J. King Saud Univ., Vol. 2, *Arts* (2), pp. 93-134 (A.H. 1410/1990).

On Translating the Quran (An Introductory Essay)

Abdel Moneim A. Hosni
Associate Professor, Department of English, College of Arts, King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

(Received 13/3/1408; accepted 14/7/1409)

Abstract. This essay is divided into five sections. The first is a short note on whether it is permissible to translate the Quran. In section two the author demonstrates that many of the well-known translations are not accurate in rendering the meaning of the original. In section three the writer discusses English translators' attempts to "rearrange" the contents of the Quran and points to the wisdom underlying the present order of the Book. Section four, entitled "General Observations," deals with some of the issues raised in Sections II and III. The recommendations proposed here are based on the facts which emerged during the discussion of specific translations in the two sections. The last section calls attention to the dearth of references on translating the Quran, offers some useful tips on where to find information on the subject, and then lists the available references.

I

Introductory

Orthodox opinion rightly maintains that the Quran is untranslatable. For from the points of view of "style" and "subject-matter" and the fusion of the two, the Book is inimitable (*mu'jiz*). It follows therefore that every believer should learn to understand its meaning in the original Arabic - a task which non-speakers of Arabic find daunting.

On the other hand, Abū Hurairah and Ibn Hajar seem to imply that translating the *meanings* of sacred books into Arabic and other languages is permissible. For, Tibawi writes, Abū Hurairah

> relates that the People of the Book (which in this case means the Jews only) used to reac the Torah in Hebrew and interpret it to the Muslims in Arabic and that the Prophet dic

not disapprove. The command in the verse, "Say, Bring the Torah and read it if ye are truthful" was addressed to the Jews when they submitted a man and a woman of their community, who had committed adultery, to the Prophet to deal with them. The Prophet inquired what was the punishment prescribed in the Torah (sic).[1]

This brings us to Ibn Hajar who comments that

since the Torah was in Hebrew, and God commanded that it be read to Arabs who knew no Hebrew, this was an authority to express it in Arabic. To him the converse is also permissible: "to express what is in Arabic in Hebrew." The context suggests that the author had the Qur'ān in mind.[2]

The purport of these statements is that it is permissible to translate the meanings of sacred books. For Abū Hurairah uses the word *interpret* and Ibn Hajar uses the word *express*.

II
Accuracy

The Quran has been translated many times into many languages (classical and modern, foreign and Islamic). The question here is not therefore whether the Quran should be translated but whether or not a certain translation is accurate in rendering the meanings of the Book. This essay deals with well-known English translations of the Quran. (For a list of the translations discussed in this essay see Section V "Of References on Translating the Quran.")

The first English translation was done by Alexander Ross. This translation, which is in fact a translation of the first French translation of Du Ryer of 1647, cannot, for obvious reasons, be accurate.[3] I say for obvious reasons because a translation at a second remove is never accurate, even when the first translation is accurate. But in this case the first translation is far from being accurate. Here is Sale's account of Du Ryer's achievement:

Some years within the last century, Andrew Du Ryer, who had been Consul of the French nation in Egypt, and was tolerably skilled in the Turkish and Arabic languages, took the pains to translate the Quran into his own tongue; but his performance, though it be beyond comparison preferable to that of Retenensis, is far from being a just translation, there being mistakes in every page, besides frequent transpositions, omissions and additions, faults unpardonable in a work of this nature. And what renders it still more incomplete is the want of Notes to explain a vast number of passages, some of which are

1) A.L. Tibawi, "Is the Qur'an Translatable," *The Muslim World*, 52 (1962), 6-7. "Say, Bring the Torah and read it if ye are truthful" is verse 92 of Surah III. The original is: قُلْ فَأْتُوا بِالتَّوْرَىٰةِ فَاتْلُوهَا إِن كُنتُمْ صَادِقِينَ
2) Tibawi, p. 7.
3) Ross's translation was published a few years after Du Ryer's.

> difficult, and others impossible to understand, without proper explications, were they translated ever so exactly, which the author is so sensible of that he often refers his reader to the Arabic commentators.(4)

What about the English version?

> The English version is ... a very bad one; for Alexander Ross, ..., being utterly unacquainted with the Arabic, and no great master of the French, has added a number of fresh mistakes of his own to those of Du Ryer, not to mention the meanness of his language, which would make a better book ridiculous.(5)

This is what Sale has to say about the first English translation: a defective version of a grotesque French translation of the Arabic Quran.

This brings us to the second English translation, or rather to Sale's translation. George Sale's translation (1734), which is in fact based on Maracci's Latin version of 1698, is not accurate either.

Sale's work has what he calls "The Preliminary Discourse" (in which he acquaints "the reader with the most material particulars proper to be known previously to the entering on the Quran itself")(6) and copious "Notes." But, like his translation, his "Preliminary Discourse" and his "Notes" are based on Maracci, whose work gives the worst possible impression of Islam.(7)

Of Maracci's translation and his indebtedness to it Sale writes:

> In 1698 a Latin translation of the Quran, made by Father Lewis Marracci, who ha been Confessor to Pope Innocent XI, was published at Padua, together with the origina text, accompanied by explanatory notes and a refutation. This translation of Marracci's generally speaking, is very exact; but adheres to the Arabic Idiom too literally to be easil understood ... The notes he has added are indeed of great use, but his refutations, whic swell the work to a large volume, are of little or none at all, being often unsatisfactory and sometimes impertinent. The work, however, with all its faults, is very valuable, an I should be guilty of ingratitude did I not acknowledge myself much obliged thereto; bu

---

(4) G. Sale and E.M. Wherry, "Sale's Preface," *A Comprehensive Commentary on the Quran* (London Kegan Paul, 1896) 1, 7. (All references to Sale in this essay are to this edition.) Of the Latin translatio by Robertus Retenensis, which appeared in 1143, Sale has this to say, the book "deserves not th name of a translation; the unaccountable liberties therein taken, and the numberless faults, both o omission and commission, leaving scarce any resemblance of the original". p. 6.

(5) Sale and Wherry, pp. 7–8.

(6) Ibid., p. 9.

