود ختم می‌کرد و من دستم را میان زانوهای برهنه اش فشار می‌داد و دوباره فشار را کم می‌کرد، با سوتی از صدای نفسش که به صورتم می‌خورد. برای رهایی از درد عشق، نخست سفت لب‌های خشکش را روی لب‌های من می‌مالید، سپس طفلی من با پرتاب عصبی موهایش به عقب از من فاصله گرفت، و دوباره در همان تاریکی به من نزدیک می‌شد و می‌گذاشت که دهان بازش را بمکم. با بخشندگی تمام، آماده بودم هر چه داشتم به او پیشکش کنم. قلب، گلو، دل، و روده، حتی چوگان پادشاهی غرورم را در مشت عجیبش گذاشتم تا نگه دارد.

common equivalent Persian expression for “scepter” is *‘asa-ye saltanati* (literally “royal staff”),²⁴ and the metaphorical use of *‘asa* for “male member” is well attested in the vulgar works of classical authors. *‘Asa* stands in for “penis” in a line from a collection of bawdy and scurrilous verse called *Abominations and Sessions of Vulgarity*,²⁵ attributed to one of the finest writers of the classical period, Sa‘di of Shiraz (1210–91/92). The narrator of the poem, which is addressed to a male lover, says, “This staff which inside your ass / would break were the door [to it] made of iron.”²⁶ “Sexual organ” would not have been an acceptable equivalent for “scepter,” because Nabokov, in conferring monarchical authority on a randy adolescent Humbert, is clearly having some fun with the banalities of pornographic writing. “Scepter of passion” is not among the stock of baroque images for the male member in the great erotic epics in Persian by Fakhr al-Din As‘ad Gorgani, Nezami Ganjavi, and Nur al-Din ‘Abd al-Rahman Jami. Did the translator, therefore, miss an opportunity

²⁴There are many reasons for preferring *‘asa-ye saltanati* to *chowgan*. The entry in Haim, *Farhang-e Bozorg-e Engelesi-Farsi* (Tehran: Farhang-e Mo‘aser, 2011), for “scepter,” under the word *‘asa*, gives *‘asā-ye saltānati*, but also includes *chowgān*. Other examples in which *‘asa* is used for “scepter” are found in Persian translations and scholarship. In his translation of Shakespeare’s *Anthony and Cleopatra* (Shakspir, *Majmu‘eh-ye asar-e nemayeshi vilyam shakspir* [Tehran: Soroush, 2013]), ‘Ala al-Din Pazargadi uses *‘asa -ye saltanati* to translate “To throw my scepter at the injurious gods” (Act 4, Scene 15). The Qajar ruler Fath ‘Ali Shah (r. 1797–1834) is pictured seated on the Sun Throne with a jewel-encrusted scepter in his right hand. See *Royal Persian Paintings: The Qajar Epoch 1785–1925*, ed. Layla Diba with Maryam Ekhtiar (Brooklyn, NY: Brooklyn Museum of Art, 1998), 177. Commenting in Persian on the aesthetic uses of such trappings of royal authority, Maryam Narini calls “the scepter” *‘asā-ye saltānati*. Narini, “Analysis of the Aesthetic Connections between Literary Return (Bazgasht-e Adabi) and Royal Figural Painting during Fath Ali Shah Qajar (1785–1925 A.D.),” *Fasl-nameh-ye pazhuhesh-ha-ye adabiyat-tatbiqi* 3 (Fall 2015): 131–56, www.academia.edu/29431502.

²⁵These poems have been expurgated from contemporary editions of Sa‘di’s “complete” works. Some scholars assert they are not Sa‘di’s, but the work of skillful imitators. Terms used in the title, *khabisat* and *hazl*, are originally Arabic. Be that as it may, the Koran (24: 26) uses *khabisat* to describe “impure women,” while another Arabic plural of the word *khabā‘ith* (Koran 21: 74) means the “abominations” of Sodom. *Hazl* in the Koran (86: 14) can be translated as “amusement” or “meriment.” Both borrowings from Arabic, *khabisat* and *hazl*, became standard literary terms for off-color types of writing in Persian. See *The Meaning of the Holy Qur‘ān*, trans. ‘Abdullah Yūsuf ‘Ali (Beltsville, MA: Amana, 1989).

²⁶Sa‘di, *Kolliyāt-e sa‘di ba estefādeh-ye noskkeh-ye tashih shodeh mohammad ‘ali forughī* “*zaka al-mohuk*,” (Tehran: Amir Kabir, 1961), 15: این عصا کاندرا میان {گون} تست / بشکند گراهنین باشد دری.

to expand the range of what can be expressed in Persian here? Perhaps. The sentence might have been the proper setting for the coinage “*asa-ye sheydayi-am*.”²⁷ Finally, Pedramnia’s choice of “her strange fist” (*mosht-e ‘ajib-ash*) for “her awkward fist” also seems ill-chosen. Humbert is clearly referring to Annabel’s inexperience or clumsiness when it came to manipulating his penis. Her fist is not “strange,” but inept, in which case *mosht-e na-azmudeh-ash* (literally “untested fist”) would have been more faithful to the original.

The translation also shows that *Lolita*’s eroticism can be so explicit it exceeds the capacity of Persian to express it in culturally acceptable terms. The Friday, 13 June, 1947, entry in Humbert’s diary contains a breach of verbal decorum that makes a faithful rendering impossible. Here, preserving the original typography, is what Humbert writes:

Friday. I wonder what my academic publishers would say if I were to quote in my textbook Ronsard’s “*la vermeillette fente*” or Remy Belleau’s “*un petit mont feutré de mousse delicate, tracé sur le milieu d’un fillet escarlatte*” and so forth.²⁸

Pedramnia’s version, in back translation (with Persian punctuation), is

Friday. I don’t know if in my book I repeat this verse (the bright crimson breach) from Ronsard or these two lines (the small hills covered in fine downy hairs / embellished with a scarlet beef tenderloin in the middle).²⁹

²⁷*Sheydayi* (“frenzied passion”) is much closer to the spirit of *Lolita* than “pride.” The term has a long pedigree in Persian. *Sheyda* (“love-sick”) derives from Hebrew שד (shed), which itself is an Akkadian loanword for “demon” or “devil”; see Ernest Klein, *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the Hebrew Language for Readers of English* (Haifa, Israel: University of Haifa, 1987). *Sheyda*, meaning “mad,” with its final long *a*, was a staple of classical odes in Persian rhyming in *a*; see Shams Fakhri Esfahani, *Vazehnameh-ye farsi, bakhsh-e chaharom, me’yar-e jamali, varasteh-ye sadeq kia* (Tehran: Daneshgah-e Tihiran, AH 1337/AD 1958), 10.

