Translating Whispers:
Recitation, Realism, Religion

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Abstract
The essay analyzes the beginning of the seventh chapter of Naguib Mahfouz’s Palace Walk in which, at the heart of this realist novel, we encounter a vivid description of Qur’anic recitation. The scene does not discuss what is recited so much as it offers an account of how. “His voice could not be heard,” we are told, “but the continual motion of his lips gave him away. From time to time a faint whisper slipped out in a sibilant s sound.” What is a minor detail in a novel otherwise filled with events reveals a sort of literary limit to the descriptive labor of realism. In the translator’s use of “sibilant s sound” is a creative rendering of the Arabic letters 赡 and 赝 and the evocation of waswasa. Drawing together reflections on the whispered s and the speaking body, this essay considers the potentials of language folding upon itself, torn between the tongue of the speaker described in prose and the poetic resonance of the Qur’anic verse. Alongside discussions of the postlingual turn, this whispered detail invites reflections on registers of discourse both liturgical and literary.

In a curious passage at the beginning of the seventh chapter of Naguib Mahfouz’s Palace Walk (Bayn al-qasrayn), we are presented with a scene. The opening paragraphs describe a set of routines that greet the domineering father al-Sayyid Ahmad Abd al-Jawad as he arrives at his store first thing in the morning. He bids good morning to his assistant, Jamil al-Hamzawi, who has already opened the shop and prepared it for customers. And we learn that, even though al-Sayyid Ahmad is dreaded and feared in his family, in the context of business, “with friends, acquaintances, and customers,” he is “a different kind of person” (36). Following the arrival of these two characters, Mahfouz goes on to describe the space: a medium-sized store crammed full of coffee beans, rice, dried fruit, nuts, and soap “on the shelves and piled by the walls” (36). The owner’s desk, we are told, is stacked with ledgers, newspapers, and a telephone. Mounted on the wall is a safe (“its color was reminiscent of bank notes”) and just over the desk hangs an ebony frame containing the words, “In the name of God,” in gold lettering. Carefully crafted with attention to minute details, the passage presents a description of objects, each of which speaks in a particular way about the store and the sensibility of its owner.
And as Mahfouz sketches this elaborate description of characters, settings, and situations, the words on the page seemingly disappear in a vividly visual scene of everyday life in Cairo.

As the chapter continues, the nearly list-like detail of the contents of the store returns us to the ordinariness of that particular day: “Business was light as usual early in the morning. The proprietor began to review the accounts of the previous day...” (36). And then, with the invocation of a “meanwhile,” Mahfouz goes on to add a detail that I will take here as my focus:

Meanwhile al-Hamzawi stood by the entrance, his arms folded against his chest. He was reciting to himself the Qur’an verses he knew best. His voice could not be heard, but the continual motion of his lips gave him away. From time to time a faint whisper slipped out in a sibilant s sound. He continued his recitation until the arrival of the blind shaykh who had been retained to recite the Qur’an every morning. (36)

Alongside the visual descriptions of characters, settings, and objects, this passage offers us competing registers of discourse: embodied language whispered in an act of recitation, a liturgical utterance rendered in realist prose. While at first Mahfouz conjures a visual scene by describing the reciting body (“arms folded against his chest,” “continual motion of his lips”), he then shifts our attention from what we see to what we hear (“a faint whisper slipped out in a sibilant sound”). And without quoting the specific verse of the Qur’an, this sonorously inflected passage allows us to overhear the subtle whisper in the preponderance of s sounds repeated in the description. And so it is, on the pages of a novel considered the apex of realism in modern Arabic, we encounter a kind of mise-en-abyme in which descriptive prose and liturgical recitation are layered one upon the other. The scene presents us not with the silent reading of the novel where words disappear into descriptions of characters, settings, and situations, but instead, with a recitational practice in which the physical enunciation of whispered language comes to matter in particular ways. Here Qur’anic recitation appears both as a simple detail on an otherwise ordinary morning in Cairo and as a critical horizon gesturing beyond the linguistic sense of the prose description. With the whispered recitation emerges the fact of utterance, consequential less for its descriptive function than for the embodiment of the word itself, traced phonetically in the s sounds repeated on the page.