(7) Maracci's work includes quotations from various Muslim authorities, carefully selected and garble to discredit Islam. Maracci also introduces his work by a volume containing what he calls a "Refut tion of the Quran."

still, being in Latin, it can be of no use to those who understood not that tongue.[8]

Maracci, who "spent forty years in translating and refuting the Koran," adopted the right system when in translating he used the verse as a unit. But he made a grave mistake when he decided to translate the Book mechanically, without thought. Maracci's shoddy work prompted one critic to say:

> He has not expressed the ideas of the Koran, but travestied the words of it into barbarous Latin. Yet though all the beauties of the original are lost in this translation, it is preferable to that by Du Ryer.[9]

The critic is correct when he tells us that Maracci has "travestied the words of" the Quran "into barbarous Latin" and that "all the beauties of the original are lost in this translation." He is, however, wrong when, earlier in his criticism,[10] he suggests that Maracci "neglected," or was not aware of, the rules governing good translating when he chose to render the Book in that way. Maracci was a very learned monk. We cannot therefore accept the idea that he chose the wrong translating methods. Maracci himself is quite clear about the object of the exercise. For, as pointed out earlier,[11] he introduces his work by a volume containing what he terms a "Refutation of the Quran." Of his own translation Sale writes:

> I have endeavoured to do the original impartial justice, not having, to the best of my knowledge, represented it, in any one instance, either better or worse than it really is. I have thought myself obliged, indeed, in a piece which pretends to be the Word of God, to keep somewhat scrupulously close to the text, by which means the language may, in some places, seem to express the Arabic a little too literally to be elegant English: but this, I hope, has not happened often; and I flatter myself that the style I have made use of will not only give a more genuine idea of the original than if I had taken more liberty (which would have been much more for my ease), but will soon become familiar; for we must not expect to read a version of so extraordinary a book with the same ease and pleasure as a modern composition.[12]

Sale, who in the same "Preface" says that in translating this "extraordinary book" he has " had no opportunity of consulting public libraries,"[13] speaks here of his endeavor "to do the original impartial justice." But even a casual reading of the translation shows that what Sale says is one thing and what he does is quite another.

---

(8) Sale, p. 8.
(9) Ibid.
(10) Ibid.
(11) See footnote No. 7 above.
(12) Sale, pp. 8–9.
(13) Ibid., p. 9.

Because his main source was Maracci, and because he did not bother to consult other sources or even verify Maracci's translation or his (Maracci's) busy comments, and because he was not skilled in Arabic, Sale's translation is extremely "sloppy." To give only one example, here is his translation of the "Opening Chapter":

IN THE NAME OF THE MOST MERCIFUL GOD

(1) Praise be to GOD, the LORD of all creatures; (2) the most merciful, (3) the King of the day of judgment, (4) Thee do we worship, and of thee do we beg assistance, (5) Direct us in the right way, (6) in the way of those to whom thou hast been gracious, (7) not of those against whom thou art incensed, nor of those who go astray. Vol. I, pp. 289-90.

In this translation بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ is not considered a verse. In this Sūra, it should be verse No. 1, because this is the "Opening Chapter" to the whole Quran. Opinion on whether or not the *Bismillāh* in this Sūra should be numbered is however divided.

Sale's translation of بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ does not do "impartial justice" to the original. Lumping اللَّهِ ,ا and الرَّحْمَٰنِ and الرَّحِيمِ in one phrase ("THE MOST MERCIFUL GOD") is contrary to both the meaning and the spirit of the original. Moreover, using THE here implies that there are other Gods, which is against the main tenets of Islam.

- "The LORD of all creatures" is all wrong. "The" and " creatures" here imply that there are other Lords, each has a certain domain or sphere of influence and that the LORD mentioned here is that of all creatures. The original is رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ which is completely different. It means "LORD of the Worlds" which means not just all creatures but everything animate and inanimate.

- "the most merciful": again here Sale oversimplifies the two concepts الرَّحْمَٰنِ and الرَّحِيمِ and lumps them together in one phrase.

The word "beg" which occurs in Sale's translation of verse 4 is nowhere to be found in the original. And his translation of verse 5 is not accurate. "Direct us in the right way" should simply be "Show us the straight path."

Sale's use of the word "incensed" in the last verse reduces God to the rank of a petty human being, which is the contrary of the original. Of Sale's translation of this verse E.H. Palmer says:

> the placing the preposition before the verb gives a completely different ring to the English to that of the Arabic, to say nothing of the absence of that colloquial freedom

> which distinguishes the original.(14)

The first part of Palmer's criticism is correct, but the second is obviously wrong. What he calls colloquial freedom is simply *iʿjāz*. There is nothing colloquial about this verse.

But to return to Sale, all these errors occur in just one *sūra* - one of the shortest *sūras*. Sale's translation of the whole Book is, as pointed out above, extremely "sloppy." And to do his translation "impartial justice" an equal number of volumes is needed (Sale's translation is in four volumes). But the trouble with Sale is, as Rodwell says in his "Preface" to his translation of the Quran, that he "has ... followed Maracci too closely."(15)

The question now is: Why? Like Maracci, Sale is against Islam. One of his aims in translating the Quran is, as he says in his "Preface," "to undeceive those who, from the ignorant or unfair translations which have appeared, have entertained too favourable an opinion of the original."(16)

Sale is not happy about what other Christian sects are doing in the way of refuting "Muhammadism."(17) In this connection he observes:

> The writers of the Romish communion, in particular, are so far from having done any service in their refutations of Muhammadism, that by endeavouring to defend their idolatory and other superstitions, they have rather contributed to the increase of that aversion which the Muhammadans in general have to the Christian religion, and given them great advantage in the dispute.(18)

He then comes to the conclusion that

> The Protestants alone are able to attack the Quran with success; and for them, I trust, Providence has reserved the glory of its overthrow.(19)

So why should Sale do "impartial justice" to the original, if this is his aim? In his "Preface" he goes so far as to "lay down rules to be observed by those who attempt the conversion of the Muhammadans."(20)

Sale's "Preface," we notice, abounds in comments offensive to Muslims. This is also true of his "Preliminary Discourse" and his "Notes."

(14) E.H. Palmer, *The Quran* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1880), p. LXXVIII.
(15) J.M. Rodwell, *The Koran* (London: Dent, 1909), p. 17.
(16) Sale and Wherry, pp. 3–4.
(17) See Ibid., p. 4.
(18) Ibid.
(19) Ibid.
(20) Ibid.

E.M. Wherry's Preface to Sale's translation and his "additional notes and emendations" are also replete with offensive comments. To give only one example:

> As to the matter of the notes, the reader will perceive occasional repetition. This is due in part to the repetitions of the text, and partly in order to call special attention to certain doctrines of the Quran, e.g., its testimony to the genuineness and credibility of the Christian Scriptures current in the days of Muhammad; the evidence it affords to its own character as a fabrication; its testimony to the imposture of the Arabian prophet, in his professing to attest the *Former Scriptures*, while denying almost every cardinal doctrine of the same, - in his putting into the mouth of God garbled statements as to Scripture history, prophecy, and doctrine, to suit the purposes of his prophetic pretensions, - and in his appealing to Divinity to sanction his crimes against morality and decency.(21)

Wherry here calls the Prophet bad names and calls the Quran "a fabrication." Wherry's aim is clear: his additional notes and his emendations are not therefore included to shed more light on Sale's translation of the Quran; they are there to discredit Islam. It is however worth noting here that Wherry does not substantiate these remarks either in his "Preface," from which the passage quoted above is taken, or in his additional notes. What Wherry and Sale say in this connection is usually subjective or based on speculation and conjecture.