²⁸Nabokov, *Annotated Lolita*, 49.

²⁹Nabokov, *Lolita*, trans. Pedramnia, 69: جمعه. نمی دانم اگر در کتابم این بیت شعر (چاک قرمز روشن) ۶ از رونسار یا این دو بیت شعر (تپه ی کوچکی پوشیده از کرک های نازک / تزئین شده با فیله ی قرمزی در میان

Dr. Pedramnia annotates this passage with explanations taken from Alfred Appel's *The Annotated Lolita*. In English, Appel provides two notes. In one, he identifies Ronsard as a French poet and locates the line, which he translates as "oh little red slit." In the next note, Appel translates Belleau's line as "the hillock velvety with delicate moss, / traced in the middle with a little scarlet thread [labia]," which explains why the publishers of Humbert's textbook would have found the quotations objectionable.³⁰ In her annotation of the French verse, Pedramnia writes: "All these are code words and expressions (*'ebārāt va kalameh 'hā-ye ramzi*) girls and women use when referring to their monthly periods so men will not understand what they are talking about—things like [saying euphemistically] 'auntie has come' in our culture."³¹ Thus, the Persian translation, perhaps because of the demands of censorship, transforms the original's French paeans to female genital geography into encrypted speech about menstruation. Readers of the Persian are told to interpret Ronsard's "bright crimson breach" as menstrual blood and are left to wonder why an expensive cut of meat is lying among hairy hills. "Beef tenderloin" (Persian *fileh*), of course, owes its existence to Pedramnia's transliteration of French *fillet*.³² One can only wonder why she has avoided using a Persian noun of ancient provenance, namely *nakh* ("thread"), which would have served quite well.

The lapses in Pedramnia's translation here seem all the more puzzling when one contrasts her version of Ronsard and Belleau's references to female anatomy with how she expresses the exacting mental picture of the sleeping Lolita that Humbert paints later in the novel, after locking her in their hotel room. Nabokov writes:

Naked, except for one sock and her charm bracelet, spread-eagled on the bed where my philter had felled her—so I foreglimpsed her; a velvet hair ribbon was still clutched in her hand; her honey-brown

³⁰Nabokov, *Annotated Lolita*, 358.

³¹Nabokov, *Lolita*, trans. Pedramnia, 436–37: این‌ها همه عبارت‌ها و کلمه‌های رمزی‌اند که دختران و زنان برای: 37–436 Nabokov, *Lolita*, trans. Pedramnia, 436–37. بیان عادت ماهانه به کار می‌برند تا مردان متوجه منظورشان نشوند. چیزهایی مثل «خاله‌اش آمده» در فرهنگ ما.

³²Persian users would most likely encounter *fileh* on menus; among "kabobs," diners can choose *kabab-e fileh*, a "banquet" (*majlesi*) type of roasted meat dish composed of filleted strips of calf or lamb bunched on skewers and charred over coals.

body, with the white negative image of a rudimentary swimsuit patterned against her tan, presented to me its pale breastbuds; in the rosy lamplight, a little pubic floss glistened on its plump hillock.³³

Back translation shows, but for “charm bracelet,”³⁴ the Persian is quite faithful to the original. As far as the level of explicitness, however, the exquisite “pubic floss” is reduced to the clinical “fine hairs, fuzz (*porz`hā*) of her privates (*sharmgāhi*)” in translation. A more likely equivalent might have been *zehir* (“pubic hair”):

In the realm of imagination, I glanced at her and saw she was naked except for one sock and a bracelet, fallen on the bed [an] eagle with wings spread, exactly that place that love potion had felled her, still with that velvet ribbon in her hand. Part of her honey-colored body was patterned with a negative white image of her swimsuit on places where her skin was not tanned and the white buds of her breasts were apparent to me. In the rosy light of the table lamp a little of the fine hairs of her privates shone on the plump hillock.³⁵

Besides being overly explicit, some of the wit in *Lolita* is too subtle to be conveyed accurately and faithfully in Persian. This is especially the case in one of the depictions of Humbert’s strategically veiled states of sexual arousal. In the passage, the writing becomes what Couturier calls “poerotic,” a refined form of expression that turns the description of a routine act of self-pleasuring into a work of art.³⁶ Couturier writes that the passage about the “scepter” of Humbert’s passion mentioned above

³³Nabokov, *Annotated Lolita*, 127.

³⁴The translation has only “bracelet,” while the original reads “charm bracelet,” suggesting Lolita’s juvenile taste. A “charm bracelet” on Persian jewelry sites on the web is literally a *dastband-e jadhdhabiyat*, “bracelet of fascination” (see the website of Yiwu Melone Jewelry Co. Ltd., www.ywmelones.com/).

³⁵Nabokov, *Lolita*, trans. Pedramnia, 172: در عالم خیال نیم تنگاهی به او انداختم و دیدم که به جز لنگهای جوراب و دستبند، عقاب بال گشوده هیچ به تن ندارد و عربان روی تخت افتاده است، درست همان جایی که معجون عشق او را از پا در آورده؛ هنوز آن گل سر مخملی توی دستش بود. بخش عسلی رنگ و نگاتیو سفید بدنش زیر لباس شنا به دیگر جاهای برنزه‌ی پوستش نقش و نگار داده بود و غنچه‌های سفید پستان‌هایش را در نظرم نمایان می‌کرد. زیر نور صورتی چراغ رومی‌زی کمی پوزه‌های شرمگاهی‌اش روی تپه‌ای گوشتی می‌درخشید.

