

REFLECTIONS ON THE WORK OF E.D. BLODGETT AS POET AND TRANSLATOR¹

Manijeh Mannani

Athabasca University

534 If Love reveals Her Face, take Her home.
Should She loosen Her Hair, become Her comb.
How long a pawn or a half a rook in size,
How long like a queen move crookedly? Be wise.
Before you gave gracious billet-doux,
Forget the gifts, now the gift is you.
Once the elements you were, and beast,
Then human soul, now be soul, at least
—Rumi, “Ghazal 779” (23-30)²

Since I was approached to write this brief article on the work of E.D. (Ted) Blodgett as a poet and translator for this issue of *CRCL/RCLC*, I have been lamenting where and how to start discussing succinctly and expeditiously a poet with two Governor General’s Awards, among other honours, to his credit. I have been bemoaning how to do justice to a literary giant, whom I have been fortunate enough to call a supervisor, an advisor, a co-translator and co-author, a mentor, and, above all, a friend, in a limited space. Leafing through his multiple poetry collections sitting tall and proud on the shelf in my study, I have been looking for a sign, a secret hint, an inspiration to discuss intelligently and comprehensively his poetry and translations without repeating what has already been written about him before and since his passing on Saturday, November 15, 2018. I finally settled on limiting this piece to my own experience working with him on four poetry collections as translator (of *Najvā*, his selected poetry in Persian) and co-translator (of *Speak Only of the Moon: A New Translation of Rumi*), and also as editor of *Mingling Voices*, the poetry series in which he published two of his fairly recent collections, *Poems for a Small Park* and *Praha*.

When my husband and I visited Ted and his lovely wife, Irena, last May in the beautiful garden of their home in South Surrey, BC, he asked me again to consider

earnestly his proposal to co-translate with him Hafiz, the fourteenth-century Persian bard, whose work he and I had often talked about in various contexts, including the literary. If only the demands of my career as an academic and administrator had not stood in the way, today a volume on Hafiz would be complementing the work that we joyously collaborated on in translating selected ghazals and poetry of Rumi³ into English.

Anyone even remotely familiar with Rumi knows that translating his poetry, and any other Sufi work for that matter, is not simple because, without exception, these works by their very nature are multilayered and highly allusive. A question that must be asked, then, is why Rumi and Hafiz? What made Ted so keen on reading these poets and choosing to render them into English? Even a cursory look at his poetry reveals stark similarities with the spiritual poetry of the Sufis. Let me illustrate this point with one or two examples. One of the recurrent motifs in the Sufi doctrine of love is observing silence for the dual purpose of distancing oneself from the mundane and achieving spiritual refinement. In other words, in the world of the Sufis, speaking less is a virtue. It is through silence and self-reflection that the individual in search of Truth can find him/herself and look for the right path toward the Beloved:

535

Die and die again in what you are
And love: and dead you will live in all you are.

Die, o die, there is nothing to fear,
Earth will fall away, heaven appear.

...

Die, o die, come out from under the cloud
And like the moon shine without a shroud.

Try silence, since silence seems death
But death where I lament is living breath.
(Rumi, "Ghazal 230" 1-5; 12-14)

The juxtaposition of silence and death in these lines connotes a rebirth, a life akin to one portrayed in many of Ted's poems. In the poem that follows, silence plays a central role not just in unifying the speaker and the addressee, but also in accompanying the persona alongside his journey of self-exploration:

Why have I failed to speak
of tears that I have shed
tears that have filled the night

and left the waning moon
and all the stars that fill
the sky obscure with grief

why have I failed to speak
of silence that comes upon
me night and day and stands

forever at my side
 the one companion you
 have left me to know

 why have I failed to speak
 of my desire to step
 into the sea where you

 have gone into the dark
 ahead of me to show
 me where I am to go
 ("Elegy" 33)

In a 2006 interview that led to the publication of translations of selections of his poetry into Persian, Ted explained to me that his preoccupation with silence goes back to his focus on the Old Testament as a literary text and the principle of *ex nihilo*, the creation of man out of "nothing." "Nothing," in Ted's worldview, equates with "silence"; moreover, God is silence, and everything in life originates from the interaction between these two silences: God and nothing. Secondary silence that shrouds all creatures and permeates all aspects of life derives from primary silence, which is God. In Ted's world, the quieter the creature, the closer it was to God, a principle that most certainly bears elements of Sufism. In his own words, he wrote poetry to open windows onto this silence.

In a similar way, nature figures prominently in Ted's work. As in the mystical poetry of the Sufis, images of birds, clouds, and the wind, among other natural phenomena, are abundant in his poetry and point to the transient nature of life and the ever-changing cycle of nature. The frequent appearance of the word *passage* in his work by and in itself illuminates this line of thinking. I asked Ted specifically about the widespread use of the images of apples, apple trees, apple blossoms, and apple leaves in his poetry. The answer lies in the "passage" of life symbolized in the transition of apples and the apple tree from one state to the other.

Apart from his command of the Old Testament and Greek and Latin texts, which he often read in the original up to the days leading to his demise, Ted's extensive familiarity with other scriptures, including those pertaining to Buddhism and the Quakers, further elucidates the specific nature of his poetry. It would not be hyperbolic to conclude that the same allusiveness and intertextuality that characterize many of these and other canonical texts define his poetry in a most refined sense.

In his own words, Ted owed his superb command of rhythm and grasp of musicality in poetry, and his ear and enthusiasm for music, to the soft voice of his mother, who read him stories from a very young age. Even though his mother had no technical training in either poetry or music, she knew exactly where to pause when reading a story and where to pick the narrative up again. His mother's tactful art of reciting stories and her delicate voice were also decisive factors in his choice of world literature as an academic field.

To discuss the legacy of E.D. Blodgett, Distinguished University Professor Emeritus of Comparative Literature, as poet, translator, literary critic, and scholar requires multiple volumes. I hope this short article on some of the poems and translations of this dedicated man of letters will assist current and future students and scholars of poetry and comparative literature in their study of his oeuvre.

NOTES

1. Special thanks to my friend and colleague Heather Buzila for reading this essay and providing editorial feedback.
2. Translated by E.D. Blodgett and Manijeh Mannani in *Speak Only of the Moon: A New Translation of Rumi*.
3. The celebrated Persian poet Jalal al-Din Muhammad Ibn Baha al-Din Muhammad (1212-73), known as Rumi in the West and Mowlānā in Iran and in the Persian-speaking world, has been one of the most widely read poets in North America for at least two decades.
4. Translated by E.D. Blodgett and Manijeh Mannani in *Speak Only of the Moon: A New Translation of Rumi*.

537

WORKS CITED

- Blodgett, E.D. *Elegy*. U of Alberta P, 2005.
- . *Poems for a Small Park*. Athabasca UP, 2008.
- . *Praha*. Athabasca UP, 2011.
- Blodgett, E.D., and Manijeh Mannani, translators. *Speak Only of the Moon: A New Translation of Rumi*. Afshar Publ, 2015; reissued by Guernica Editions, 2017.
- Mannani, Manijeh. *Najvā: Selected Poems of E.D. Blodgett in Persian*. Nasl-i Nuvīn Publishing, 2006.