So much for Sale's work, this brings us to another English translation of the Quran.

The Rev. J.M. Rodwell, who arranged the *Sūras* in a rough chronological order,(22) published his translation in 1861. It is not accurate and his notes suffer from the fact that he was a Christian clergyman first and a translator second.

Rodwell, whose work is entitled "The Koran Translated from the Arabic",(23) fails, in many places, to understand the Arabic text. Let us give a few examples from the shorter *sūras*. To begin with, take *Sūra* CVIII. This is how he renders the first two verses:

> TRULY we have given thee an ABUNDANCE:
> Pray therefore to the Lord, and slay the victims. p. 30.

"an ABUNDANCE" should be Abundance or the Fount of Abundance. " ... and slay the victims" should be "and sacrifice." "Slay the victims" gives the wrong meaning and the wrong impression. "To the Lord" is a minor mistake; nevertheless it is a mistake. It should be "to thy Lord." Three mistakes in two verses.

---

(21) Ibid., p. vii.
(22) For a discussion of this arrangement see Section III.
(23) All references to Rodwell in this essay are to the edition published in London by Dent in 1909.

In *Sūra* I he renders the fourth verse as follows:

King on the day of reckoning! p. 28.

This should be "Master (or Owner) of the Day of Judgment." Rodwell's use of the word "King" and the preposition "on" in this verse distorts the meaning of the original. It means that God is King on that day only, to say nothing of the fact that "King" is not the right word here.(24) In Arabic "day of reckoning" is not the same as "Day of Judgment." The first is يَوْمَ الْحِسَابِ but the second is يَوْمِ الدِّينِ and the second is what we have in the Arabic Text.

"I shall never worship that which ye worship". p. 29. This is how he renders verse 4 of *Sūra* CIX. This should be rendered as follows: "And I will not worship that which ye have been wont to worship." "Never" is nowhere to be found in the Arabic Text. And his translation of عَبَدتُّمْ as "ye worship" is, from the point of view of grammar, wrong. For عَبَدَ is not present simple.

Now consider Rodwell's translation of *Sūra* CVII (p. 31). He gives the Sura the title "RELIGION" (it should be *al-Māᶜūn* or "Neighbourly Needs" or "Small Kindnesses") because the word دِينِ occurs in the first verse. What Rodwell does not know is that not every *sūra* takes its name from a word in the first verse. The original title is الماعون which is the last word of the last verse.

Rodwell translates the first verse as follows: "WHAT thinkest thou of him who treateth our RELIGION as a lie?"(25) The verse should read: "Seest thou one who denies the judgment (to come)?" His translation of verses 4 and 5 is also inaccurate, "Woe to those who pray," should be " So woe to the worshippers" and "But in their prayer are careless," should be "Who are neglectful of their Prayers," or "Who are heedless of their prayer."

Rodwell's tendency to give the *Sūras* strange and sometimes misleading names (in many cases completely different from the original titles) is painfully obvious. One of his blunders in this connection is to give *sūra* CVII the title RELIGION because, as pointed out above, the word دِينِ occurs in the first verse. Another blunder is to give *Sūra* XCIV (p. 26) the title "THE OPENING." For *Sūra* I *Fātiha* الفاتحة is THE OPENING CHAPTER to the whole Quran. And this is likely to confuse the uninitiated reader. (In Rodwell's translation The Opening Chapter is No. 8 and has no title). In translating the title of *Sūra* XCIV Rodwell does not deviate from the origi-

(24) See our discussion of Sale's translation of this verse above.

(25) دِينِ (Dīn) may mean either (1) the Judgement to come, or (2) Faith, Religion. Rodwell, we notice, chose the second meaning, whereas the context requires the first. For the main point here is this: because some people deny the Judgement to come, they "treat the helpless with contempt and lead arrogant selfish lives."

nal الشرح but he makes a mistake when he renders it as THE OPENING. الشرح here means "The Expansion." Rodwell's translation of the first verse of this *sūra* is therefore wrong. "HAVE we not OPENED thine heart for thee?" p. 26 should be "Have We not expanded thee thy breast?" or "Have We not caused they bosom to dilate?" The word used in the Arabic Text is صَدْرَكَ and not قَلْبَكَ .

Before discussing other mistakes, some examples to illustrate Rodwell's odd way of translating the titles must be cited here:

Sura	**Original Title**	**Rodwell's Translation**
XCIII	الضحى	THE BRIGHTNESS
CXI	المسد	ABU LAHAB
CII	التكاثر	DESIRE
XC	البلد	THE SOIL - and this is how he translates verse 1: "I NEED not to swear by this SOIL." p. 35
LXXXV	البروج	THE STARRY
LXXVII	المرسلات	THE SENT
LXIX	الحاقة	THE INEVITABLE
LVI	الواقعة	THE INEVITABLE

The last two titles are good examples to illustrate Rodwell's bankruptcy in giving/translating titles.

But let us return to the main point (Rodwell's failure to understand the Arabic Text). Verse 2 of *Sūra* CXIII is rendered: "Against the mischiefs of his creation". p. 27. This should be: "From the mischief of created things." Rodwell translates verse 4 of the same *sūra*: "And against the mischief of weird women"; p. 27 and in a footnote points out that he used "weird women" instead of the literal meaning of the Arabic original which is "who blow on knots." Rodwell then goes on to explain:

> According to some commentators an allusion to a species of charm. Comp. Vig. ECVI. But the reference more probably is to women in general, who disconcert schemes as thread is disentangled by blowing upon it. p. 27.

The reference here is to witchcraft practised by some perverted women and not to women in general. But Rodwell reads too much into the text. (Moreover he is all the time asking the reader, in many cases unnecessarily, "to compare"). Pickthal renders this verse in such a manner as to clarify the problem phrase ("And from the evil of malignant witchcraft.") and in a footnote writes:

> Lit. "from the evil of the blowers (feminine) upon knots," it having been a common form of witchcraft in Arabia for women to tie knots in a cord and blow upon them with an imprecation.(26)

Rodwell's translation of the last verse of *Sūra* CXIV is inexact. "Against djinn and men", p. 27, should be "Among Jinns and among Men." "The Army of the ELEPHANT" which occurs in his translation of the first verse of *Sūra* CV should be "the Companions (or the Owners) of the Elephant."

In Rodwell's work the first two verses of CVI are translated thus:

> For the union of the KOREISCH:-
> Their union in equipping caravans winter and summer. p. 36.

These should read as follows:

> For the uniting of Quraish,
> For their uniting (We cause) the caravans to set forth in winter and in summer.

Enough has been said to show that Rodwell's translation is not accurate. It is worth noting here that "the Arabic Text from which this translation has been made is that of Fluegel. Leips 1841". p. 16. Rodwell should have used the received version.