³⁶Maurice Couturier, “The Poerotic Mode: Nabokov,” *Nabokov Studies* 15 (2017). doi:10.1353/nab.2017.0008.

is an example of what he means by poerotic. In a similar diary entry dated Sunday, 8 June, the “sequel” to the “scepter” passage, Humbert, his lap covered by the convenient bulk of a Sunday newspaper, maneuvers himself to derive as much pleasure as possible from a minute examination of Lolita’s physical state. With his eyes trained on the nymphet dressed in a two-piece bathing suit, he says:

There my beauty lay down on her stomach showing me, showing the thousand eyes wide open in my eyed blood, her slightly raised shoulder blades, and the bloom along the incurvation of her spine, and the swellings of her tense narrow nates clothed in black, and the seaside of her school girl thighs. Silently, the seventh-grader enjoyed her green-red-blue comics. She was the loveliest nymphet green-red-blue Priap himself could think up. As I looked on, through prismatic layers of light, dry-lipped, focusing my lust and rocking slightly under my newspaper, I felt that my perception of her, if properly concentrated upon, might be sufficient to have me attain a beggar’s bliss immediately; but, like some predator that prefers a moving prey to a motionless one, I planned to have this pitiful attainment coincide with one of the various girlish movements she made now and then as she read, such as trying to scratch the middle of her back and revealing a stippled armpit.³⁷

The translation translated reads:

My beauty stretched out on her stomach and showed me, the thousands of pupils protruding from their sockets sitting in the blood of my eyes, her slightly raised shoulder blade[s], the downy hairs on the bend of her spine, the bulge of her small buttocks under the black bathing suit and the bronzed childlike thighs. The small seventh grader, silent, was enjoying the colorful illustrated funnies. She was the most loveable nymphet, a nymphet who even Priapus, green, red, and blue could not contain in his imagination. When I looked at her through the colorful prism of lights and with dry lips, focused on my lust and under the newspapers, and rocking slightly back and forth, I

³⁷Nabokov, *Annotated Lolita*, 44-45.

sensed that if I concentrated properly, I realized it would be enough to immediately attain from her the rapture [*khalseh*] and delight that a beggar gains from a piece of bread; but, like some hunters who prefer a moving prey to a stationary one, I decided to have this pitiful attainment coincide with her various girlish movements, for example when she tried to scratch the middle of her back, her speckled under arm was revealed.³⁸

The translation of Humbert's description of Lolita's nates omits "tense narrow," qualities that, like other paired descriptors of his darling's body, such as her "tender and tanned"³⁹ skin and her "bright brown" hair,⁴⁰ make the seventh-grader sexually appealing. Pedramnia's translation of "nates," *kapal'ha-ye kuchek* ("small buttocks"), is adequate as far as the lexicon is concerned; however, the prose calls for something more erotically charged, more expressive of an older man's lust for a young girl's backside, but, at the same time, reflective of Nabokov's fondness for obscure medical terminology (e.g., "nates").

Finding the requisite language is quite a challenge for any translator whose aim is to create an accurate, explicit, and faithful *Lolita*. For obvious reasons, culturally acceptable but explicit Persian expressions for the seductiveness of a nubile girl's buttocks are not to be found in contemporary writing publishable in Iran and Afghanistan. A more likely source would be a work from the corpus of Persian erotica published abroad, where there are fewer constraints on what can be said in print. One such work is a "sketch" (*tarh*) by Bijan Gheiby, a scholar of Zoroastrian culture and literature whose writing is published in Germany. The narrator of Gheiby's story "The Dutch Girl" (*Dokhtar-e Holandi*)

³⁸Nabokov, *Lolita*, trans. Pedramnia, 62–63: کتف، بالازدهی کتف، 62–63. زیبایی من روی شکمش دراز کشید و استخوان کمی بالازدهی کتف، 62–63. کرک‌های روی خمیدگی ستون فقرات، برآمدگی کیل‌های کوچک زیر مایوی سیاه و ران‌های برنزه شده‌ی کودکانه‌اش را به من، به هزاران مردمک از کاسه بیرون زده‌ی نشسته در خون چشمانم، نشان می‌داد. دخترک کلاس هفتمی، آرام، از فکاهی عکس دار رنگی لذت می‌برد. او دوست داشتنی‌ترین نیمفت بود، نیمفتی که حتا پریاپوس ۳ سبز، قرمز و آبی نمی‌توانست در خیالش بگنجانند. وقتی از لابلای منشور رنگارنگ نورها می‌باییدمش و بال‌های خشک بر میل شهوانی‌ام تمرکز می‌کردم و زیر روزنامه‌ها آرام عقب و جلو می‌رفتم، احساس کردم اگر درست تمرکز کنم، همه‌ی در یافتنم از او شاید آن قدر باشد که بی‌درنگ به خلسه و شادمانی‌ای که گدایی با قطعه نانی به آن می‌رسد دست یابم؛

³⁹Nabokov, *Annotated Lolita*, 41.

⁴⁰Nabokov, *Annotated Lolita*, 43.

is strolling among a crush of people lying in the sun on a North Sea beach, when he spots the “round and captivating rump” (*lom[n]bar`hā-ye gerd-o faribandeh*) of one of the sunbathers.⁴¹ The girl satisfies the narrator’s curiosity about the rest of her body when she gets to her feet and enters the sea. He describes what happens next this way:

Without thinking, I followed her. That graceful walk of hers, that rhythmic movement of her rump, and the ineffable sway of her breasts, produced drumbeats in me that set the tempo of my existence. She entered the sea. Each moment the surface of the water kept climbing up the back of her legs until her bathing suit bottom was now soaked, making what it had been concealing more visible.⁴²

Dr. Pedramnia does not have to borrow from expatriate erotica when it comes to translating the rapture Humbert imagines he will experience as he observes Lolita. To convey the covert satisfaction he nearly achieves under the cover of the Sunday paper, she utilizes *khalseh*, which normally refers to the ecstatic state of consciousness Sufis attain after prolonged bouts of spiritual activity. Coincidentally, Gheiby’s narrator uses the same word when describing the “sense of vertigo and weightlessness [he] had from the waves as they lifted [him] out of the water along with witnessing this indescribable vision [of the Dutch girl].”⁴³ The translation falls down, however, when it comes to conveying the phrase “beggar’s bliss.” Instead of reading the phrase for what it is—that is, a dysphemism for how people without means or partners achieve sexual satisfaction—Dr. Pedramnia takes the phrase literally and makes it even more familiar to Persian readers by providing the idiomatic beggar with a mouthwatering “piece of bread” not in the original.

Khalseh turns up once again when Humbert, with Lolita’s legs rather than the Sunday paper draped over his lap, finally reaches a world-class

⁴¹Bizhan Gheiby, “Dokhtar-e Holandi,” in *Haft Tarh va do she’r* (Bilfeld, DE: Entesharat-e nemudar, AH 1376/AD 1997): 1–25. Quote on p. 17. لبرهای گرد و فریبنده.

