



International Qur'anic Studies Association
الجمعية الدولية للدراسات القرآنية

REFLECTIONS OF A QUR'AN TRANSLATOR

9 APRIL 2013

TARIF KHALIDI
AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

REFLECTIONS OF A QUR'AN TRANSLATOR

* Although professor Khalidi was not able to attend the St. Andrews meeting, he has generously agreed to sharing his paper.

I cannot claim much excitement for my topic this afternoon, for I simply wanted to share with you a few reflections concerning the various ordeals which any Qur'an translator must inevitably undergo. It is entirely a personal testament and one which recycles some earlier views found in the Introduction to my translation, for which my apologies.

It is now a cliché to say that translation is a lonely job. To this cliché one might respond that *any* sustained piece of writing is a lonely job; writing a novel, for example, is not exactly a gregarious activity. On the other hand, one could argue that the dictionaries and commentaries and previous translations one needs for translating the Qur'an act, with their many voices, like companions who keep the translator anything but lonely; in fact, very busy indeed as he or she navigates between them.

To begin with, translating the Qur'an imposes two or three distinct burdens on the translator. The first is the decision that has to be made at every single phrase or word as to the best rendering. We'll come to what "best" might mean later on, but the pressure is unrelenting and, in the case of the Qur'an, is daunting. Ludwig Wittgenstein, you will remember, has this curious epigram: "If a lion could speak we would not understand him." A philosopher once explained to me what that strange epigram meant: If a lion could speak, he would speak lionese. And now that God has spoken, can we really understand Him? Can we really understand Godese? Nor is understanding "Godese" made any simpler by the fact that we do not, it seems to me, make enough allowance for the Qur'an's often deliberate mystification: the self-referential epithet "mutashabah" enshrines the mystification, in addition to frequent Qur'anic references "How can you know what is X, Y, or Z," in other words, to its explicit, its deliberate "ambiguity." This is a text which, while claiming manifest clarity, is at least partially meant to make the flesh creep—somewhat like the "shudder" in T.S. Eliot (cf. Kermode 2010). Or else we might call it the "mysterium tremens": that which causes you to tremble and to be awed by the divine unfathomable. The mystery is thus quite deliberate and meant to be just that: a mystery which causes a "shudder." And that "shudder" is so culture- and language-specific that it often defies translation.

The second burden is that translation in general and translating the Qur'an in particular is what one might call a Sisyphean activity, in that no matter how close to the top you push and shove your rock of language, it will always come tumbling down before you reach that top. No matter how well you fancy you have captured a meaning, there is always a sense of regret as you surrender the manuscript to the publisher. It is as if, having said goodbye to someone you love, you will always regret that your goodbye was not more eloquently expressed. The French call it *l'esprit de l'escalier*. This sort of feeling does not happen, or at least nowhere near to the same extent, with other pieces of writing, other translations, where the dominant feeling, when one is through with them, (or at least when I am through with them) is generally one of relief or even "good riddance and good luck." Translating the Qur'an, however, is a haunting experience.

The third burden is philological. In recent years much work has been done on the vocabulary of the Qur'an and how many terms in the Qur'an can be better understood if we examine their origins in Syriac, Ethiopic, Greek, etc. There is a great deal of this going on: from a learned biochemist relative of mine who argued that "Tayran ababil" in the Qur'an (*Sūrat al-Fil* [105]) means not "flocks of birds" but something more like "fiery flying objects", i.e it was a volcanic eruption that dispersed Ashab al-Fil; that "wassama'u wa'l tariq" of *Sūrah* 86, the "tariq" was in fact Haley's comet calculated as having appeared around the year 618, a perfect chronological match; to my friend the late Kamal Salibi's theory that "Inna a'taynaka al-Kawthar" in *Sūrat al-*

Kawthar (108) is best rendered “We gave you Kosher,” i.e. the law of halal and haram, which makes better sense in context; to the current favorite that Paradise is full of grapes rather than maidens or virgins; to the funniest of them all, that hitting the wife verse in Q 4:34 refers to the husband “departing from” rather than hitting, or even to having sexual intercourse with, the long-suffering wife.