In his "Preface" Rodwell lavishes praise upon Maracci and others whose translations of the Quran are, for one reason or another, defective (to say nothing of their anti-Muslim feelings), and points out that these have more or less been his main sources.

In the same "Preface" he tells us that he allowed himself some freedom in translating "the more brief and poetical verses of the earlier Suras" (see p. 17). And the question that springs to mind now is: Why?

Of his translation of proper names Rodwell writes:

> The proper names are usually given as in our Scriptures: the English reader would not easily recognize Noah as *Nūh*, Lot as *Lūt*, Moses as *Musa*, Abraham as *Ibrahym*, Pharaoh as *Firaun*, Aaron as *Harun*, Jesus as *Isa*, John as *Yahia*, etc. p. 17.

This is a lame excuse. To preserve something of the spirit of the original, Rodwell should have kept the Arabic forms and given a list of their counterparts in the Bible at the beginning of his translation.

---

(26) *The Glorious Koran*, a bilingual edition with English translation, introduction and notes by Marmaduke Pickthall (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1976), p. 826.

Towards the end of his "Preface" Rodwell declares:

> I have nowhere attempted to represent the rhymes of the original. The "Proben" of H.V. Purgstall, in the *Fundgruben des Orients,* excellent as they are in many respects, shew that this can only be done with a sacrifice of literal translation. p. 17.

It is indeed wise of Rodwell not to have "attempted to represent the rhymes of the original." Not only because they are extremely difficult, if not impossible, to represent, but also because one can plainly see that the man's knowledge of Arabic is not all that great. He would have grossly misrepresented the whole pattern.

Finally, G. Margoliouth's "Introduction" to Rodwell's book and Rodwell's "Preface" and his "Notes" include hints and comments offensive to Muslims. But these remarks, usually rude and crude, are not substantiated. In some of these remarks the writer goes so far as to ignore or twist the facts to suit his own purposes. A case in point is when Margoliouth contends that Muhammad is the author of the Quran. Here is the crucial passage:

> The secret of the power exercised by the book, of course, lay in the mind which produced it. It was, in fact, at first not a book, but a strong living voice, a kind of wild authoritative proclamation, a series of admonitions, promises, threats, and instructions addressed to turbulent and largely hostile assemblies of untutored Arabs. As a book it was published after the prophet's death. In Muhammed's life-time there were only disjointed notes speeches, and the retentive memories of those who listened to them. To speak of the Koran is, therefore, practically the same as speaking of Muhammed, and in trying to appraise the religious value of the book one is at the same time attempting to form an opinion of the prophet himself. It would indeed be difficult to find another case in which there is such a complete identity between the literary work and the mind of the man who produced it.(27)

Margoliouth's assertion here does not show deep thinking or extensive learning. In the following passage, A.J. Arberry proves that Margoliouth's contention is wrong:

> We know quite well how Mohammed spoke in his normal, everyday moods; for his *obiter dicta* have been preserved in great abundance. It is simply untrue therefore to say, as Margoliouth said, that "it would be difficult to find another case in which there is such complete identity between the literary work and the mind of the man who produced it. Accepting, as we have good reason to accept, the sayings of Mohammed recorded in the books of Traditions as substantially authentic, and supposing, as Margoliouth supposed that the Koran was Mohammed's conscious production, it would be more reasonable to say that it would be difficult to find another case in which the literary expression of a man differed so fundamentally from his ordinary speech.(28)

(27) G. Margoliouth, "Introduction" to *The Koran*, translated from the Arabic by J.M. Rodwell (London, 1909), p. vii.

(28) A.J. Arberry, "Introduction," *The Holy Koran* (London: Oxford University Press, 1953), pp. 31-32.

Arberry's point is not difficult to deduce. But Margoliouth,[29] who, paradoxically enough, was a professor of Arabic at the University of Oxford, is not objective in his "Introduction" to Rodwell's work.

Another English translation must be discussed here. Professor E.M. Palmer, whose translation was first published in 1876, believed that the Quran should be translated into colloquial language. Palmer, to whom the style of the Quran was "rude" and "rugged," failed to appreciate the beauty and the grandeur of the original.

Of the language of the Quran he writes:

> Regarding it ... from a perfectly impartial and unbiased stand-point we find that it expresses the thoughts and ideas of a Bedawi Arab in Bedawi language and metaphor. The language is noble and forcible, but it is not elegant in the sense of literary refinement. To Mohammed's hearers it must have been startling, from the manner in which it brought great truths home to them in the lagnuage of their every-day life.
>
> There was nothing antiquated in the style or the words, no tricks of speech, pretty conceits, or mere poetical embellishments; the prophet spoke with rude, fierce eloquence in ordinary language. The only rhetorical ornament he allowed himself was that of making his periods more or less rhythmical, and most of his clauses rhyme, - a thing that was and still is natural to an Arab orator, and the necessary outcome of the structure of the Arabic tongue.[30]

Palmer's analysis of the language of the Quran is not free from error. In these two paragraphs he is quite certain that the Prophet is the author of the Quran. In the first paragraph, he tells us that the language of the Quran is "not elegant in the sense of literary refinement" without giving us his definition of "literary refinement" in those days. And in the same paragraph he describes the reaction of "Muhammed's hearers" to the words of the Quran, but his description is based on guesswork. In the second paragraph the word "rude" occurs and in his long "Introduction," from which these paragraphs are taken, he keeps repeating it. He also keeps repeating the words "rugged" and "colloquial"[31] in connection with the language of the Quran. Palmer is quite sure that "the prophet spoke with rude, fierce eloquence in ordinary language." How did he come to this conclusion? And how did he come to the conclusion that the language of the Quran is "rude," "rugged" and "colloquial"? Palmer's statements, we notice, are not substantiated and as such they are, in the language of research, worthless.

---

(29) "Margoliouth's successor in the Laudian Chair of Arabic at Oxford, Professor H.A.R. Gibb, also takes the view that Mohammed was the author of the Koran." See Ibid., p. 16.

(30) E.H. Palmer, *The Quran* (London, 1880), Part I, pp, LXXVI–LXXVII. All references to Palmer in this essay are to this edition.

(31) See, for example, his criticism of Sale's translation of the last verse of the "Opening Chapter" cited above where the word "colloquial" is used.

