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'Writing for' with Authority: Theorizing an Electronic Edition of Shahriar Mandanipour's *Censoring an Iranian Love Story*

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ABSTRACT

Censoring an Iranian Love Story (*CAILS*) by Shahriar Mandanipour (2009) is a novel written for translation. Despite being penned in Farsi, this original text has yet to be published. *CAILS* simultaneously presents the initial titular love story (**bold**), pre-emptively censored text before it is 'submitted' to the Iranian Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (~~**bold with strikethrough**~~), and explanations as to why censoring occurred (roman). Mandanipour's voice has the authority that comes with writing in a mother tongue, yet in writing for translation he disavows authorial privilege. A non-hierarchical electronic text that enables the reader to shift between the 'original', censored, and 'annotated' text, as well as these options within the original Farsi, could restore authority to the writer. By theorising such an edition, I explore the possibility of a novelistic form that would enable and empower non-English writers to cross linguistic, social, cultural, political, religious, and censorship boundaries.

KEYWORDS

authority in fiction; electronic literature; literary theory; palimpsest; Shahriar Mandanipour; translation.

RESUMO

Censoring an Iranian Love Story [Censurando uma história de amor iraniana] (CAILS) por Shahriar Mandanipour (2009) é um romance escrito para ser traduzido. Apesar de escrito em Farsi, este texto original ainda não foi publicado. CAILS apresenta simultaneamente a história de amor do título (**negrito**), texto censurado preventivamente antes de ser "submetido" ao Ministério da Cultura e Orientação Islâmica do Irão (~~**negrito rasurado**~~), e explicações sobre por que ocorreu a censura (texto romano normal). A voz de Mandanipour tem a autoridade que advém da escrita em língua materna, mas ao escrever para tradução, ele nega o privilégio autoral. Um texto eletrónico não hierárquico que permita ao leitor alternar entre texto "original," texto censurado e texto "anotado," bem como essas opções no Farsi original, poderia restaurar a autoridade do autor. Ao teorizar sobre tal edição, exploro a possibilidade de uma forma romanesca que possibilitaria e capacitaria escritores não-anglófonos a cruzar fronteiras linguísticas, sociais, culturais, políticas, religiosas e censórias.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

autoridade na ficção; literatura eletrónica; teoria literária; palimpsesto; Shahriar Mandanipour; tradução.

Shahriar Mandanipour's 2009 novel, *Censoring an Iranian Love Story* (hereafter *CAILS*), is written in Farsi (Nastaʿlīq script). This initial version of the text, however, has yet to be published. The English translation, by Sara Khalili, is the first publication of the text. *CAILS* is the second Iranian novel to appear first in English translation.[1] Born in Shiraz, 1957, Mandanipour is a novelist and essayist of Persian literature. In 2006, he went to the United States as the third International Writers Project Fellow at Brown University, and spent the following years as a visiting scholar and writer at various American institutions, during which he wrote *CAILS* (Encyclopædia Iranica, 2012). Yet *CAILS* is not simply a text written by an émigré/expatriate writer whose homeland refuses to publish his work. Unlike, for example, émigré novelist Gāo Xíngjiàn's fragmentary text *Soul Mountain* (灵山 or *Língshān*, 2000), which is both banned in Mainland China and makes no accommodations for non-Chinese readers through translation, Mandanipour's text has been written with self-awareness of its anomalous place as a text-in-translation.

Mandanipour's voice has a sense of authority that comes with writing in a mother tongue. Ostby (2013: 74), however, argues that in writing for translation the text disavows authorial privilege. By creating a networkable and programmable version of Mandanipour's novel, this authority that Ostby argues is compromised could be strengthened, or even 'restored.'[2] There are two major components relating to text 'authority' to consider in this version's development: the first is the representation of the original text in Farsi; the second is an ability to restructure the text by shifting between the 'original' text, the censored text, the visibly censored text, and the annotated text (as well as these options within the original Farsi). The purpose of theorizing this potential digital text, however, is not simply to resolve issues of writer authority in this specific example, but also to theorize the implications this form has to enable Iranian (and other) writers and readers to traverse linguistic, social, cultural, and censorship boundaries. To explore the possibilities of this networkable/programmable form, literary theory will be used. Hypertext theorist Landow (2006: 1) argues that "over the past several decades literary theory and computer hypertext, apparently unconnected areas of inquiry, have increasingly converged." Following his exam-

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1 The first Iranian novel to appear first in English translation is Hušang Golširi's *King of the Benighted,* which appeared in English in 1990 over a decade before the publication of its Persian original (*Šāh-e siāh-pušān*) in 2001.