I begin with this seemingly minor passage because of its significance for discussions of what might be described as a postlingual turn. A literary passage of this sort is obviously not beyond language in any strict sense, but how might we understand the various registers it animates? What might it mean to read Qur’anic language described in realist prose?
How does the passage allow us to both visualize and hear an embodied recitation? What are the implications of a liturgical practice performed in a whisper? How does the embodied word differ from descriptive prose? Drawing together practices of close reading from comparative literature and discussions of liturgical language from the anthropology of religion, I consider in what follows the potential reverberations of this whispered recitation and its implications for literary analysis. Doing so is less a matter of reading through the language than of tracing its contours alongside questions of embodiment, translation, and religion. At the intersection of the liturgical and the literary, this remarkable passage allows us to imagine language whispered and not heard, recognized and not spoken, hidden and yet revealed.

At first glance, Mahfouz’s lucid descriptions of characters and situations seem to welcome an almost sociological understanding of the novel, especially when we recognize that this one scene is but a microscopic part of a much broader story. There is the central plot revolving around the family patriarch, Sayyid Ahmad Abd al-Jawad, his wife, Amina, his daughters, Khadija and Aisha, and his three sons, Yasin, Fahmy and Kamal. And there is the historical backdrop spanning a period from 1917-1944 across critical moments of modern Egyptian history: in this first novel of the trilogy, the Wafdist generation of 1919. Mahfouz masterfully presents a world to be understood in the detailed experiences of a family through whom Egyptian history is rendered sensible. So successful is this endeavor that Mahfouz’s novel is widely regarded as a cornerstone of modern Arabic literature, earning him the Nobel Prize in 1988. If not a novel “born translated,” to borrow Rebecca Walkowitz’s term, then Mahfouz’s Palace Walk has subsequently emerged as one of the most recognizable works of modern Arabic literature. Published in 1957, adapted to cinema in 1964, and translated into numerous languages, its story extends well beyond the covers of the book, beyond a specific national public, and beyond the Arabic language in which it was initially composed.

And yet, even with this global dissemination, there is much more to understanding the novel’s postlingualism than its inherently translational afterlife. I turn to the minor passage for how it reveals language in a manner overheard but not necessarily communicated, whispered but not stated outright. In the recited verse, the very fact of utterance exceeds the sound/sense relationship—that is, the utterance matters less for what is said specifically (the words of the verse in the novel, for example) than for the liturgical practice it performs (as part of a morning routine). It thus draws language together in two distinct senses: on the one hand, a seemingly untranslatable materiality with the embodiment of the whisper in the words used to describe it (a preponderance of “sibilant s sounds”), and on
the other hand, the role of realist description in a readily translatable scene depicting the reciting body, making the whisper visible in language. In this otherwise minor scene, we come to face language in multiple senses. In the allusion to recitation, we confront liturgical language brought to bear in a realist text, and then, in visualizing the face and the motion of its lips, we apprehend the whispering of words we are not destined to hear. Here, then, the novel—most often read silently with words figuring images, scenes, and situations—describes an alternate textual practice of knowing words by heart, embodying scripture for bodily enunciation. This curious passage extends us well beyond the language of the text (in this case, Arabic) to various postlingual registers of discourse: the remediation of religious language in realist prose.

Among the many entries in Keywords, Raymond Williams includes a reflection on the term “mediation,” which he notes, “has long been a relatively complex term in English” (152). His entry offers a translational detour through the German word Vermittlung, alternately reconciliation, middle point, or interaction, figured frequently in discussions of ideology and social relations. For media theorists such as Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, the term “remediation” more aptly describes “the representation of one medium in another” (45). They draw inspiration from Derrida’s understanding of mimesis to claim that “all mediation is remediation” (53/55). My use of the term here and throughout this essay both borrows and deviates from these conversations in cultural and media analysis. By remediation, I allude to the use of liturgical language in the realist novel and to the recitational performance described in literary prose. From the matter of the whisper to the embodiment of the word itself, the remediations of this minor passage proliferate sense beyond the logic of language and translation. In the novelistic description of Qur’anic recitation, language matters as body, as enunciative act, and as ritual, and thereby expands from literature to mediation and semiology.