Palmer is aware that "the language of the Quran is universally acknowledged to be the most perfect form of Arab speech."(32) But he is not ready to accept Muslims' attitude towards the language of their Holy Book. In this connection he has this to say:

> ...we must not forget that the acknowledged claims of the Quran to be the direct utterance of the divinity have made it impossible for any Muslim to criticise the work, and it became, on the contrary, the standard by which other literary compositions had to be judged. Grammarians, lexicographers, and rhetoricians started with the presumption that the Quran could not be wrong, and other works therefore only approached excellence in proportion as they, more or less, successfully imitated its style.(33)

Palmer begins his assessment of the language of the Quran by saying "regarding it from a perfectly impartial and unbiased standpoint." But, as demonstrated above, his assessment of the language of the Book is far from being "impartial and unbiased." What about his translation? In this respect he observes that to translate the Quran "worthily is a most difficult task" and then goes on to say:

> To imitate the rhyme and rhythm would be to give the English an artificial ring from which the Arabic is quite free; and the same objection lies against using the phraseology of our authorised version of the Bible: to render it by fine or stilted language would be quite as foreign to the spirit of the original: while to make it too rude or familiar would be to err equally on the other side. I have, therefore, endeavoured to take a middle course; I have translated each sentence as literally as the difference in structure between the two languages would allow, and when possible I have rendered it word for word. Where a rugged or commun place expression occurs in the Arabic I have not hesitated to render it by a similar English one, even where a literal rendering may perhaps shock the reader.
>
> To preserve this closeness of rendering, I have had in several instances to make use of English constructions which, if not incorrect from a strictly grammatical point of view, are, I am aware, often inelegant. pp. LXXVII-LXXVIII.

The fact that Palmer refrained from imitating the rhyme and the rhythm of the original is commendable. Equally commendable is the fact that he refrained from using the phraseology of the authorised version of the Bible.

His reasoning however about whether "to render it by fine or stilted language" or "to make it too rude or familiar" is indeed very strange. For one of the simplest rules of translating is to reproduce the meaning and the spirit of the original. There is thus no problem here. The translator studies the text and then tries to render it in the most appropriate manner possible. But behind Palmer's kind of twisted logic there is a serious purpose: the idea is to convince the reader that he had to adopt the method of "mechanical" translation, and that he had to use "rude" and "rugged" expressions and "commonplace" and "inelegant" constructions.

(32) Palmer, p. LXXVI.
(33) Ibid.

Palmer, it would seem, was unable to understand the significance and the shades of meaning of certain Arabic words and phrases. Thus referring to ambiguous words in the Quran, he discusses the ambiguous nature of اَسْتَوَىٰ *istawā* and then writes:

> I have, therefore, adopted a rendering which has a similar confusion of significations, and translated it 'made for', as in Chapter II ver. 27, 'He made for the heavens.' Where no question can arise concerning its interpretation, as, for instance, when it is used of a rider balancing himself on the back of his camel, I have rendered it simply 'settled.' (See Chapter XLIII, ver.12).(34)

Palmer's note on the translation of اَسْتَوَىٰ shows that his knowledge of Arabic was imperfect. اَسْتَوَىٰ is not an ambiguous word. But, like many Arabic words, it possesses an extraordinary breadth of meaning. In each of the verses cited by Palmer the meaning is however clear. Here is the first verse (which is II. 29 and not II. 27 as Palmer says):

هُوَ ٱلَّذِى خَلَقَ لَكُم مَّا فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ جَمِيعًا ثُمَّ ٱسْتَوَىٰٓ إِلَى ٱلسَّمَآءِ فَسَوَّىٰهُنَّ سَبْعَ سَمَٰوَٰتٍ ۚ وَهُوَ بِكُلِّ شَىْءٍ عَلِيمٌ

Palmer's use of "made for" in translating this verse is not correct, because it does not bring out the meaning of the original, which is: having done one thing, Allah "turned" his attention to something else. The following rendering of the verse is a good approximation of the Arabic version:

> He it is Who created for you all that is in the earth. Then turned He to the heaven, and fashioned it as seven heavens. And He is Knower of all things.(35).

Moreover, Palmer's translation and the explanatory words in defence of the translation quoted above tend to give Allah human qualities. Muslim scholars oppose this tendency since it does not suit the greatness of God to Whom there is no equal وَلَمْ يَكُن لَّهُۥ كُفُوًا أَحَدٌۢ . Palmer labors here under the impression that God is a physical body which He is not. To be able to translate اَسْتَوَىٰ properly, this verse should be read in conjunction with verse 255 of *Sūra* 2 and verse 54 of *Sūra* 7 where اَسْتَوَىٰ عَلَى ٱلْعَرْشِ should be translated to read "took hold of the Throne" (which embraces the heavens and the earth).

Palmer's other equivalent ("settled") is equally wrong. The verse he cites should be XLIII. 13 and not XLIII. 12. Here are the two verses (12 and 13) because without 12 one cannot hope to understand 13:

---

(34) Ibid. p. LXXIX.

(35) *The Meaning of the Glorious Quran*, Text and Explanatory Translation by Marmaduke Pickthall (Hyderabad-Deccan: Govt. Central Press, 1938), I, 6. (Reprinted in London by George Allen & Unwin in 1957).

وَٱلَّذِى خَلَقَ ٱلْأَزْوَٰجَ كُلَّهَا وَجَعَلَ لَكُم مِّنَ ٱلْفُلْكِ وَٱلْأَنْعَٰمِ مَا تَرْكَبُونَ ﴿١٢﴾ لِتَسْتَوُۥا۟ عَلَىٰ ظُهُورِهِۦ ثُمَّ تَذْكُرُوا۟ نِعْمَةَ رَبِّكُمْ إِذَا ٱسْتَوَيْتُمْ عَلَيْهِ وَتَقُولُوا۟ سُبْحَٰنَ ٱلَّذِى سَخَّرَ لَنَا هَٰذَا وَمَا كُنَّا لَهُۥ مُقْرِنِينَ ﴿١٣﴾

The word in question is used twice in verse 13 and in each case it should be "mount" and not "settle." Palmer's idea of a rider balancing himself on the back of his camel which he cites to justify his use of the word "settled" is not to be found in the verse under consideration. Pickthall's translation of the two verses is close to the original. Consider:

> (12) He Who created all the pairs, and appointed for you ships and cattle whereupon ye ride.
> (13) That ye may mount upon their backs, and may remember your Lord's favour when ye mount thereon, and may say: Glorified be He Who hath subdued these unto us, and we were not capable (of subduing them):(36)

"Mount" is much more convincing than "settle" here.(37)

But Palmer was not only mediocre in his knowledge of Arabic, he also tended to show off. This we deduce from the following:

> In my rendering I have, for the most part, kept to the interpretation of the Arabic commentator *Bāidhāvi*, and have only followed my own opinion in certain cases where a word or expression, quite familiar to me from my experience of everyday desert life, appeared to be somewhat strained by these learned schoolmen. Chapter XXII, ver. 64, is an instance in which a more simple rendering would be preferable, though I have only ventured to suggest it in a footnote. (See Part II, p. 63, note).(38)

The question here is: what has the language of modern every-day desert life to do with the language of the Quran? The fact that a certain word or expression is used these days by people in the desert does not mean that it still retains the old meaning. Palmer is trying to say that he is also well-versed in the lagnuage spoken in the desert. He, however, failed to say which desert and in what part of the particular desert the particular word or expression is used. Palmer's idea of "a more simple rendering" does in fact mean "oversimplification."