2 Permission to create this edition for research purposes has been granted by *Georges Borchardt, Inc. Literary Agency.*

ple, Derrida's decentered text (1978), Said's *Beginnings* (1978), Barthes's network-able text (1975), and Bakhtin's polyphonic text (1973) will be used to analyze this hypothetical form. The repercussions/possibilities for this form will also be explored, particularly as a tool for writers of the Global South.

I. *CAILS* AS TEXT-IN-TRANSLATION

Iran's Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance has subjected Mandanipour to not only censorship, but also threats, harassment and intimidation (PEN America Center in Ostby, 2013: 75). As a result, much of his work has gone unpublished. In *CAILS*, Mandanipour addresses this predicament directly. The novel contains three types of text, all of which are present in the following extract:

> **She closed the door to her room, lay down on her bed, and began reading the book from the beginning.**
>
> I guess by now you have realized that the crossed-out words in the text are my own doing. And you must know that such fanciful eccentricity is not postmodernism or Heideggerism. In fact...
>
> And by now you have surely grasped the significance of '...' in Iran's contemporary literature.
>
> **On page seven, Sara noticed several purple dots. She paid no attention to them and continued reading voraciously.** (17)

The titular 'Iranian love story' is written in **bold**. Text that is pre-emptively censored before the 'author' submits the 'Iranian love story' to Iran's Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance is written in ~~**bold with strikethrough**~~. Descriptions as to why the censoring has occurred and other meta-fictional explanations of culturally specific elements by the narrator are written in roman. This style maintains throughout the novel.[3]

Mandanipour's text could be contrasted with Nabokov's *Poems and Problems* (1970), which displays Nabokov's original Russian poems printed on the left and Nabokov's translations of these poems into English on the right. Nabokov also includes endnotes where necessary to explain translation choices. For example,

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3 There are occasional meta-fictional moments when the characters of the 'love story' (Dara and Sara) 'interact' with the narrator within the 'roman' sections, for example:

Dara grabs my throat. He shoves me back and slams me against the wall of his room. For the first time I realize how strong his right arm has become as a result of painting walls and ceilings. In my face he shouts:
"You shouldn't have written me like this. You shouldn't have written me as browbeaten and pathetic. You wrote me as an earthworm. You wrote me so that no matter what they do to me, all I can do is squirm and bear the pain. You wrote me like this to pass your story through censorship. I don't want to be written as an earthworm that even when they cut it in two turns into two earthworms. You are my murderer too for having written me as so utterly miserable. All the torment and misery there is you have written for me. You are no different than the torturer who would flog me so that I would concede there is a God. I want to write my own murder." (229)

The love story in bold, however, is maintained from start to finish.

слава/Fame contains seven endnotes. These are used to explain intertextual references —

> Line 12/ *Akakiy Akakievich*. The hero of Gogol's *Shinel* (The Carrick) whose speech was interspersed with more or less meaningless accessory words. (113)

—, justify English word choice —

> Line 42/ *strobe-effect spin*. The term renders exactly what I tried to express by the looser phrase in my text "sequence of spokelike shadows." The strobe effect causes wheels to look as if they revolved backward, and the crossing over to America (line 36) becomes an optical illusion of a return to Russia. (113)

—, allude to wordplay —

> Lines 47-48. The injunction is addressed to those — probably nonexisting — readers who might care to decipher an allusion in lines 45-47 to the *sirin*, a fabulous fowl of Slavic mythology, and "Sirin," the author's penname in his 1920-1940 period. (113)