I am full of admiration for this kind of ingenuity, or some of it anyway. But this is really little more than philology, or else polemic, fighting a rear-guard action against the march of Cultural Theory. Let me explain. The “maidens” or “virgins” of paradise have been with us for—let’s be conservative—at least a thousand years. They have penetrated the deepest layers of what Charles Taylor calls the social imaginary—in this case, the Muslim social imaginary. Let us consider the following scenario: a biblical scholar now discovers that the fishes in Jesus’ miracle of the feeding of the five thousand do not refer to fishes at all but to something more like popcorn. Or that Joshua’s trumpet at Jericho was not really a trumpet but a mangonel. Very interesting, but so what? And in my immediate case of translating the Qur’an, do I examine these philological suggestions and choose the “latest” or the most “convincing” alternatives, or do I purvey to a western reader what Muslims down the ages, and in their great majority, took these words to mean? There is simply no hesitation between the two alternatives.

Finally, there is the widespread view that Arabic is in some peculiar sense extremely difficult to translate, and the reason most often given for this is that Arabic words often have contradictory meanings. This is sometimes part of a larger attempt to exoticize Arabic and Islamic civilization—to argue that somehow, as a language, it is unique in its ambiguity and difficulty. I am sorry to say that Arabic shares with all other languages known to me this characteristic of possessing words with multiple meanings. Yes, it does have a difficult syntax and morphology but no more so than, say, ancient Greek. So the choices that a translator has are by no means unlimited, and even the difficult Arabic of the Qur’an is not insuperable, given the huge battery of commentaries that have accompanied the text down the ages.

So let me now turn to these companions I had while translating. First among my Muslim companions was Tabari, whom I adopted early on as my anchor, my guru. I don’t need to defend my choice of Tabari before this audience, but perhaps the most remarkable thing about him is that, while having many ideological axes to grind (he was anti-Qadarite, anti-Shi’ite and anti-Hanbalite), he nevertheless reproduced with astonishing fidelity a very wide spectrum of ancient views, including those to which he did not subscribe himself. Unlike many contemporary Muslim conservative thinkers, Tabari would never, ever, presume to say that the “position of Islam” on this or that Qur’anic doctrine or phrase is such and such, although he will often say “I prefer this or that interpretation.” But he always positioned himself inside a wide circle of interpretation, leaving the status of the problem open. In addition to Tabari, I became very attached to Suyuti’s *Al-Itqan fi Ulum al-Qur’an*, a wonderfully succinct and very well organized treasury of opinions and interpretations. My third guru was Ibn Qutayba’s *Ta’wil Mushkil al-Qur’an*, a masterpiece of literary erudition. Many other classical commentaries and studies were used, especially the very convenient *Al-Jalalayn*, but the above three were my intimates, my constant guides.

My other group of companions were previous translations. But let me say at the very outset that any criticism I have of my predecessors must not, in any sense, be interpreted to mean, God forbid, that I have done better. It is simply quite impossible for any Qur’an translator to ignore those who came before. One is always working under their shadow.

At this our conference, it is quite unnecessary for me to speak at any length on English translations of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Of the three translations I consulted (Sale, Rodwell and Palmer), Sale’s translation remains to this day an astonishing achievement, setting standards for accuracy that neither Rodwell nor Palmer were later on to equal. Norman Daniel states

that readers of Sale's translation have complained not so much of its lack of accuracy but of it "not being sufficiently lively in expression or elevated in style"—a bit harsh, perhaps. In any case, Sale was a constant companion while Rodwell and Palmer were soon abandoned as guides. The Rodwell translation is often very free and speculative, too intent upon a biblicizing diction and generally less graceful than Sale. The Palmer translation, twenty years later, displays a more strict adherence to the literal meaning than Rodwell and therefore is often less understandable and even less readable than his two predecessors, in addition to its numerous mistakes (cf. Nykl 1936).

The Twentieth Century

One of the more significant developments in the twentieth century was the appearance of translations done by British Indian Muslims, often in conjunction with a modernizing agenda. The Rodwell/Palmer translations had cast a long shadow over the field. Thus Rodwell, for instance, made no secret of his view that he was dealing with a Muhammad-made text which, while at times lofty, was nevertheless intermixed with "morbid hallucinations," "fantastic legends," "self deception" and similar mid-Victorian psychological notions. To counter such opinions, the new translations by Muslims had about them a sense of mission, an urge to present the Qur'an to English readers in all its pristine "grandeur" and as experienced by "qualified Muslims . . . in their own mental and spiritual vision" as Yusuf Ali phrased it (Ali 1934; iii, xv–xvi). Pickthall, a British convert, goes even further, asserting that "no holy Scripture can be fairly presented by one who disbelieves its inspiration" (Pickthall 1930, ix).