⁴²Gheiby, “Dokhtar-e Holandi,” 18: من هم ناخودآگاه به دنبالش افتادم. آن خرامیدنش، آن حرکت موزون لبرهایش، آن: نوسان ناکفتمی پستانهایش حکم ضربانهای را یافته بود که هستی ام بر نظامشان می گردید. وارد آب شد سطح آب بر پشت پاهایش هر دم بالاتر می آمد تا اینکه مایویش دیگر خیس شده بود و آنچه را در خود پنهان داشت بهتر نمایان می ساخت.

⁴³Gheiby, “Dokhtar-e Holandi,” 18: آن بی ثباتی و بی وزنی که موجها با برداشتنم از کف دریا درم تولید می کرد باتماشای: این چشم انداز وصفناپذیر در هم آمیخت و مرا دچار خلسه کرد.

state of pre-climax abandon. Nabokov makes no attempt to dress up Humbert's bliss with metaphors, which might have tested the translator's *alfiyeh-shalfiyeh* resources to the limits of permissibility, had it not been for the well-attested presence of *khalseh* in mystical Persian literature. Humbert's longed-for relief comes at the end of a bout of verbally exquisite foreplay, a lengthy passage consisting of, among many other things, the biology of sexual arousal, a common orientalist conceit (the "lusty Turk"), exacting descriptions of the nymphet's anatomy, one of Nabokov's much-discussed neologisms ("solipsized"), and his passion for archaisms ("asprawl," "athwart"). The passage, even when trimmed of some of *Lolita*'s nonsense rhymes, shows Nabokov at his erotic best and, at the same time, shows why his prose is so challenging to translators:

By this time I was in a state of excitement bordering on insanity; but I also had the cunning of the insane. Sitting there, on the sofa, I managed to attune, by a series of stealthy movements, my masked lust to her guileless limbs. It was no easy matter to divert the little maiden's attention while I performed the obscure adjustments necessary for the success of the trick. Talking fast, lagging behind my own breath, catching up with it mimicking a sudden toothache to explain the breaks in my patter—and all the while keeping a maniac's inner eye on my distant golden goal, I cautiously increased the magic friction that was doing away, in an illusionary, if not factual, sense, with the physically irremovable, but psychologically very friable texture of the material divide (pajamas and robe) between the weight of two sunburnt legs, resting athwart my lap, and the hidden tumor of an unspeakable passion. . . . Her legs twitched a little as they lay across my live lap; I stroked them; there she lolled in the right-hand corner, almost asprawl, Lola the bobby-soxer, devouring her immemorial fruit [a prelapsarian apple], singing through its juice, losing her slipper, rubbing the heel of her slipperless foot in its sloppy anklet, against the pile of old magazines heaped on my left on the sofa—and every movement she made, every shuffle and ripple, helped me to conceal and to improve the secret system of tactile correspondence between

beast and beauty—between my gagged, bursting beast and the beauty of her dimpled body in its innocent cotton frock.

Under my glancing finger tips I felt the minute hairs bristle ever so slightly along her shins. I lost myself in the pungent but healthy heat which like summer haze hung about little Haze. Let her stay, let her stay...As she strained to chuck the core of her abolished apple into the fender, her young weight, her shameless innocent shanks and round bottom shifted in my tense, tortured, surreptitiously laboring lap; and all of a sudden a mysterious change came over my senses. I entered a plane of being where nothing mattered, save the infusion of joy brewed within my body. What had begun as a delicious distension of my innermost roots became a glowing tingle which now had reached that state of absolute security, confidence and reliance not found elsewhere in conscious life. With the deep hot sweetness thus established and well on its way to the ultimate convulsion, I felt I could slow down in order to prolong the glow. Lolita had been safely solipsized....Everything was now ready. The nerves of pleasure had been laid bare. The corpuscles of Krause were entering the phase of frenzy. The least pressure would suffice to set all paradise loose....I was above the tribulations of ridicule, beyond the possibilities of retribution. In my self-made seraglio, I was a radiant and robust Turk, deliberately, in the full consciousness of his freedom, postponing the moment of enjoying the youngest and frailest of his slaves. Suspended on the brink of that voluptuousness abyss (a nicety of physiological equipoise comparable to certain techniques in the arts) I kept repeating chance words after her—barmen, alarmin', my carmen, ahmen, ahahamen—as one talking and laughing in his sleep while my happy hand crept up her sunny leg as far as the shadow of decency allowed. The day before she had collided with the heavy chest in the hall and—“Look, look!”—I gasped—“look what you've done, what you've done to yourself, ah, look”; for there was, I swear, a yellowish-violet bruise on her lovely nymphet thigh which my huge hairy hand massaged and slowly enveloped—and because of her very perfunctory underthings, there seemed to be nothing to prevent

my muscular thumb from reaching the hot hollow of her groin—just as you might tickle and caress a giggling child—just that—and: “Oh it’s nothing at all,” she cried with a sudden shrill note in her voice, and she wiggled, and squirmed, and threw her head back, and her teeth rested on her glistening underlip as she half-turned away, and my moaning mouth, gentlemen of the jury, almost reached her bare neck, while I crushed out against her left buttock the last throb of the longest ecstasy man or monster had ever known.⁴⁴

Pedramnia translates:

The impudent child in perfect simplicity placed her legs on my live legs.

Now I had reached a state of excitement verging on insanity; but at the same time I also had the cunning of the rational. As I sat on the furniture, with several concealed movements, I coordinated my hidden lust with her naïve legs. Throwing off the attention of the little girl while trying to carry out the movements necessary to my trick successfully was not an easy task. I spoke rapidly to justify my irregular fussing and fidgeting. I ran out of breath and then refreshed it, and, to explain the gaps, I pretended I had come down with a sudden tooth ache, while the whole time keeping my inner sight fixed on my next golden goal and carefully increased my magic friction, a friction that in an illusory way, if not actually, freed me from the evil of cloths (pajamas and robe) between her two sunburnt legs and the hidden tumor of my unspeakable feeling, cloths that were physically irremovable, but psychologically destructible.... Her legs on my live legs gave a slight start. I stroked them; at this point she leaned on the right corner, sitting loosely. Lola, my little stockings girl, swallowing the fruit of an ancient age and gulping down its juice through which she sang, and, having removed her sandal, rubbing her naked foot with its collapsed anklet along the mass of magazines to my left, and with everything she did and every wiggling motion and ripple she made, helped me to improve the secret system of contact between the

⁴⁴Nabokov, *Annotated Lolita*, 60–63.

beast and the beauty, between the disgusting explosion of this beast and the beauty of her pure pocked body in its cotton frock.