—, explain cultural reference —

> Line 67/ *gill*. The carton mouthpiece of a Russian cigarette. An unswept floor in a cold room strewn all over with the tubes of discarded cigarette butts used to be a typical platform for the meditations of a hard-up Russian enthusiast in the idealistic past. (113)

—, and explain historical reference —

> Line 87/ *co-orthographical brethren*. A new orthography was introduced in 1917, but *émigré* publications stuck to the old one. (113)

Both Nabokov's poems and Mandanipour's novel display a position of authority over the reader unaccustomed to the original reference (Nabokov more so, in that he writes in both Russian and English). Where Nabokov simply uses such notes to explain the issues of poetic translation, however, Mandanipour makes this explanation the very artistic form of his work: his digressions become a meta-fictional narrative alongside the love story.

By writing in his mother tongue, Mandanipour's position could be regarded as one of strength. The non-Iranian reader is a guest and Mandanipour speaks with an air of convivial condescension. Contrast this with V.S. Naipaul, who in 1951 (in Bewes, 2011) as a student at Oxford, in a paper on *Paradise Lost* read by Professor J.R.R. Tolkien, wrote the phrase: "Prayer, the incense for the incenséd God." In 2002, Naipaul explained:

> Now I knew exactly what I was doing. 'Incenséd' meaning angry, it's the same word. And Tolkien said to me, 'it's good, did you intend it?' And I was ashamed and I said

no. And so I lost points in Tolkien's mind, I suppose, and the witticism yet was my own. (Bewes, 2011: 79)

By writing in his mother tongue and yet still directly addressing the Western reader, Mandanipour avoids the 'post-colonial shame' experienced by Naipaul, despite Naipaul's mastery of the adopted English language.

Ostby, on the other hand, argues that despite clever self-referentiality, Mandanipour in fact "renders his authorial position *more* vulnerable" (74) and that in writing for translation he and translator Khalili render "impossible the novel's complete ownership or understanding by even the author himself" (93). '*Author*ity' in writing, Said defines, is the explicit and implicit rules of pertinence for itself:

> ...both in the sense of explicit law and guiding force... and in the sense of the implicit power to generate another word that will *belong to* the writing as a whole (Vico's etymology is *auctor: autos: suis ipsius: propsius: property*). (16)

Mandanipour's authority, Ostby concludes, is compromised, declaring *CAILS*:

> ...simultaneously a surrender of authorial control and a liberation of the synchronic text that enables situational, individualistic readings across a transnational audience. (75)

While Mandanipour avoids potential 'post-colonial shame' by not surrendering his mother tongue, he sacrifices a modicum of authority over the end text through the translation process.

II. *CAILS* AS A POTENTIAL NETWORKABLE/PROGRAMMABLE TEXT

Due to its unique form, *CAILS* can also be regarded as an example of what Hayles (2008) calls a print novel that displays "the mark of the digital" (159). Hayles argues that contemporary print is deeply interpenetrated by electronic textuality:

> [D]igital technologies do more than mark the surfaces of contemporary print novels. They also put into play dynamics that interrogate and reconfigure the relations between authors and readers, humans and intelligent machines, code and language... More than a mode of material production (although it is that), digitality has become the textual condition of the twenty-first-century literature. (2008: 186)

This interpenetration could work in the opposite direction: the print novels influenced by electronic textuality could in turn influence electronic literature.

In this proposed digital version, the original Farsi text will be represented. Though the Farsi text will likely be 'unreadable' to the Western reader, the presence of this "unread unreadable virtual language" may — as Cayley (2015) claims in his essay on Xu Bing's *Book from the Sky* — "impress upon the reader's perception, disproportionately and entirely without regard to any of their (supposed) effects as actual language" (77). This digital version will also allow the reader to restructure the text by shifting between '**original,**' **censored**, **actually censored**, and 'annotated' text. A similar digital mechanism exists in the digital novel *Paige & Powe* (2017). In the section titled 'Letter to the Shareholders,' a 'palimpsestic' (or 'layered') form is used, which allows the reader to add or remove 'edited text,' revealing the difference between scripted and 'honest' self. In other words, the interactive experience allows the reader to peel away the mask of professional language, which, in contemporary culture, too often covers up and conceals, rather than communicates. Referring to the extract quoted above, *CAILS* could be presented in various ways that the reader shifts between. First, the uncensored 'Iranian love story':