My point in what follows is not to dwell on qualitative distinctions between literature and scripture, nor to celebrate Mahfouz as a master writer or his novel as a touchstone for world literature. Much more than an observation about literary style or the Arabic language, I focus on Mahfouz’s description of Qur’anic recitation for what it reveals about broader questions of reading and translation. This smallest of details from what is perhaps one of the most canonical texts in Arabic literature raises key questions about the status of language itself. No longer simply a matter of Arabic or English translation, we confront registers of discourse folded into a single scene. What happens in the transmutation of scripture in this literary passage? How does the novel differentiate script from scripture from speech act? The non-citation of any Qur’anic verse and instead its
muted recitation emerge here as the grounds for imagining a non-linguistic mode of translation, one attuned to the valences of discourse that this curiously minor instance makes thinkable. Whether read alongside debates in speech act theory, intertextuality, or hermeneutics, the scene of Qur’anic recitation ushers in a curious fold whereby literary language necessarily confronts its limits—and its potentials. What is revealed in the interplay between description and embodiment is a more fundamental distinction between language-as-such and language-in-use. The passage does not simply describe in Arabic, it frames a situation for the recitational utterance. Qur’anic recitation takes place, whispered through the lips of al-Hamzawi as part of a morning routine imagined and described on the pages of the novel. Cast against the backdrop of world literature, we confront in this microscopically small detail the complexities and collisions of language turned upon itself: sound and sense folded alongside the secular and sacred.

Lip Reading, or Translating Whispered Tongues

One of the tenets of a field like comparative literature is to read texts in the original language, attending to questions of translation in the crossing from one language to another. With a focus on literary history and close reading, a comparatist tends to train in two or three different national languages and literary traditions. In both field of study and method, there is an implicit assumption that a literary text is best understood with knowledge of the language of its original composition—and, quite often, in relation to other texts from a national literary canon or textual tradition. An ear trained to the nuances of multiple languages ascertains details in a text that others might not, and close reading in the original language is seen to yield insights of a particular sort. Where world literature looks for themes, narrative structures, or stylistic features, comparative literature adds insight based on the interplay between detail and generality, between close reading and literary theory, between textual fragment and literary history. In the end, it would be possible to say that comparative literature—with its disciplinary debts to philology and comparative grammar—takes the fundamental status of language as a given. It might even be too obvious to state that there is no reading beyond language. Language is the material basis for what is called literature, or so it might seem.

With these matters in mind, allow me to return once again to the minor passage and to read it through comparatist eyes. Above and beyond the harnessing of a visual scene, there are fundamental details revealed with attention to the Arabic language of its composition. A supposedly astute reader would likely notice how Mahfouz’s description offers a phonetic approximation of the Qur’anic verse in the novel. That is to
say, the Arabic passage does not merely describe the scene of recitation, it seemingly performs it:

Notice that Mahfouz’s description repeats words with the “s” sound (masmū’, mustamira, waswasa, șawt, șadr, muwâṣal), each of which embodies the “s” in an enunciative sense. Far from a mere description of what happens, which could be rendered in any language, the Arabic passage approximates the sounds of whispering, culminating in the passage’s invocation of the onomatopoeic word for this act: waswasa. With vivid descriptions of the motion of al-Hamzawi’s lips, the words of the description appear to trace the sounds described, circling back on the word itself, and in doing so, taking “whispering” (waswasa) to the letter. The word carries not only a linguistic sense (in so far as it describes the activity of whispering), but a performative sense (insofar as the word phonetically performs the action it describes). Here on the page, waswasa thus folds upon itself as both saying and doing. And ultimately, just as the word waswasa is an onomatopoeia, so too is the attenuated description a sort of performance of the very practice it describes.

On another level (and in light of the interplay between saying and doing), there is a fundamental challenge posed in the translation of the passage. For one, there is a deeper significance to waswasa—not merely as an issue of phonetics, but as a matter of cultural and religious contextualization. Even though Mahfouz does not say so explicitly, the term waswasa recurs in the Qur’an in various instances, each of which alludes to the whispering of the devil: to lure Adam and Eve (7:20, 20:120) and to tempt in general (50:16, 114:1-6). Likely as it is that Mahfouz is referring to one of these specific verses, the utterance of the verse itself functions as a sign of a character’s religiosity, simply part of a broader scene of early morning routines. An additional challenge in the passage is that Mahfouz offers a metalinguistic reflection, referring explicitly to the repetition of the two Arabic letters (ṣīn and ṣād). How might one translate a passage that refers explicitly to letters of the Arabic alphabet? Does the reflexivity around sign systems (and the Arabic language in particular) suggest a sort of limit to the possibilities of translation? Certainly the visual dimension of the scene lends itself to rendering across languages, but how, we might wonder, can a description so closely aligned with the verse itself (both in terms of the sonic element and the allusion to the two Arabic letters) occur in translation? Trained to pursue a good comparatist reading, we might
be led to wonder: does the richly layered cultural, religious, and linguistic dimension make this scene what one might call untranslatable? Can the subtleties of the linguistic self-reference translate across sign systems? Can the material sounds of the whispered s find their way into English?