I will now consider eight twentieth and twenty-first century translations: Maulana Muhammad Ali (1917), Marmaduke Pickthall (1930), Yusuf Ali (1934), Richard Bell (1937-39), A.J. Arberry (1955), N.J. Dawood (1956), M. Fakhry (2000), and Abdel Haleem (2004). Some or all of them are likely to remain in wide use well into the twenty-first century and almost certainly to remain influential and instructive to future translators. The ambivalence of Rodwell and Palmer regarding content and style is gone and is replaced by a sense of awe among the Muslims and of respect among non-Muslim translators. We are now among translators who are intent, in their varying ways, upon doing justice to the original Arabic, even at the cost of a very large battery of commentary appended to the translation itself, as in the Yusuf Ali version, or published separately, as in the Richard Bell version. All the other versions present the text with minimal glossing, intending it to speak—as far as possible—in its own voice.

Two ancient problems loom large for all these translators: (1) Is it possible to translate Qur'anic Arabic into understandable, let alone graceful, English? And (2) what strategy of diction should the modern translator adopt? Earlier translators had struggled with both problems and had expressed varying degrees of hopelessness in the attempt to render the full resonance of the Arabic original. Our eight translators are in this respect no more hopeful than their predecessors, and Arberry's sentiments are typical. He aims "to produce something which might be accepted as echoing however faintly the sublime rhetoric" of the original (Arberry 1955, x), a sentiment shared by almost all the other translators in this group. The only dissenting voice is that of Yusuf Ali for whom the challenge is not so much to carry the Arabic successfully into English but to "make English itself an Islamic language," a far more ambitious endeavour.

The second problem, that is, the strategy of diction, was more compelling. With the exception of Dawood, Fakhry and Abdel Haleem, our twentieth century translators adopted a Biblical style derived from the King James and Revised Standard versions, leading inevitably to a text overlaid with biblical allusions and parallelisms. Their neo-archaic diction is by and large indistinguishable from the diction of Rodwell, Palmer or even Sale. In Arberry, for example, phrases like "haply," "unto" and "verily," rub shoulders with "thou wouldst," "if ye differ," "haste unto

remembrance” and “who forsaketh.” It appears that in attempting what Pickthall called a “not unworthy language” and Yusuf Ali called “an exalted tone,” these translators opted to continue with a diction that was fast disappearing even from contemporaneous English Bible translations, to say nothing of the rapid disappearance of Bible study from British schools in the last quarter century or so. This awe of the text expressed as insistence on biblical diction results in translations which are frequently too literal and thus incomprehensible, and in a semantic field where the archaic does service for the poetic, or else in free paraphrase.

Consider the idiomatic phrase *bi ma qaddamat aydibim* (Qur'an 2:95 and passim). The most literal translation would be, “Because of that which their hands have sent ahead.” Muhammad Ali translates, “On account of what their hands have sent on before.” Pickthall translates, “Because of that which their own hands have sent before them.” Without a gloss the meaning is at best nebulous. Arberry translates, “Because of that their hands have forwarded,” introducing his annoying habit of replacing :what” with “that” and making no more sense than Muhammad Ali or Pickthall. Dawood translates, “Because of that which they have done,” and Fakhry follows close behind with “Because of what they did earlier,” both versions completely ignoring the idiom. Abdel Haleem translates, “Because of what they have stored up with their own hands.” Yusuf Ali translates, “On account of the (sins) which their hands have sent on before them” but glosses the Arabic idiom as referring to the committing of sins which precede us to the “judgement-seat of God” and refers the reader to 1 Timothy 24 (*sic*, for 5:24) for a parallel expression.

This example highlights the manner in which these translators by and large dealt with many of the idioms of the Qur'an. Alone among them, Yusuf Ali strives to go beyond literalism or free paraphrase. In doing so, however, he necessarily reveals his own theological and literary preferences and his belief that a translation of the Qur'an should be accompanied by a battery of commentaries and short, often lyrical, introductions designed to bring the text into line with his own declared taste for English Romantic poetry. At the other end of the translation spectrum Dawood and Fakhry opt for a “contemporary English” or “a simple readable English,” confining the ambiguities of the original to a few footnotes in order to allow the text to speak for itself. This results in pedestrian translations which fail to convey both the concision of the original and its frequent and abrupt changes of mood and tone. In the case of Dawood especially, the translation is not only flat and prosaic but, in its pursuit of “contemporary English,” goes well beyond the original and often incorporates what should be a gloss into the text itself, resulting in a translation both free-wheeling and highhanded.