From notes on the translation to the translation itself. If Palmer's notes on trans-

---

(36) Ibid., 2, 647.
(37) In simple English the problem word means ride or use. And the general meaning of the verse is this: When you use these facilities, you will come to appreciate their importance or usefulness and so you will thank Allah for having created them and made them subservient to you.
(38) Palmer, p. LXXX.

lating the Quran raise doubts about his ability to translate the Book, his translation does not dispel them. Here is a specimen to show what the rest is like (the *sūra* quoted here is very short; Palmer's performance in the longer *sūras* is worse):

THE CHAPTER OF THE EARTHQUAKE
(XCIX Place of origin doubtful)

In the name of the merciful and compassionate God
When the earth shall quake with its quaking!
And the earth shall bring forth her burdens, and man shall say, "What ails her!"

On that day she shall tell her tidings, because thy Lord inspires her.

On the day when men shall come up in separate bands to show their works: and he who does the weight of an atom of good shall see it! and he who does the weight of an atom of evil shall see it! Volume 2, pp. 338-339.

Before commenting on Palmer's translation, let us read Pickthall's version of this Sura:

SŪRAH XCIX

Az-Zilzāl takes its name from a word in verse 1.
A very carly Meccan Sūrah.

THE EARTHQUAKE
Revealed at Mecca(39)

In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful

1. When Earth is shaken with her (final) earthquake,
2. And Earth yieldeth up her burdens,
3. And man saith: What aileth her?
4. That day she will relate her chronicles,
5. Because thy Lord inspireth her.
6. That day mankind will issue forth in scattered groups to be shown their deeds.
7. And whoso doeth good an atom's weight will see it then,
8. And whoso doeth ill an atom's weight will see it then.(40)

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

إِذَا زُلْزِلَتِ الْأَرْضُ زِلْزَالَهَا ﴿١﴾ وَأَخْرَجَتِ الْأَرْضُ أَثْقَالَهَا
﴿٢﴾ وَقَالَ الْإِنسَانُ مَا لَهَا ﴿٣﴾ يَوْمَئِذٍ تُحَدِّثُ أَخْبَارَهَا ﴿٤﴾
بِأَنَّ رَبَّكَ أَوْحَىٰ لَهَا ﴿٥﴾ يَوْمَئِذٍ يَصْدُرُ النَّاسُ أَشْتَاتًا
لِّيُرَوْا أَعْمَالَهُمْ ﴿٦﴾ فَمَن يَعْمَلْ مِثْقَالَ ذَرَّةٍ خَيْرًا
يَرَهُ ﴿٧﴾ وَمَن يَعْمَلْ مِثْقَالَ ذَرَّةٍ شَرًّا يَرَهُ ﴿٨﴾

(39) Regarded by many as revealed at Al-Madinah.
(40) *The Glorious Koran*, Translated by Marmaduke Pickthall (London, 1976) pp. 816–17.

Pickthall's translation of the Quran is not the best. But it is one of the accepted translations. A striking characteristic of Pickthall's work is that it is very close to the original. Now, if the reader compares the two versions of the *sūra* under consideration (I should say the three versions, the third being the original), he cannot fail to see that Palmer's version is far from being accurate. His method of "simple rendering" is everywhere to be seen here. To give some examples:

- his translation of بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ
- "quake with its quaking" in verse 1,
- "come up in separate bands", and
- "to show their works" in verse 6.

These are striking mistakes. Needless to say that there are other mistakes.

So much for non-Muslim and anti-Muslim translators of the Quran. Poor performance, emanating from a desire not to excel (to present a distorted version of the original) and/or an unsound knowledge of the source language, is in each case painfully obvious.

* * *

Before dealing with Muslim and pro-Muslim translators, I should however point out that unwittingly non-Muslim and anti-Muslim translators of the Quran have done Islam a great service, for, in addition to making non-Muslims, in many countries of the world, aware of the presence of another religion, their versions of the Quran have convinced Muslim writers that, if Islam is to be presented in a fair and unbiased manner, they must venture into the field of English translation. Thus at the turn of the century a number of Muslim writers in India tried their luck with varying degrees of success. Their translations are not discussed in this paper because they have already been discussed elsewhere.(41) Suffice it to say here that, in these early translations, Muslim writers could present the picture which reflected their mental and spiritual vision of the message of Islam. Of course there are mistakes in their translations, but these are not intentional mistakes. These are the mistakes of pioneers trying not only to come to grips with the problems of rendering the meaning of a holy book, but also (some tried) to capture its atmosphere, a task fraught with innumerable difficulties owing to the Book's inherent inimitability.

The first English Muslim to translate the Quran was Marmaduke Pickthall, a literary man of standing and a scholar of Arabic. In his "Translator's Foreword," he sums up the case for Muslim translations of the Quran when he writes:

> It may be reasonably claimed that no Holy Scripture can be fairly presented by one who disbelieves its inspiration and its message; and this is the first English translation of the

(41) For a list of these see: A.Y. Ali, "Translations of the Quran," *The Holy Quran* (New York: The Muslim Students' Association of the United States & Canada, 1975), p. XV.

> Koran by an Englishman who is a Muslim. Some of the translations include commentation offensive to Muslims, and almost all employ a style of language which Muslims at once recognise as unworthy.(42)

A.J. Arberry does not subscribe to the main point here. He attacks Pickthall's proposition ("that it takes a Muslim to translate the Koran honestly"(43) and goes on to say:

> as though the Old Testament, that Hebrew Bible, were not conscientiously and worthily rendered into English by scholars who professed and called themselves Christians; to quote only one example to the contrary. It is a fanatical argument, unworthy of a serious enquirer; it is an insulting argument, unjust to the integrity of not a few who have laboured honestly in the field of Koranic interpretation; it is an invalid argument, and that on many counts, which I will abstain from enumerating here.(44)

Arberry's angry words are not justified, because the majority of non-Muslim translators of the Quran are, as we have seen, anti-Muslim. This can be very clearly seen not only in their translations, but also in their writings about Islam. Arberry himself concedes that the translations discussed above are not really good and that the notes appended to them include commentation offensive to Muslims. In many places in the "Introduction" to his book *The Holy Koran* (London, 1953), he attacks these versions and what he terms "the ingenious literature that has gathered around Koranic studies in the West."(45) Pickthall's proposition (which Arberry calls "assertion" and "definition") is thus valid.

Still, Arberry has a point here, because in his work he tried to be fair not only in rendering the meaning of the Book, but also in speaking about it and about Islam in general. Pickthall should have made his "definition" elastic enough to embrace future objective non-Muslim translators like Arberry.