> **She closed the door to her room, lay down on her bed, and began reading the book from the beginning.**
>
> **On page seven, Sara noticed several purple dots. She paid no attention to them and continued reading voraciously.**

Second, the 'visibly' censored 'Iranian love story':

> **She closed the door to her room, lay down on her bed, and began reading the book from the beginning.**
>
> **On page seven, Sara noticed several purple dots. She paid no attention to them and continued reading voraciously.**

Third, the censored 'Iranian love story':

> **She closed the door to her room and began reading the book from the beginning.**
>
> **On page seven, Sara noticed several purple dots. She paid no attention to them and continued reading voraciously.**

And fourth, the 'visibly' censored text with annotations, i.e. as currently is:

> **She closed the door to her room, lay down on her bed, and began reading the book from the beginning.**
>
> I guess by now you have realized that the crossed-out words in the text are my own doing. And you must know that such fanciful eccentricity is not postmodernism or Heideggerism. In fact...
>
> And by now you have surely grasped the significance of '...' in Iran's contemporary literature.
>
> **On page seven, Sara noticed several purple dots. She paid no attention to them and continued reading voraciously.**

These four options, as stated above, will also be made available in the original Farsi.

III. THEORIZING *CAILS* AS A POTENTIAL NETWORKABLE/ PROGRAMMABLE TEXT

It is important to ask whether *CAILS* as a text has a 'center', or if we should regard Mandanipour as a *briocleur*, which Levi-Strauss (in Derrida, 1978: 285) defines as someone who uses "the means at hand," that which is already there. In *Writing and Difference*, Derrida states that "the concept of structure" is dated; the reason for structure was to orient, balance, organize, and to "limit what we might call the *freeplay* of the structure" (278). Such absence of structure can be observed in Derrida's *Glas* (1974), which contains pages split into two columns. On the left is an essay on the works of Hegel, on the right an essay on the writing of Jean Genet. The individual essays are frequently interrupted by what Barthes calls 'lexias', i.e. brief, contiguous fragmentary units of reading (Barthes, 1975: 13), which supply relevant information and/or digressions. The essays can be read separately or 'simultaneously'. As text, *Glas* lacks a 'center' (although one could argue that the center is Derrida, the author). *CAILS*, as it currently exists, is removed by language from the 'origin' text, transformed by Khalili's translation. But within the text itself, the 'love story' in bold typeface could be considered a structural center. Censorship is palimpsestically and diegetically 'added later' (i.e. the 'author' has added the censorship), as are the roman explanations. A digital version of this text in the manner described could therefore better articulate this center by removing the layers of visible censorship and annotation. On the other hand, the 'censoring' and 'annotating' could be regarded as 'central' or '*origin*al' (i.e. the *author*ity), essential to the Iranian experience Mandanipour depicts. Said (1978) argues that:

> ...a document becomes a text with authority when emendations, excisions, additions, editions, and revisions of it become intentional textual acts displacing earlier textual acts instead of, as before, matters of communal tacit agreement. For the communal document there can be no question of textuality, since anyone who intervenes in it does so out of love and common memory: such a document increases in value each time something (an anecdote) is added to it and fills it out. (217-18)

With *CAILS*, it could be argued that this process of emending, excising, adding, and revising is inherent in its process, is '*origin*al', that Mandanipour's form is a claim for authority. Removing or rearranging these 'layers', therefore, is an act of emending, excising, etc.