The value of reading in the original language, we are told, derives from the insights gleaned from attention to the linguistic complexities of a text. And yet, in the case of the English edition, we have a masterful example of the novel’s enduring translational afterlife. When William Hutchins translates Mahfouz’s passage, he turns to alliteration, replicating in the English what Mahfouz performs in the Arabic: “From time to time a faint whisper slipped out in a sibilant s sound. He continued his recitation…” (36, my emphasis). Notice that Hutchins’s translation—like the Arabic—not only draws attention to the “sibilant s sound,” it also performs it with the repetition of various words: whisper, slipped, sibilant, s, sound, and recitation. As we read, then, we are welcomed into a register of description attentive to the whisper of the recitation, the matter of its words, the repetition of the s’s off of the speaker’s lips. Even the English description sheds light on the reciting body and performatively traces the language being recited. Where the Arabic text alludes to the ṣīn and the ṣād, two alphabetic letters drawn together by Hutchins’s reference to the “sibilant s,” Hutchins’s translation quite impressively mimics the repetition of various s sounds so prominent in the Arabic passage.

I perform this sort of reading to note what happens to language in the process. Attention to the phonetics of the passage means that the words cannot simply disappear between the lines. They are integral to the description itself with language mattering as both sense and sound. This is neither the celebration of the inherent genius of the writer, nor the cunning of the astute reader of the text, nor even the persistence of scripture in the realist novel. Instead, the point is to gesture to the tension between translation, understood as the linguistic fete folding one language into another, and mediation, understood as the registers animated by the reciting body, the urban soundscape, and the words of the Qur’anic verse. What we confront here in the passage is the collision of a visual register describing the reciting body and the linguistic register approximating the sounds of the words recited. If there is a postlingual turn at stake, it is to be found in excess of translation: not so much the sense of the words as the texture of enunciation. The trace of the Qur’anic verse remains less as uttered in sense than whispered in sound.

There is more, though, to this postlingual scene. As any literary scholar would recognize, language takes place in its situational deployment alongside questions of form, genre, and sites of reception. Colin Jager, Tracy Fessenden, and Mimi Winnick, for example, gesture to the
rich potential of considering religion alongside matters of literary form. In differing ways, each engages the framework of religion to consider not only the status of language and representation, but the world in which language comes to matter. Among an extensive list of objects, Mahfouz’s scene places the everyday (the desk, ledger, newspaper, and telephone) alongside the sacred (the hanging on the wall, the recitation itself) and juxtaposes mundane language (of everyday greetings) with the whispering of the Qur’anic verse. What is revealing is that religion—and the piety of those characters in the scene—is to be understood through various objects, characters, and practices (the wall hanging, the recitation, and the blind shaykh). In this sense, not only do we confront the appearance of recitation in the novel, we also confront the broader question of how the novel incorporates, assimilates, and engages a liturgical practice on its pages. Reckoning with language on the page, we could say, relies on frames (formal or cultural) that impact how words come to matter, especially words that come to be understood as indices of religion. Here then, distinctions between registers of sacred and secular language have implications beyond the sense of words, shifting us from the terrain of translation to the matter of remediation.

From questions of form to frames of reception, the minor passage reverberates across prose and poetry, literature and scripture, sound and sense. And yet, it is the religious dimension of the recitation that might be seen to pose the greatest challenge to translatability. Among the numerous literary critics commenting on Palace Walk (Samia Mehrez and Rasheed El-Enany, for example), Muhammed Siddiq is especially astute in his attention to religion. After contextualizing how religion functions in other Egyptian novelists (Yahya Haqqi, Taha Husayn, Ahmad al-Sharqawi, and al-Muwaylihi), Siddiq focuses on the curious passage of Qur’anic recitation. He resists any simple thematic reading of the scene and suggests instead that there is something inherently secularizing about the novel as form. He notes that in the body of Mahfouz’s work, there is a “structural leveling of the narrative perspective that places the Islamic option on equal footing with all these others” (114). The implication is that “[t]he religious option is confined here to the realm of personal choice and no longer enjoys an a priori universal sanction” (114). Siddiq’s attention to religion is not simply a linguistic matter (understood either as intrinsic to the Arabic language or even modern Arabic literature) so much as it pertains the “structural leveling” offered in Mahfouz’s novel. Religion is not something to be discovered thematically in the text but enmeshed in how the novel facilitates, frames, and forms the fact of utterance.