Under the gentle tap of my fingertips, I felt the small hairs bristling on her shins. I felt myself lost in the pungent but welcome heat, which was like the hazy warmth of summer. Let her stay on my feet, let her stay on my feet... As she stretched to throw the core of her apple toward the fire place, her young body, her shameless innocent shanks and her round hips shifted on my secret, tortured, agonized, and contracted part; and suddenly a mysterious change in my senses happened. I entered a stage of existence in which nothing was important to me, except tasting the delight brewed inside my body. That sweet brew which began in the innermost of my roots changed into a burning frenzy, *now* had reached a state of complete tranquility, self-confidence, and encouragement that can be found nowhere in life. Submerged in the sweet and deep honey that was established thus and progressing well on its way to its ultimate convulsion, I felt I could slow it down to lengthen my frenzy. Lolita was safely in her own world... Now everything was ready. The nerves of pleasure appeared. The nerve endings were entering the phase of frenzied passion and madness. A little pressure could unleash all heaven. No longer was I that Humbert the rabid. The abject degenerate cur who would cling tightly even to the boot that would kick him out. I was beyond the pain of ridicule, beyond every possibility of punishment. In this seraglio of my own making I was that robust and radiant Turk who in the full consciousness of his freedom would postpone the ultimate moment of enjoying the youngest and frailest of his slaves. Hanging on the verge of lust's fault line (with a fine physiological balance like some artistic techniques) I repeated a string of words following Lo: my remaining cupbearer... my effective carmen... like one asleep and speaking and laughing and, in that same state, my happy hand slid up her tanned leg as far as the spirit of decency allowed. That spot where the day before she had bumped into a heavy wardrobe in the hallway. I gasped and said, "Look... look! What have you done, look at what you have done to yourself... Oh,

look.” I swear it was on account of that violet-yellowish bruise on her beautiful nymphet thigh that I massaged with my huge hairy hand and slowly covered; and on account of her loose underthings there seemed nothing to prevent my muscular thumb from reaching the hot hollow of her groin—just as when you pet and caress a ticklish child, only that. Suddenly in a sharp tone of voice she said, “It’s nothing, really nothing at all” and wiggled and squirmed and tossed her head back, and sunk her teeth on the glistening underlip of her mouth, and, at the same time, she twisted around and turned her back on me, in a way that allowed my moaning mouth, gentlemen of the jury, to almost reach her naked neck and I crushed the last throb of the longest rapture possible for a man or a monster against her left buttock.⁴⁵

The translation of the above passage also reveals other points where Dr. Pedramnia fails to take full advantage of Persian’s stock of erotic expressions or misrepresents what Nabokov intends. The “unspeakable

⁴⁵Nabokov, *Lolita*, trans. Pedramnia, 85–88: پاهایش که روی پای زندهام بود کم واخورد؛ نوازششان کردم؛ این لولا، دخترک جوراب ساق کوتاه، میوه‌ی عهد باستان را جا بود که به گوشه‌ی سمت راست تکیه داد، کمی گل و گشاد نشست. لولا، میان انفجار انزجارآور این جانور و زیبایی بدن پاک گود می‌بلعید و آتش را هورت می‌کشید و میانش آواز می‌خواند و دمپایی‌اش را می‌انداخت و پاشنه‌ی پای برهنه‌اش را در کنار انبوه مجله‌های سمت چپ من، به جوراب ساق کوتاه کش در رفته‌اش می‌مالید، و با هر کاری که می‌کرد، وولی که می‌خورد و موجی که می‌زد، کمکم می‌کرد بتوانم به نظم تماس مخفی میان جانور و ماهر، میان انفجار انزجارآور این جانور و زیبایی بدن پاک گود رفتنی او در فراک نخ، بهبود بخشم. زیر ضربه‌ی نرم نوک انگشتانم پرزهای ریز روی قلم پای او را که سیخ شده بودند احساس کردم. خودم را در گرمای گزنده اما خواستنی بدن مه کوچولو، که مثل گرمای مه آلود تابستان بود، گود کردم. بگذار روی پایم بماند، بگذار روی پایم بماند... وقتی خود را کشید تا هسته‌ی سیب را به سمت شومینه پرتاب کند، بدن جوانش، ساق‌های بی‌گناه بی‌شرم و باسن گردش‌را روی بخش محرمانه‌ی منقبض زیر شکنجه و زنجیرم جامه‌جا به جا کرد؛ و ناگهان تغییری مرموز در احساسم ایجاد شد. وارد مرحله‌ای از بودن شدم که دیگر هیچ چیز برایم مهم نبود، به جز نیوشاندن لذت دم کرده‌ی درون بدنم. آن دمش شیرینی که در محرمانه‌ترین ریشه‌هایم شروع شد و به سوزش پرتب و تاب بدل گشت اینک به مرحله‌ای از آرامش کامل، اعتماد به نفس و دلگرمی رسیده بود که در هیچ جای دیگر این زندگی یافت شدن نبود. غوطه‌ور در شهید شیرین و عمیق که بدین گونه پای می‌گرفت و در راهش به سوی تشنج‌نهایی به خوبی پیش می‌رفت، احساس کردم می‌توانم از سرعتش بکاهم تا تب و تابم را طولانی‌تر کنم. لولیتا در امن و امان در عالم خودش بود... حالا همه چیز آماده بود. عصب‌های خوشی نمایان بودند. پایانه‌های حسی وارد مرحله‌ی شیدایی و جنون می‌شدند. ذره‌ای فشار می‌توانست همه‌ی بهشت را آزاد کند. دیگر آن هامبریت هار نبودم، سگ هرز فاسد عبوسی که حتا به چکمه‌ای که با لگد او را بیرون می‌اندازد محکم می‌چسبید. من از رنج ریشخند فراتر بودم، فراتر از هر احتمالی برای مجازات. در این حرمسرای خود سازم آن ترک نیرومند و شادی بودم که با اندیشه و در آگاهی کامل از آزادی‌اش اوج لحظه‌ی لذت بردن از جوانترین و شکننده‌ترین برده‌اش را به تاخیر می‌انداخت. آویزان بر لبه‌ی گسل شهوت (با تعادل فیزیولوژیکی دقیق همچون برخی تکنیک‌های هنری) یگریز واژه‌هایی را از پی‌لو تکرار می‌کردم: ساقی باقی من... کارمن کارساز من، هاهاهار من... مثل کسی که در خواب حرف بزند و بخندد، و در همان حال، آهسته دست خوشم را تا آن جا که روح ادب اجازه می‌داد روی پای آفتاب خورده‌اش سراندم و پیش رفتم. آن نقطه‌ای که روز پیشش به کمد سنگین توی راهرو خورده بود، بریده نفس کشیدم و گفتم: «بین چه کار کرده‌ای، ببین با خودت چه کار کرده‌ای... آه، ببین.» قسم می‌خورم که به خاطر کودکی بنفش مایل به زرد روی ران زیبای نیمفیت‌اش بود که آن را با دست گنده‌ی پشمالویم مالیدم و آرام پوشاندم؛ و به خاطر لباس زیر شل و ولش گویی هیچ چیز نبود که از رسیدن شست عضلانی‌ام به گودی داغ کشاله‌ی ران‌ش جلوگیری کند درست مثل وقتی که پچه‌ی قفلکی‌ای را نوازش کنی و قفلک بدهی، فقط همین. ناگهان با صدایی نیز گفتم: «بیم نیست، اصلا مهم نیست» و وول خورد و لولید و برش را به پشت پرتاب کرد و دندان‌ش را روی لبه‌ی درونی براق دهانش فرو کرد و همزمان کمی چرخید و پشتش را به من کرد، طوری که دهان نالان من، هیئت منصفه‌ی دادگاه، تقریبا به گردن برهنه‌اش رسید و من آخرین ضربه‌ی طولانی‌ترین خلسه‌ی ممکن یک مرد یا یک هیولارا به کیل چپش کوبیدم.