The Figurative Challenge

Tabari had popularized the view that all figures of speech such as simile, metaphor, allusion, concision, antithesis, alliteration and so forth were to be found in the Qur'an (Tabari 1903, 6). Later Muslim writers on literary theory would amplify and illustrate this view. Eventually, a body of some twenty or so phrases were singled out as totally original idioms and these were regarded as part of the more general case that classical Muslim literary scholarship made for the rhetorical, God-ordained, inimitability (*i'jaz*) of the Qur'an. In assessing the literary quality of Qur'an translations, it may be of some interest to compare modern translations of what the Muslim literary tradition itself held to be surpassing, indeed divine, figurative expressions.

Among those twenty or so tropes, two in particular are most often cited by the classical theorists: Qur'an 19:4 and 17:24. They run, respectively, as follows, *wa'sbta'ala l'ra'su shayban* and *w'akbfid labuma janaba'l dbulli min al-rabmati*. The first phrase, part of the prayer of Zechariah (cf. Luke 1:18), is rendered as follows by our translators:

REFLECTIONS OF A QUR'AN TRANSLATOR

And my head flares with hoariness (Muhammad Ali)
And my head is shining with grey hair (Pickthall)
And the hair of my head doth glisten with grey (Yusuf Ali)
And my head is lit up with white (Bell)
And my head is all aflame with hoariness (Arberry)
And my head is all silver (Dawood)
And my head is aflame with grey hairs (Fakhry).
And my hair is ashen grey (Abdel Haleem)

Of these versions, Arberry's, closely followed by Fakhry, reproduces most literally the impact of the metaphor. The Dawood version is the furthest removed and the freest.

For the second phrase, which enjoins submission and kindness to parents, we have the following versions:

And lower to them the wing of humility out of mercy (Muhammad Ali)
And lower unto them the wing of submission through mercy (Pickthall)
And, out of kindness, lower to them the wing of humility (Yusuf Ali)
And lower to them the wing of humbleness out of mercy (Arberry)
Treat them with humility and tenderness (Dawood)
And lower to them the wing of humility out of mercy (Fakhry)
And lower your wing in humility towards them in kindness (Abdel Haleem)

Here, most versions retain the metaphor of 'lowering the wing,' but Dawood totally ignores it, while Yusuf Ali needlessly changes the word order. Once again, the Arberry version comes closest to the idiom.

If one wished to place these seven prominent twentieth-century translators in kindred groups, one might argue that Muhammad Ali and Pickthall belong to one group; Dawood, Fakhry and Abdel Haleem to another; Bell, Yusuf Ali and Arberry to a third. Suffusing them all, however, is an excessive awe of the original, as if even for non-Muslims divine speech remains forever beyond the reach of a truly faithful translation. But the Qur'an translators who dressed the Arabic in the robes of King James or of Wordsworth opted for what they thought the most graceful English equivalent, revealing what Matthew Reynolds calls a "specially incisive relationship to time" (Reynolds 2003, 37) and thus, for a modern reader, emphasizing not so much its foreignness as its archaic hybridity.

Should the language of a translation preserve its current identity or should it allow that language to be powerfully affected by the original, so that "the result will read, precisely, as a translation"? (Sontag 2003, 14) This is a debate in contemporary translation theory, recently and lucidly arrayed by Susan Sontag, which has important implications for Qur'an translations (Sontag 2003,13–15). Among translations reviewed here, Dawood, Fakhry and Abdel Haleem attempt what one might describe as current English, but the result is a pedestrian monotone. All other translators cling manfully to a diction no longer familiar to modern readers. Even Arberry, in some ways still the most sensitive translation, produces on almost every page translations so literal that they become incomprehensible, in an English that is already quite archaic when compared even to the English of his own days. Between these two poles, i.e. preserving the alienness of the text versus bringing out its familiarity, there must be room for a translation that achieves a diction that is at once modern, measured, and worthy of an original considered untranslatable by many of those who believe in it.

My Translation

The question to be answered by any new translation must be: does a new translation bring new insight?

It's a fairly widespread sentiment among Arabists and Islamists that no Qur'an translation has attained an iconic or canonical or exemplary status, that there is no King James or RSV or even a Jerusalem Bible where the Qur'an is concerned, that all one can say is that X or Y's translation is the least bad among them. There is also a fairly widespread view that the Arberry translation is the most "sensitive," "graceful," or "poetical" among them. I have shared and held these views for many years. With the appearance of new translations in the late nineties onwards, I felt that these newer translations were not in any sense improvements on Arberry, that they held onto a tradition of a monotone prose translation where no account was taken of the frequent changes in mood and register or even grace of the original. So, about nine or ten years ago, I decided to see if I could do something a little different. Why does Arberry need to be improved upon? Because, as argued above, Arberry's language is literal and pretty archaic, bearing absolutely no relationship even to the English of Arberry's own time. So, bowing in the direction of Arberry, but dissatisfied with prose monotones, I decided to try myself.