It is telling, then, that Siddiq weaves together close readings and reflections on genre to focus on dimensions of al-Sayyid Ahmad’s charac-
ter. He focuses less on al-Hamzawi’s recitation than on the appearance of the blind shaykh hired to do the reciting, and he notes the almost parenthetical role this passage plays: “From its somewhat garbled syntax and abrupt appearance and disappearance in the text, this background ‘filler’ has all the marks of a staging afterthought, added for good measure, so to speak” (124). He continues by emphasizing how fleeting this scene is, especially that the shaykh who does the reciting emerges as a totally dispensable character: “Nothing else is said about it in the text; nor is the Qur’an recited seen or heard from again. Even before the scene is over, he [the blind shaykh] simply recedes into oblivion, leaving no trace behind.” Above all, though, Siddiq concludes, “While his brief ‘performance’ lasts, however, it proves effective: Both al-Sayyid and his assistant are said to follow the shaykh’s recitation with evident fealty” (124). Siddiq’s aim in this reading is to attenuate the scene’s function in enriching a sense of character, and he reads it with purpose in mind—its effectiveness, as he has it, to demonstrate al-Sayyid Ahmad’s religiosity.

When it comes to the postlingual dimensions of the passage, it is worth noting that the religious register extends beyond the specific words uttered and beyond the disposition of the character presented on the page. What we encounter is a ritual of recitation in which the utterance is embodied, known by heart, and revealed in a whisper, even if it is descriptively rendered in realist prose. Recent scholarship by Hoda ElShakry, Ellen McLarney, and Nadia al-Bagdadi helps to reflect on the role of the novel in the remediation of such religious language. ElShakry constructively traces Sufism in the modern Maghrebi novel, and McLarney and al-Bagdadi question the valences of a term like *adab* and its implications for what is understood to be literature. Each of these insightful approaches sheds light on modes of literary analysis that push beyond linguistic determinism to engage instead with the semiotic field in which language comes to matter in particular ways.

Even given the concentric frameworks of language, genre, and register, I still wonder what it might mean to translate Mahfouz’s passage in excess of its linguistic significance—that is, beyond the masterful rendering we see in Hutchins’s attention to the sibilant *s* sounds, and beyond the careful reading of a literary scholar such as Siddiq. What Mahfouz offers, above and beyond a scene, an embodiment of language, and an enunciative whisper, is a particular mode of citation that allows the Qur’anic verse to linger as a trace in the description offered. Where literary scholarship gestures already to approaches that expand beyond language, the scene suggests a shift from questions of translation (in any linguistic sense) to the stakes of a literary remediation of liturgical language. This, we could say,
is part of its resonant postlingualism: reading the lips of recitation entails far more than apprehending the specific tongue in which it is whispered.

On Liturgy and Language

If comparative literature points to linguistic and cultural knowledge about a specific novel, then anthropology can be seen to shed light on how language matters in the world—that is, how it is taken up by various communities of readers. One might concede that every reading is itself a sort of translation, and through an engagement with semiotic ideology, we gain insight into the limits, potentials, and pitfalls of a translational ethos that assumes the possibility of linguistic equivalence. The narrative form of the novel may be as consequential as the language of its composition, and the social understanding of language, literature, and representation have direct bearing on how a text comes to be understood. For a literary reader, the text serves as the fundamental ground of the knowledge claim, and for the anthropologist, the reception of the text lends insight into the social world of its readers. This anthropological shift from text to reader is not a matter of anchoring translation in the specificity of a language, but instead of thinking critically about the semiotic ideology undergirding the reading itself. Among a set of scholars in the anthropology of religion (namely, Talal Asad, Webb Keane, and Saba Mahmood), we encounter numerous scenes through which questions of translation, religion, and embodiment come to the fore. Unlike literary readers for whom the novel makes visible a certain imaginary world, these anthropologists invoke social worlds to articulate a conceptual grammar of reception.

In the second chapter of *Secular Translations*, Talal Asad explicitly takes up the question of translation, but offers a manner of thinking less across languages than across religious traditions. He begins with a discussion of the Christian theologian Lamin Sammeh’s claim that Christianity has little trouble translating the Christian message for non-Christian cultures. By contrast, Asad tells us, Sannah understands Islam to be limited by a language ideology in which the Qur’an is taken to be untranslatable. As the chapter plays out, Asad questions Sanneh’s key assumption that a deeper message can be readily separated from the language in which it is communicated—that somehow the language and its message have an arbitrary relation one to the other. Looking at a history of feelings, intention, and prayer, Asad traces language-use from pre-modern to modern times, and he explores the shortcomings of Sanneh’s argument. Asad notes a distinction between *naṣṣ* and *mustashābīha*, as well as *tafsīr* and *ta’wīl*, as offering different valences of textuality and hermeneutics in the Islamic tradition. And perhaps most importantly, he draws together reflections

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on ritual as crucial for understanding language ideology. For Asad, language is not an instrument through which a message is encoded. Rather, a liturgical utterance—be it a prayer or a recitation—weds language and message inseparably one to the other.