passion” Humbert experiences upon finding his groin separated by a few layers of flimsy cloth from its goal is reduced simply to an “unspeakable feeling” (*ehsas-e nagoftani*) in her translation. The word “passion” is absent, which, given the context, might have been rendered as *hava va havas* or *sheydayi*. The translation also tempers the erotic intensity of Humbert’s realization about dragging out his pre-orgasmic euphoria. He says, “With the deep hot sweetness thus established and well on its way to the ultimate convulsion, I felt I could slow down in order to prolong the glow. Lolita had been safely solipsized.” In Persian he says, “Submerged in the sweet and deep honey that was established thus and progressing well on its way to its ultimate convulsion, I felt I could slow it down to lengthen my frenzy. Lolita was safely in her own world.” With the exception of the addition of “honey,” the mistranslations of “insane” as “rational” (*‘aqel*) and of “dimpled” as *gowd rafteh* (“pocked”) instead of *chal-dar*, the Persian faithfully conveys the original. The translation is inadequate in rendering the neologism “solipsized.” In translation, Lolita is “safe and sound” (*dar amn va aman*) “in her own world” (*dar ‘alam-e khod*), which implies she is in a world of her own making, while “solipsized” means she is held captive in a realm of Humbert’s making and “safe” in the sense that she is immune to change. As a figment of Humbert’s fevered imagination, she becomes a creature at his fanciful beck and call, the plaything of the Humbert who has changed from abject Humbert the Hound into Humbert the Magnificent, the strapping lord of a harem of young girls.

At the same time, the passage about Humbert’s “state of excitement,” shows how Persian, among all the world’s languages, can be more amenable as a medium for *Lolita*. The translation of “seraglio” is an obvious example of this congeniality. With its impeccable Persian provenance, the term slips effortlessly from English to Persian as *saray*. The seclusion of women, whether in plush *sarays* or the more humdrum interior parts (*andarun*) of ordinary homes, has long been a feature of patriarchal Persian society. To readers of the language, then, the idea of a “harem” is more a matter of practicality than orientalist fancy. Finally, there is the reappearance of *khalseh*, which Pedramnia uses to translate

the prolonged “ecstasy” that Humbert crushes out against Lolita’s left buttock. Bijan Gheiby uses the term, it will be recalled, for the rapture that the narrator of his story “The Dutch Girl” experiences, when bobbing up and down in waves on the Dutch North Sea coast. In Sufism, *khalseh* is the trance-like state between sleep and wakefulness, during which seekers on the path to enlightenment gain knowledge by nonrational means. Employing *khalseh* instead of *enzal*, the *alfiyeh-shalfiyeh* as well as the clinical term for “ejaculation,” has two unexpected and unintended consequences. First, it confirms in Persian—as if confirmation were needed—Nabokov’s coy claim that there was no vulgarity in *Lolita*. Second, it shows the similarities in terminology between the language Nabokov uses to write about Humbert’s pre-orgasmic and orgasmic states and the language Sufis use to speak about the exalted states of consciousness (*ahval*) they traverse in their search for union with God. The two languages become very close in expressing states of intimacy, one physical and the other metaphysical. An example of the former comes when Humbert speaks of a sudden transformation of his senses: “What had begun as a delicious distension of my innermost roots became a glowing tingle which *now* had reached that state of absolute security, confidence and reliance not found elsewhere in conscious life.” In the language of mystical literature, Sufis might say that Humbert’s soul had reached a state of absolute certainty, a state that they infer from a Koranic verse (89: 27): “O soul in (complete) rest and satisfaction.”⁴⁶ The soul privileged with complete certainty (*etmenan*) is the “soul at peace” (*nafs-e motma’enneh*).⁴⁷ And here is where examining the Persian translation of *Lolita* yields a kind of semantic convergence. The two languages, which, on the surface, seem so remote from each other, so mutually unintelligible, use similar terms to express the ravings of a middle-aged hebephile and the intuitions of wayfarers on the path to God.

Convergence in the expression of physical and metaphysical passion is also evident in one of the symptoms of Humbert’s erotomania. He

⁴⁶*Meaning of the Holy Qur’ān*.