When I began this translation there were several issues, of varying import, to be considered. To many ancient and modern readers, the Qur'an progresses through what one might call "bursts of revelation," and some classical scholars like Suyuti argued that revelation descended "according to need, with five or ten verses (*ayat*) at a time, and more and less" while a more ancient authority, 'Ikrima (d.724) stated that the Qur'an was revealed "in installments" (*nujuman*) of three, four, or five verses at a time. Any translation of the Qur'an must therefore come to some sort of decision as to where these "bursts of revelation" begin and end, and reflect this in the arrangement of the text. So it became evident to me that a straightforward, monochrome, monotone prose rendering was clearly not an accurate reflection of the Qur'an's structure. By dividing my translation into paragraphs my hope was to highlight the pericopes upon which the text is built, without of course any claim to authority as to the exact boundaries of these pericopes.

More complex is the issue of translating the many voices in which the Qur'an speaks to us. For here the reader will doubtless notice that the "register" of the Qur'an is in a constant state of flux, from narrative to exhortation, from homily to hymn of praise, from strict law to tender mercies, from fear and trembling to invitations to reflection. These, I decided, *had* to look different; hence the horizontal and vertical disposition of my translation. By and large, where the Qur'an is narrating or legislating, I opted for a horizontal prose format. Where it is in any sense of the term "dramatic," I arranged in a vertical "poetic" order. The inspiration for this arrangement into prose and poetry came from the Jerusalem Bible. But here too I cannot claim to have done anything other than to highlight a translation problem and offer a tentative solution to it.

Equally substantial is the question of glossing the Qur'anic text. It seemed to me from the very beginning that to gloss the text in any way other than to identify a few proper names is to exercise a false authority, giving the translation a peculiar spin that reflects the translator's own juridical or theological position. The ambiguous, the mysterious, the unfathomable should not be explained away but left exactly as is, so that readers can make of them what they will. The translator should aim, in my view, at capturing what the text may have meant to its earliest listeners. This is of course a tall order, but it is not helped in the least by commentary or glossing.

REFLECTIONS OF A QUR'AN TRANSLATOR

Most pressing of all is the issue of the language one chooses to render Qur'anic Arabic. Without wishing to engage with the many and fertile theories of translation on offer today, or with the fascinating controversy over the “familiarity” versus “alienation” of the foreign text, I unconsciously slipped into what I like to think of as measured modern English. At the same time, it appeared to me to be highly desirable to preserve the sentence structure of the Arabic so long as this did not obscure the sense. In other words, I attempted a balance between the familiar-modern and the alienating-archaic, but preferring at all times as literal a rendering as possible. In his translation of *Beowulf*, Seamus Heaney expresses the translator's dilemma as follows:

It is one thing to find lexical meanings for the words and to have some feel for how the meter might go, but it is quite another thing to find the tuning fork that will give you the note and pitch for the overall music of the work. (Heaney 2002, xxxvi)

In my search for that “tuning fork,” I was painfully aware that the cadence of the Arabic could never be truly reproduced but nevertheless strove for what Heaney calls a “directness of utterance,” in order to convey something of the power of juxtapositions, rhythmic recurrence, sonority, verbal energy, and rhymed endings of the original.

If all this amounts to some kind of answer to the question posed above about a new translation bringing new understanding, that in itself might be a worthwhile endeavor.

Works Cited

- Al-Tabari, Muhammad ibn Jarir. *Jami' al-Bayan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an*. Vol. 1. Cairo: Al-Maṭba'at al-Maymaniyya, 1903.
- Ali, Yusuf. *The Holy Qur'an; Translation and Commentary*. Ludhiana: Lahore, 1934.
- Arberry, Arthur J. *The Koran Interpreted*. London: Oxford University Press, 1964.
- Heaney, Seamus. *Beowulf: A Verse Translation*. London: W.W. Norton & Co. Inc., 2002.
- Kermode, Frank. "Eliot and the Shudder." *London Review of Books* 32, no. 9 (2010): 13.
- Nykl, A.R. "Notes on E. H. Palmer's 'The Qur'an.'" *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 56 (1936): 77–84.
- Pickthall, M. Marmaduke. *The Meaning of the Glorious Qur'an*. New York: A. A. Knopf, 1930.
- Reynolds, Matthew. "Seriously entertaining." *Times literary supplement* 5229 (2003): 37.
- Sontag, Susan. "The world as India." *Times literary supplement* 5228 (2003): 13–15.