What is revealing here is that the question of translation has little to do with language (Arabic) and more to do with the ritualistic register, the embodied word, and the fact of utterance. Asad is clear that the Arabic language itself is open to translation, but he contrasts language and ritual: “it is the act of worship (not the Qur’anic text) that is nontranslatable, whose full sense is not given in a dictionary (even a dictionary that provides an explanation of seventh-century Arabic in modern Arabic) but one that requires cultivation” (96). The upshot of this liturgical context is, as Asad tells us, what “makes it difficult for political as well as ecclesiastical authority of control Qur’anic meaning.” For, as he goes on to note, “The original is always present, generating unlimited possibilities of meaning” (96-7). Asad remarks that the blurring of textuality with recitation is the result of a language ideology based on a certain abstraction, one that has implications for the publication of the Qur’an as a codex subject to readerly interpretation. In the end, Asad offers a cogent summary of what is at stake: “'Language' is not separable from ‘the message’ conveyed in it, and the message is not simply cognitive” (96). If there is a liturgical dimension to the Qur’an, it matters in particular ways for the communities for whom it is a text unlike others. The recitation is not about knowing the language (as a cognitive matter) so much as about inhabiting the sacred word with the body (as enunciation).

What might the postlingual implications be of Asad’s reading be for an understanding of translation in Mahfouz’s work? First and foremost, Asad seems to push against translation as an ethic of linguistic equivalence predicated on distinctions between language and message as separable one from the other. In contrast to the notion of untranslatability, Asad addresses what he calls the “nontranslatable,” by which he alludes to distinct registers of language-in-use, as well as a principle of intention integral to the language of prayer. When it comes to the literary passage, the issue is not that Mahfouz cites the Qur’an, even though readers may well know that the allusion to the specific letters of the Arabic language refers to the verse on waswasa. Nor is the issue that Mahfouz secularizes scripture by drawing it into the fold of the novel. Rather, there is a question of remediation that Asad draws to the fore both with his analysis of liturgical language and with his critical take on Sanneh’s argument about translatability. To reckon with Qur’anic recitation in the novel, then, is to reckon with the remediation of the liturgical verse in a realist scene. What is at stake is not the sense of the word, but the staging of its register:
in this case, the embodied liturgical whisper rendered and described in realist prose. Language matters as embodied utterance.

Where Asad focuses on language ideology in Sanneh’s argument, Webb Keane offers insights on a sort of postlingualism through a different story. He recounts “a small melodrama” that took place in the 1990s surrounding a proposed Indonesian edition of the Qur’an to be rendered in poetic verse (760). On one side of the story, Keane describes how the literary figure H.B. Jassin’s proposed the publication of an Indonesian Qur’an to be printed in verse form rather than in its conventional format as blocks of prose. Jassin conscientiously consulted with religious authorities, including Ali Hasjmy, as he undertook his work, and he was assured that “as long as the number and sequence of the verses remained the same, there was nothing wrong with the project” (761). And on the other side of the story, Keane describes how, as media attention for the publication grew, opposition arose to Jassin’s project. Eventually, in 1995 and in response to mounting pressure, the Minister of Religious Affairs “ruled that the book could be archived, but not distributed to the public at large” (761). Ever the anthropologist, Keane takes this story to suggest, “We should not assume what is trivial and what is not,” and goes on to analyze the terms of this debate. He notes that the story is not simply a matter of translation (tarjamah) or interpretation (tafsir), but more deeply rooted in semiotic ideology. What emerges extends beyond a matter of language (whether Arabic or Indonesian) and form (whether poetry, verse, or codex): “Jassin,” Keane tells us, “would agree [with his critics] that the Qur’an is not mere words” (775).