But to return to Pickthall's translation. After stating the orthodox view that "the Koran cannot be translated." Pickthall sums up his achievement as follows:

> The Book is here rendered almost literally and every effort has been made to choose befitting language. But the result is not the Glorious Koran, that inimitable symphony, the very sounds of which move men to tears and ecstasy. It is only an attempt to present the meaning of the Koran - and peradventure something of the charm - in English. It can never take the place of the Koran in Arabic, nor is it meant to do so.(46)

---

(42) Marmaduke Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1930).
(43) *The Holy Koran* (London, 1953), p. 13.
(44) Ibid.
(45) Ibid, p. 31.
(46) Marmaduke Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran* (London, 1930), p. vii.

Pickthall's translation (1930) is, as he says, "almost literal." Unlike other "literal" translations, however, Pickthall's does not distort the message; and to do "that inimitable symphony" justice, the translator has indeed made every effort "to choose befitting language." It is however regrettable that the notes the translator has added are not enough to elucidate the text.

Pickthall speaks of presenting "the meaning of the Koran - and peradventure something of the charm - in English." In connection with the translator's ability to present something of the charm of the Book, one can only refer the reader to the Translation itself. Here is however, an example, chosen at random to illustrate Pickthall's attempt to present the meaning and something of the charm of the original:

SURAH XCVI

Al-ᶜAlaq takes its name from a word in verse 2. Verses 1-5 are the words which the Prophet received in the vision at Ḥirā, therefore the first of the Quran to be revealed.

A very early Meccan Surah.

THE CLOT
Revealed at Mecca

In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful.
1. Read: In the name of thy Lord Who createth.
2. Createth man from a clot.
3. Read: And thy Lord is the Most Bounteous.
4. Who teacheth by the pen,
5. Teacheth man that which he knew not.
6. Nay, but verily man is rebellious.
7. That he thinketh himself independent!
8. Lo! unto thy Lord is the return.
9. Hast thou seen him who dissuadeth.
10. A slave when he prayeth?
11. Hast thou seen if he relieth on the guidance (of Allah).
12. Or enjoineth piety?
13. Hast thou seen if he denieth (Allah's guidance) and is froward?
14. Is he then unaware that Allah seeth?
15. Nay, but if he cease not We will seize him by the forelock -
16. The lying, sinful forelock -
17. Then let him call upon his henchmen!
18. We will call the guards of hell.
19. Nay! Obey not thou him. But prostrate thyself, and draw near (unto Allah).(47)

(47) *The Meaning of the Glorious Quran* (Hyderabad-Deccan, India, 1938), 2, 813–14.

And here is the original:

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

اقْرَأْ بِاسْمِ رَبِّكَ الَّذِي خَلَقَ ﴿١﴾ خَلَقَ الْإِنسَانَ مِنْ عَلَقٍ ﴿٢﴾ اقْرَأْ وَرَبُّكَ الْأَكْرَمُ ﴿٣﴾ الَّذِي عَلَّمَ بِالْقَلَمِ ﴿٤﴾ عَلَّمَ الْإِنسَانَ مَا لَمْ يَعْلَمْ ﴿٥﴾ كَلَّا إِنَّ
الْإِنسَانَ لَيَطْغَىٰ ﴿٦﴾ أَن رَّآهُ اسْتَغْنَىٰ ﴿٧﴾ إِنَّ إِلَىٰ رَبِّكَ الرُّجْعَىٰ ﴿٨﴾ أَرَأَيْتَ الَّذِي يَنْهَىٰ ﴿٩﴾ عَبْدًا إِذَا صَلَّىٰ ﴿١٠﴾ أَرَأَيْتَ إِن كَانَ عَلَى الْهُدَىٰ ﴿١١﴾ أَوْ أَمَرَ
بِالتَّقْوَىٰ ﴿١٢﴾ أَرَأَيْتَ إِن كَذَّبَ وَتَوَلَّىٰ ﴿١٣﴾ أَلَمْ يَعْلَم بِأَنَّ اللَّهَ يَرَىٰ ﴿١٤﴾ كَلَّا لَئِن لَّمْ يَنتَهِ لَنَسْفَعًا بِالنَّاصِيَةِ ﴿١٥﴾ نَاصِيَةٍ كَاذِبَةٍ خَاطِئَةٍ ﴿١٦﴾ فَلْيَدْعُ نَادِيَهُ ﴿١٧﴾ سَنَدْعُ الزَّبَانِيَةَ ﴿١٨﴾ كَلَّا لَا تُطِعْهُ وَاسْجُدْ وَاقْتَرِب ۩ ﴿١٩﴾

I do not think Pickthall has succeeded in reproducing what he calls "the charm of the Book" here, but this is extremely difficult to reproduce. We should however give him credit for trying. This appears in his attempt to follow the order of words in the Arabic verse.

This brings us to meaning. Generally speaking, the translation of the *Sūra* is good, but I find myself in disagreement with him on translating certain words. To give some examples: "Read" in verse No. 1 should be "Recite"; "rebellious" in verse No. 6 should be "contumacious" (i.e. stubbornly disobedient), or if the translator decides to use a verb "transgresses all bounds"; "slave" in verse No. 10 should be "votary" (i.e. a devout or zealous worshipper); "cease" in verse No. 15 should be "desist" (a more formal equivalent); "henchmen" in verse No. 17 should be "council" or "helpmates." Finally, instead of "the guards of hell" in verse No. 18, I would use "*al Zabāniyah*" and in brackets or a footnote put (the guards of Hell).

A. Yusuf Ali, one of the best Indian Muslim scholars, also insisted on reproducing not just the meaning of the original, but also "its nobility, its beauty, its poetry, its grandeur and its sweet practical reasonable application to everyday experience."(48) Ali elaborates when later on in his "Preface" he writes:

> The English shall be, not a mere substitution of one word for another; but the best expression I can give to the fullest meaning which I can understand from the Arabic Text. The rhythm, music, and exalted tone of the original should be reflected in the English Interpretation. It may be but a faint reflection, but such beauty and power as my pen can command shall be brought to its service. I want to make English itself an Islamic language, if such a person as I can do it.(49)

(48) A.Y. Ali, "Preface to First Edition," *The Holy Quran* (New York, 1975), p. iv.
(49) Ali, p. iv.

What Ali proposes to do here is not easy to achieve. But his translation seems in many places to live up to his main aim, i.e. translating the meanings of the Quran. However, reproducing what he calls "the rhythm, music, and exalted tone of the original" reminds us of the inimitability (*iʿjāz*) of the Quran. Ali's attempts to reproduce the stylistic aspects of the Book, it should be pointed out here, do not in many places reflect those of the original. But to be fair, Ali never said that he would be able to reproduce them fully. In his "Preface" he speaks of the possibility of reproducing "but a faint reflection."