⁴⁷Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 25, 112.

endows parts of his anatomy with faculties they normally do not have. Hence, his blood is “eyed,” and his fingertips are able to “glance” at the minute hairs along Lolita’s shins. One finds an analogous synesthesia in mystical Persian poetry. Putting into words the ineffable experience of acquiring spiritual truths by nonrational means, Rumi speaks of the “eye of the heart” (*cheshm-e del*), the “tongue of the soul” (*zaban-e jan*), and the “ear of the eye” (*gush-e cheshm*), among others.⁴⁸ The narrator of one of Hafez’s odes likewise tells readers not to listen with the “ear of reason” (*gush-e hush*).⁴⁹ Similar metaphors are also in everyday Persian speech. Paying attention to something (e.g., recitation of the Koran) with all one’s being is to “lend the ear of the soul” (*gush-e jan sepordan*). Pedramnia’s translation fails to take full advantage of this aspect of Persian in conveying the inventiveness of Nabokov’s prose in describing Humbert’s two frenzied states of nymphet-inspired arousal. Her rendering of Nabokov’s “eyed blood” as “the blood of my eyes” suggests that Humbert suffers from subconjunctival hemorrhaging.

In addition to not taking full advantage of the similarities in the way Persian and Nabokov’s English express rapturous abandon, Dr. Pedramnia’s translation of the sexually explicit—some have said pornographic—parts of *Lolita* fails to draw on the *alfiyeh-shalfiyeh* tradition in Persian literature. There are at least three places where the translation falls short in this regard. The first comes after Humbert picks Lolita up from camp and is taking her to the Enchanted Hunter Hotel. Lolita notices a theater playing a movie she wants to see and asks her “dad” if they could see it. Nabokov writes, ““We might,” chanted Humbert—

⁴⁸Jalal al-Din Rumi, *Kolliyat-e Shams ya Divan-e Kabir*, ed. Badi’ al-Zaman Foruzanfar (Tehran: Amir Kabir, 1976): 2: 163, no. 830: 4 : 99 , : 4 , چون می‌رود! 31: 1 , no.38: مرد آیندام، آیندام، مرد یا رب به‌غیر این زبان جانرا ده روان / در قطع و وصل وحدت تا بسکلد ز نار من، no. 1792: مقالات نهاد / دیده شود حال من ار چشم شود گوش شما

⁴⁹Khvajeh Shams al-Din Mohammad, *Divan-e Hafez*, ed. Parviz Natel Khanlari (Tehran: Khvarazmi, AH 1362/AD 1983): 1: 358 no. 171. به گوش هوش نبوش از من و به عشرت کوش / که این سخن سحر از هاتفم به: 31: 1 , no.38: مرد آیندام، آیندام، مرد یا رب به‌غیر این زبان جانرا ده روان / در قطع و وصل وحدت تا بسکلد ز نار من، no. 1792: مقالات نهاد / دیده شود حال من ار چشم شود گوش شما

⁴⁹Mohammad Reza Shafi’i Kadkani (*Suvar-e khyal dar she’r-e parsi: tahqiq-e enteqadi dar tataavor-imazhha-ye she’r parsi va sayr-e nazariyeh-ye balaghat dar eslam va iran* [Tehran: Nil, AH 1350/AD 1971] 209), sees this type of imagery as a means of broadening the expressiveness of poetic language. For the linking of two nouns to produce a metaphor in Persian, the so-called *edāfeh-ye majāzi*, see Friedrich Rückert, *Grammatik, Poetik und Rhetorik der Perser*, ed. Neu herausgegeben von W. Pertsch (Wiesbaden, DE: Otto Harrassowitz, 1966), 43.

knowing perfectly well, the sly tumescent devil, that by nine, when *his* show began, she would be dead in his arms.”⁵⁰ Dr. Pedramnia translates, “Humbert mumbled, ‘We might.’ But this sly devil knew very well that around nine, when his show began, Lo would be deeply asleep in his arms.”⁵¹ Perhaps to avoid the image of a penis engorged with blood, Persian Humbert is not “tumescent,” but simply a “sly devil” (*sheytan-e nabekar*). *No ‘uz* (“erect”) might have worked here, but a more inspired choice would have been *setabr* (“thick, gross, hulking”), which is used priapically in Ebrahim Golestan’s *The Treasure*. Golestan’s novel caricatures Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi as a poor farmer who suddenly becomes wealthy and unknowingly wastes his riches on Western goods incompatible with his rusticity. The arriviste farmer is persuaded to take a wife more in keeping with his newfound status and to have a modern home constructed as a monument to his imperious grandeur. The resulting structure borrows traditional elements from mosque architecture (dome and minaret), but instead of a single dome and several minarets, it has one towering minaret flanked by two geodesic domes. The word *setabr* is used in the sense of “tumescent” in the praise the farmer’s/shah’s Westernized factotum (nicknamed Leshku’i)⁵² heaps on the new structure, with its glorious erection. The factotum’s speech, which, in translation, faintly echoes the sound of the original, makes fun of the rhetorical excesses of sycophantic Persian:

If our tongue falls short, this tumescent structure goes a long way in bespeaking with ever-scintillating, brilliant retelling the vim and vigor, the riches and renown, and even the luminous intentions of its beloved patron—it is a structure upraised from the very belly and core of our ancient customs, one that harmonizes the legacy of the forebearers with the latest developments in technology and aesthetic design of undisputed American masters like Buckminster Fuller.⁵³

⁵⁰Nabokov, *Annotated Lolita*, 118.

⁵¹Nabokov, *Lolita*, trans. Pedramnia, 160: هامبرت زیر لب گفت که «شاید رفتیم.» اما این شیطان نابکار خیلی خوب می‌دانست که نزدیک ساعت نه، وقتی نمایشش شد، لو توی بغلش در خوابی عمیق خواهد بود.

⁵²“Leshku’i” is a transliteration of French *lèche-cul* (“asslicker”); the Leshku’i caricature plays on elements of the public persona of Amir-Abbas Hoveyda (1919–79), the shah’s prime minister from 1965 to 1977.

⁵³Ebrahim Golestan, *Asrar-e ganj-e darreh-ye jenni: yek dastan az yek chashm andaz* (Tehran:

The Persian *Lolita* avoids *alfiyeh-shalfiyeh* explicitness a second time when Humbert, having drugged Lolita, describes how he relishes the prospect of possessing her. Waiting for the sedative he gave her to take effect, he leaves their Enchanted Hunter's bedroom with the "hermetic vision" of her undressing on the bed they will soon share. The vision is a kind of unintentional striptease that stays with him as he prowls the corridors and guest areas of the hotel. Humbert recalls, "I had left my Lolita still sitting on the edge of the abysmal bed, drowsily raising her foot, fumbling at the shoelaces and showing as she did so the nether side of her thigh up to the crotch of her panties—she had always been singularly absent-minded, or shameless, or both, in matters of legshow."⁵⁴ In back translation, the Persian says: "I left my Lolita who was still seated on the edge of the pit-like bed and drowsily raising her foot and, fumbling with her shoelaces, showed me her under thigh to the center of the branching of her panties [*tonokeh*]. (She was always careless in showing her legs or, one could say, shameless or both) and I went."⁵⁵ "The center of the branching of her panties" is clearly a circumlocution. The translation avoids *kheshtak*, a common term for "crotch," perhaps because of its colloquial associations with "ass" and "genitals."⁵⁶ The term would have been more faithful than the circumlocution in conveying the image of a near-naked Lolita, which Humbert nurtures in his imagination and which makes the prospect of having sex with her even more titillating.