Much like Asad, Keane emphasizes the limits of a language ideology that sees a message as separable from its form: “questions of form are taken to have implications for social order” (778). He adds, “Whereas Jassin’s own account of his piety focuses on subjective states and personal affective response, his critics focus either on the materiality of piety in the text or on social consequences” (778). On the one hand, then, Keane presents the traditionalists for whom the scriptural text is ambiguous and in need of communities of interpreters working alongside a discursive tradition; and on the other hand, he presents the reformists for whom the text is “clear and susceptible to a final, determinate reading” (779). His account sheds light on translation itself: “The act of translation exposes the tension between two modes of social being, and, if not their very conditions of possibility, then at least the ontologies they presuppose and the media that help constitute them” (780). As we saw in Asad, here too Keane illuminates how semiotic ideology informs a critical understanding of language not simply as a message to be linguistically deciphered, but as materially consequential in its embodied form.
These intersections among language ideology and translation find a cogent articulation in the work of Saba Mahmood, especially as she connects representation to embodiment, attachment, and cohabitation. She takes as her focus the 2005 publication of Danish cartoons caricaturing the prophet Muhammed. Grappling with a familiar opposition, Mahmood describes the sensibility of those who understand the caricatures of the prophet Muhammed to be a matter of free speech, and those who see speech as entailing “the civic responsibility not to provoke religious or cultural sensitivities, especially in hybrid, multicultural societies” (839). Both these dominant poles of the debate, Mahmood tells us, “presuppose a semiotic ideology in which signifiers are arbitrarily linked to concepts, their meaning open to people’s reading in accord with a particular code they share between them” (841). This framework, Mahmood goes on to suggest, “fails to attend to the affective and embodied practices through which a subject comes to relate to a particular sign—a relation founded not only on representation but also on…attachment and cohabitation” (842). Resisting the pull to discuss the cartoons as a matter of good or bad representations, she notes that “Muhammed is regarded as a moral exemplar whose words and deeds are understood not so much as commandments but as ways of inhabiting the world, bodily and ethically.” She continues by noting that there is a model of emulating “how he dressed, what he ate, how he spoke to his friends and adversaries, how he slept, walked, and so on,” and she emphasizes that these aspects of the Prophet’s behavior “are lived not as commandments but as virtues” (846-7). This matters for Mahmood because “Muhammed is not simply a proper noun referring to a particular historical figure but marks a relation of similitude,” or as she frames it later, “not a referential sign that stands apart from an essence that it denotes” (847).

As though pushing even further than Asad or Keane, Mahmood describes ways beyond the familiar distinctions between language and message by emphasizing attachment and cohabitation. If one semiotic ideology is predicated on mimesis, then Mahmood highlights an alternate mode in schesis. In this latter understanding, a representation does not stand apart from what it represents, but “is based in homonymy and hypostasis; the image and deity are two in nature and essence but identical in name” (848). Importantly, Mahmood teases out the ethical implications of this mode of semiological cohabitation: “It is not due to the compulsion of the law that one emulates the Prophet’s conduct…but because of the ethical capacities one has developed that incline one to behave in a certain way” (848). As Mahmood weighs the limitations of legal and state-oriented conceptions of language and representation, she makes thinkable, much like Asad and Keane, ways of relating to language that...
are not predicated on assumptions of arbitrariness. She points to ethical exemplarity, emulation, and embodiment, rather than the framework of the original and copy. Not only is linguistic matter inseparable from its message, it matters in excess of messaging, saturated as it is with ritualistic significance. This, we could say, is part of its postlingual abundance.

Where an anthropological approach may illuminate social frames of textual reception, I wonder what implications such reading practices might have for literary study, especially when brought to bear on the formal contours of Mahfouz’s realist novel. How might we understand the collision of social worlds internal to the scene Mahfouz recounts? Does the novel frame the terms of its reception? Does the realist scene frame how we hear the Qur’anic recitation described on its pages? These questions are not meant to foreclose the insights of Asad, Keane, and Mahmood, so much as to expand them beyond the purview of a social observation. What happens when literary scholars take stock of semiotic ideology in the analysis of such scenes? What is the semiological grammar animated in the world of the novel?

Shhh…Whisper as Method

Thus far I have shifted from literary to anthropological engagements with language, and I have done so to highlight fundamental questions regarding the discursive registers of an entirely minor scene from an otherwise major novel of the Arabic literary canon. In the conceptual geography of world literature (where authors stand in for national literatures in a global literary chorus), what might it mean to focus on a single minor scene? How might we hear this whispered language in the novel? Allow me here, in closing, to tease out some of the implications that reading in miniature has for world literature—and if we are capable of listening otherwise, to make a case for what we might call whispering as method.