In this decentered, layered electronic text presented in more than one language, it is important not only to ask whether the text has a 'center', but also whether it has a 'beginning' and if so, where. In reference to Said, Landow (2006) argues that hypertext offers two different kinds of 'beginnings':

> The first concerns the individual lexia, the second a gathering of them into a me-
> tatext. Whenever one has a body of hypertext materials that stands alone—either be-
> cause it occupies an entire system or because it exists, however, transiently, within a
> frame, the reader has to begin reading at some point, and for the reader that point is
> a beginning. (111)

CAILS is already 'entered' at a different point, i.e. in translation (although the
electronic edition could force a 'beginning' in Farsi that must then be shifted to
English). The text could also be regarded as a gathering of lexias into a 'metatext'
with many 'openings'. These lexias that contain 'metafictional' digressions for
the non-Iranian audience could be regarded as optional. When one begins read-
ing the print edition of *CAILS*, the text *begins* with the bold 'love story':

> **In the air of Tehran, the scent of spring blossoms, carbon monoxide, and the
> perfumes and poisons of the tales of *One Thousand and One Nights* sway on top of
> each other, they whisper together. The city drifts in time.** (3)

By regarding the censoring and explanation as optional, the 'love story' would
become the central 'reading' rather than the 'original' print text version com-
plete with censoring and annotations.

CAILS arranged in the fashion described could also be considered as a large
(potential) network, not dissimilar to Barthes's *S/Z* (1975): an extremely thor-
ough line-by-line analysis of Balzac's *Sarrasine*, deciphering it in terms of herme-
neutic, proairetic, semic, symbolic, and referential codes. Landow argues that
S/Z is:

> ...a criticism of the power relations between portions of text. In a footnote or endnote,
> we recall, that portion of the text conventionally known as the main text has a value
> for both reader and writer that surpasses any of its supplementary portions, which
> include notes, prefaces, dedications, and so on, most of which take the form of appa-
> ratuses designed to aid information retrieval. (120)

CAILS could be regarded as similar to *S/Z* in that it 'decodes' the very story it is
telling (and failing to tell), except that where *S/Z* analyses Balzac's *Sarrasine*,
CAILS analyses a text that only exists within itself.

IV. REPERCUSSIONS/POSSIBILITIES OF THIS NETWORKABLE/ PROGRAMMABLE FORM

As a text that contains such deliberate and distinct annotations, *CAILS's* digres-
sions could be expanded upon or diversified. For example, a hypertext could al-
low for optional digressions for even more diverse audiences. The print text
makes itself accessible to Western and 'Iranian' readers. As is, *CAILS* is structured
in such a way as to give more power to the Western perspective. Yet, due to its

unique form, they remain 'unmerged'; the text is veiled rather than completely 'censored'. Bakhtin (1973), in describing the works of Dostoevsky, argues that it is:

> ...precisely the *plurality of equal consciousnesses and their worlds*, which are combined here into the unity of a given event, while at the same time retaining their unmergedness. (4-5)

This coexistence of unmerged voices Bakhtin defines as 'polyphonic'. This term is borrowed from music, where two or more melodic lines are bound together, but still keep relative independence. *CAILS* could be said to appeal to a 'polyphonic reader', that is, one who can 'read as' another. In *CAILS* one 'can read' as a restricted Iranian reader (more precisely so in the proposed digital version), without need for explanation, and as a Western reader being guided by the difference. If this annotation were taken further, a myriad of accommodations could be simultaneously presented in a digital format (e.g. the text could make itself uniquely accessible to Japanese readers, South American readers, Australian readers, etc.). By utilizing a networkable and programmable form, this could be extended and customized as required, allowing writers to traverse even more linguistic, social, cultural, and censorship boundaries. Such a form could help connect the Global South — i.e. "the places on the planet that endured the experience of coloniality — that suffered, and still suffer, the consequences of the colonial wound (e.g. humiliation, racism, genderism, in brief, the indignity of being considered lesser humans)" (Mignolo, 2011: 185) — to the Global North. What's more, the obstacles the text succeeds in overcoming would be made clearer.

This digital reimagining of *CAILS* hints at a post-novelistic form that could potentially allow restricted authors of the Global South to better connect with wider and more diverse readers. Such a form could also potentially assist such writers with "the struggle for global justice," which Mignolo (2011: 185) claims is open to all those of the Global South who "would like to adhere to the options from the Global North," but who are unable to for various political reasons. For this to occur, however, digital innovation and experimentation alone is not enough. The formatting and technological changes presented here require a complementary human change from both writers and readers.

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