Nabokov's explicit eroticism is muted in translation a third time in Humbert's musings after he leaves the room. He fantasizes that if he were to rape Lolita as she slept, it would somehow preserve the girl's "purity."

اگر زبان ما کوتاه است بیان این بنای سطر بلند است که با تلاؤ مستدام باز گوی: Agah, AH 1353/AD 1974), 140: درخشان قوت و قدرت، ثروت و شهرت، و نیز نیت نورانی بانی عزیز آن است—بنایی که از بطن و متن سنت‌های دیرین ما سر بر آورده میراث گذشتگان را تطبیق داده با تازه‌ترین تحولات تکنیک و طرح‌های استتیک استادان مسلم امریکا، مانند یک مینستر فولر.

⁵⁴Nabokov, *Annotated Lolita*, 125.

⁵⁵Nabokov, *Lolita*, trans. Pedramnia, 169: لولیتایم را که هنوز بر لب آن تخت گودال مانند نشسته بود و خواب‌آلود: پایش را بلند می‌کرد و با بند کفشش ور می‌رفت و زیر رانش را تا مرکز دوشاخه شدن تنک‌هایش نشانم می‌داد (همیشه در نشان دادن پاهایش بی‌احتیاط بود یا می‌شود گفت بی‌شرم بود و یا هر دو) گذاشتم و رفتم.

⁵⁶*Farhang-e Sokhan*, vol. 4 (Tehran: Sokhan, AH 1381/AD 2002), 2758. Another term, *jofteh*, was also a possibility here. The obscenity goes back at least to the time of Sa'di, whose *Abominations and Sessions of Vulgarity* contains this line: "face on the ground and crotch upon the heavens / if its head penetrated to the balls, what's to fear?" روی برخاک و جفته بر افلاک / چون سرش رفت تا به‌خایه چه باک.

At one point in this reverie, he calls again on the “robust Turk” to supply an image of Eastern debauchery. Humbert laments having to live in an age of Spartan modernity when people “do not as dignified Orientals did in still more luxurious times, use tiny entertainers fore and aft between the mutton and the rose sherbet.”⁵⁷ The translation is more modest: “I am not like those dignified Middle Easterners who at times of debauchery, between their dishes of lamb and rose sherbet, make use of child entertainers from chest to heel.”⁵⁸ To lift the veil of modesty on this scene, the translator might have resorted to *alfiyeh-shalfiyeh* texts for a prurient alternative to “from chest to heel.” One such text is a story from Vali b. Sohrab Gorjestani’s “Scandalous Essay” (“Resaleh-ye Fojuriyeh”). In it is the tale of Gelin Khanom, the adulterous wife of Prince Sahebqaran Mirza, who, instead of having the author ravish her “from chest to heel,” demands he take her both from behind and in front (*pas-o pish*).⁵⁹

Much more could be said about Pedramnia’s translation of *Lolita*. Students of how Western erotica is rendered in Persian, scholars of literary translation like Haddadian-Moghaddam,⁶⁰ and others interested in what can and cannot be said in the language will have to wait for the relaxing of the strict censorship regimes in places where Persian is spoken and read. Sixty-five years after its first publication in Paris by Olympia Press, the novel continues to fuel instructive discussions both as an extraordinarily imaginative work of art and as a disconcerting probing of a maniac’s obsessive love of young girls. The criticism of

⁵⁷Nabokov, *Annotated Lolita*, 126.

⁵⁸Nabokov, *Lolita*, trans. Pedramnia, 170: در میان خوراک گوسفند و شربت گلانشان، از سرگرم کننده‌های خردسال، از سینه تا پاشنه، بهره می‌برند.

⁵⁹Vali b. Sohrab Gorjestani, “Scandalous Essay” (“Resaleh-ye Fojuriyeh”), in *Haft Resaleh* (Los Angeles: Entesharat-e Pars, 2017), 161–220. Quote on p. 171. Accusing a woman of bestowing her favors both vaginally and anally is part of a lampoon (*haju*) attributed to the poet ‘Ali b. Ahmad Asadi Tusi (999/1000–1072/73). His abuse of the mother of Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni (r. 998–1030), his patron who had challenged court poets to compose such an insult, includes this line: “your mother was a mine of munificence, she gave from aft and fore.” (posted on kashkoooleamad.blogfa.com). The insult also appears in the form “your mother was a banquet table of [camal] munificence...” (i.e., خون کرم).

⁶⁰Esmacil Haddadian-Moghaddam, *Literary Translation in Modern Iran* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2015).

Dr. Pedramnia's translation here is in no way intended to discredit her laudable industry and courage in tackling a work like *Lolita*, the uniqueness of which makes it nearly impossible to be capably expressed in any language other than its original English. The considerable effort to render translation of Nabokov's masterpiece accurately and explicitly is all the more impressive considering most of the potential audience for the Persian translation would be denied the opportunity to read it.⁶¹ Even the most well-intentioned criticism of a translation, however, can be both sobering and humbling to the translator. As Vaezian and Bafta point out in their astute criticism of my own translation of *Journey to Heading 270 Degrees* by Ahmad Dehqan, an infinitely less complicated text than *Lolita*, the road from Persian to English is marred by narrative-distorting potholes, detours, digressions, and wrong turns.⁶² The least that can be said about Pedramnia's rendering of *Lolita* is that it has traveled that road far more skillfully, faithfully, and accurately than its predecessor.

⁶¹Nevertheless, some potential readers have had access to the translation by means of the large portion of it posted online (www.shahrvand.com/archives/41218).

⁶²Helia Vaezian and Fatemeh Ghaderi Bafti, "Translation Shifts and Narratology: A Case Study of 'Journey to Heading 270 Degrees,'" *Elixir International Journal* 133 (2019): 53569–72.