If I began with a scene, I did so to address how novels are readily translatable as imagined experiences in which the words on the page seemingly disappear into characters, scenes, and situations. Such seems to be the case in Mahfouz’s detailed descriptions of a regular morning in the opening scene of the seventh chapter of Palace Walk: an apparent window onto everyday life in Cairo. But, as I noted, among the many activities described in this scene, Mahfouz includes a detail that reflects immediately back on reading: namely, the whispering of a verse of the Qur’an. What might have otherwise seemed a readily translatable scene here meets its limit. The content of what is said is less consequential than the practice of its recitation. Liturgy appears in realist prose. Realizing that the scene rehearses liturgical language, it also invites a challenge to the sort of literary reading attentive to the composition itself. On the one
hand, the phonetic dimension of the Arabic text (with its repetition of “sibilant s sounds”) and the explicit allusion to the Arabic alphabet (the sin and the sad) introduce the embodiment of the verse in the descriptive language of the novel. And on the other hand, the figuration of piety within the passage complicates any simple linguistic or formal reading, drawing attention to the placement of the novel in the context of Arabic literature and discussions of literary form more broadly. And yet, all the same, arriving at discussions in the anthropology of religion, we confront what semiotic ideology offers to literary analysis—a shift from original texts to communities of readers, and a shift from textual forms to frames of reception. The subtle move from text to ritual means that the novel as literary form may be less consequential than the world in which it comes to be read. What anchors the scene is not so much the dimensions of its literariness as the framework of its readerly reception.

In one mode of reading, we encounter Mahfouz as a paradigmatic Arabic author and Palace Walk as a paradigmatic realist novel. It would be simple enough to understand the recitational scene as a simple detail among other details in the novel, and to focus on it—such a minor instance—is to misread the novel. Given that the novel does not actually cite the Qur’an explicitly, nor make any strong interpretative claim for how it out to be understand, the recitational scene stands out for what it layers upon itself. I read it not for a master lesson, nor for its remarkable style, but for the possibilities it offers for seeing and hearing language in a scene otherwise filled with the everyday. In the slippage from Arabic to English and from the novel to the Qur’an, we confront competing registers of discourse. We shuttle from whisper to utterance, from secular to sacred, and from the eye to the ear. In this minor detail, we can begin to imagine world literature beyond the scope of textuality to consider how we make literature speak. And here, an alternate philological practice emerges: less a matter of translation than remediation, less language-as-such than language-in-use, less a message to be deciphered than the word embodied.

In the twists and turns from literature to anthropology to religion, this literary and liturgical whisper is not to be shouted aloud from among other possible readings. Instead, it reveals other ways of facing language. There is no monolingual text. There are multiple languages internal to the language manifest on the page, and there are registers remediating the language that we think we see and hear. In this whisper, then, is an abundance of tongues in excess of linguistic translations. If world literature and comparative literature both presume a patchwork of traveling texts across languages, nations, and traditions, then the whispered utterance is a form of language whose traits emerge in the mode of enunciation. What might it mean to read for the whisper? How does one listen to this regis-
ter? If the orthodox reader aspires to make the text speak in a particular way, then here the whisper eludes affirmation, apprehension, and making sense. To listen for the whisper is to be welcomed into the cacophony of enunciations and the seduction of possible meanings: waswasa. Caught between hearing and mishearing, the whisper is only partially spoken, partially disclosed, and only visible as a trace of the enunciating lips. An embodied utterance exceeding linguistic sense, the whisper emerges as a faint figuration of postlingualism—it is both in and of language, but it pushes us to listen and learn anew.

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Notes
1. See Connor, especially his reflections on whispering, pp. 48-52 and p. 187. At the outset of his book, he entwines face and voice within a lineage of thoughts on language: “face and voice come to represent the emergence or figuring out (figura=face) of form itself” (7).
2. For an elaboration on the stakes of language-in-use, see Lucey and McEnaney. Their article was the backbone of the recent Sawyer Seminar at the University of California, Berkeley, which was devoted to the intersection of linguistic anthropology and literary theory.
3. I allude here to the work of Barbara Cassin and a set of debates surrounding the translatability of philosophical terms. By no means is waswasa one of these terms, but I gesture to the debates to suggest the horizon of intelligibility often at stake in comparatist readings. A model for such translingual analysis is seen in Yasser Elhariry’s analysis of Abdelkébir Khatibi alongside Starobinski and Saussure (12-13, 15).
4. In addition to the case I discuss here, Mahmood’s analysis of the novel Azazeel is remarkable for its engagement of debates between literature and history—with the novel being in a unique position to mediate positions with regard to archives, memory, and the past.

Works Cited