But Ali's version has much more to offer. In his "Preface" in which he addresses the "gentle and discerning reader," he describes what he calls "accessory aid" when he writes:

> In rhythmic prose, or free verse (whichever you like to call it), I prepare the atmosphere for you in a running Commentary. Introducing the subject generally, I come to the actual *Sūras*. Where they are short, I give you one or two paragraphs of my rhythmic Commentary to prepare you for the Text. Where the *Sūra* is long, I introduce the subject-matter in short appropriate paragraphs of the Commentary from time to time, each indicating the particular verses to which it refers. The paragraphs of the running Commentary are numbered consecutively, with some regard to the connection with the preceding and the following paragraphs. It is possible to read this running rhythmic Commentary by itself to get a general bird's-eye view of the contents of the Holy Book before you proceed to the study of the Book itself. The text in English is printed in larger type than the running Commentary, in order to distinguish, at a glance, the substance from the shadow. It is also displayed differently, in parallel columns with the Arabic Text. Each *Sūra* and the verse of each *Sūra* is separately numbered, and the numbers are shown page by page.(50)

Ali (who has "retained the numbering of Sections, as it is universally used in the Arabic copies, and marks a logical division of the *Sūra*") goes on to say:

> I have supplied a further aid to the reader in indicating subdivisions of the Sections into paragraphs. They are not numbered, but are distinguished by the use of a flowery initial letter.(51)

In addition to all these aids, Ali's version offers the interested reader copious notes on points of difficulty related to the meaning of the text.

These aids are helpful and Ali's translation (which was first published in 1934 in Lahore, India, by Shaikh Mohammad Ashraf, and then republished in 1975 in the United States of America by the Muslim Students' Association of the United States and Canada) is highly esteemed and widely read.

---

(50) Ibid.
(51) See Ibid., pp. iv–v.

Ali's translation is not however perfect. First, as pointed out earlier, he has not succeeded in reproducing what he calls "the rhythm, music and exalted tone of the original." It goes without saying that these are difficult to reproduce, but in his attempt to reproduce them he tends to use more words (these he usually puts in brackets) or inexact words. (This reminds us of the problem of translating poetry into poetry where the translator sometimes sacrifices part of the meaning to solve problems of metre and problems of rhyme.)

Second, Ali uses an unusual method of translating that depends on the use of brackets (you come across these in almost all *sūras* and sometimes in many places in any given *sūra)* to explain what he seeks to convey. The presence of these brackets implies that the original is not clear or that it is impossible to translate without the use of these brackets, which is not true.

Generally speaking, translators of the Quran do not/seldom use brackets (they of course use footnotes), and yet their translations are easy to understand. In Ali's case, the brackets are part and parcel of the translation. It follows therefore that if you omit them, the translation does not make sense. Oddly enough, footnotes abound in his work.

To illustrate our objections to Ali's translation, here are some examples:

His translation of verse I *Sūra* 102 reads as follows:

The mutual rivalry
For piling up (the good things
Of this world) diverts you
(From the more serious things),

All these words and all these brackets to translate two words أَلْهَىٰكُمُ ٱلتَّكَاثُرُ Needless to say that "The mutual rivalry/For ..." is nowhere to be found in the Arabic text. The brackets are of course here to explain the verse. The question here is: is this a translation or a *tafsīr*? In very simple English the verse says: "Multiplication keeps you occupied."

Ali's translation of verse 3 of *Sūra* 90 وَوَالِدٍ وَمَا وَلَدَ now follows:

And (the mystic ties
of) Parent and Child;-

The brackets again. "And Child" is not the exact translation of وَمَا وَلَدَ. And even "Parent" is not the right word in this context, for the verse deals with "the begetter "and" all whom he begot." And why do Parent and Child begin with capital letters?

And this is his translation of verse 5 *Sūra* 84: وَأَذِنَتْ لِرَبِّهَا وَحُقَّتْ

And hearkens to
(The Command of) its Lord;
And it must needs
(Do so):- (then will come
Home the full Reality)

In plain words, وَأَذِنَتْ لِرَبِّهَا وَحُقَّتْ means "and obeys its/her Lord in true submission" or "and yields to its/her Lord, and is made dutiful." But Ali uses a number of brackets, a cumbersome sentence construction, extra words and extra ideas to say that the earth will obey Allah without asking questions.

And now it is time to discuss the work of A.J. Arberry - a non-Muslim scholar of Arabic who, as pointed out earlier, tried to be fair and accurate in rendering the meaning of the Quran.

In view of the inimitability of the Quran, most translators content themselves with reproducing "the meaning of the message." But, like Pickthall and Ali, Arberry has tried to do more. For in his translation he has striven to reproduce what he calls "the sublime rhetoric of the Arabic Koran." In this respect, he writes:

> In making the present attempt to improve on the performance of my predecessors, and to produce something which might be accepted as echoing however faintly the sublime rhetoric of the Arabic Koran, I have been at pains to study the intricate and richly varied rhythms which - apart from the message itself - constitute the Koran's undeniable claim to rank amongst the greatest literary masterpieces of mankind.(52)

Arberry goes on to elaborate:

> This very characteristic feature ... has been almost totally ignored by previous translators; it is therefore not surprising that what they have wrought sounds dull and flat indeed in comparison with the splendidly decorated original.(53)

Arberry is wrong here, because, as we have seen, at least two of his predecessors have tried to reproduce something of "the sublime rhetoric" of the original. Ali's attempt cannot be ignored. But Arberry does not even mention Ali's translation in his "Introduction." But that is not the point.

Arberry sums up his attempt to improve on the performance of his predecessors when he writes: "I have striven to devise rhythmic patterns and sequence-groupings in correspondence with what the Arabic presents, paragraphing the grouped sequences as they seem to form original units of revelation."(54)

(52) Arthur J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. x.
(53) Arberry, p. x.
(54) Ibid.

Arberry's achievement can be seen in any of the *sūras*, but his idea of devising varied rhythmic patterns must be seen in the longer *sūras*. Whether or not he has succeeded in accomplishing his aim is not the point here, for the man, aware of the inimitability of the Quran, calls his version "an interpretation, conceding the orthodox claim that the Koran ... is untranslatable."(55) But here is an example to illustrate Arberry's attempt to do more than just render the meaning of the *sūra* cited:

LXXV
THE RESURRECTION

In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate
No! I swear by the Day of Resurrection.
No! I swear by the reproachful soul.
What, does man reckon We shall not gather his bones?
Yes indeed; We are able to shape again his fingers.
Nay, but man desires to continue on as a libertine, asking, "When shall be the Day of Resurrection?"
But when the sight is dazed
and the moon is eclipsed,
and the sun and moon are brought together,
upon that day man shall say, 'Whither to flee?'
No indeed; not a refuge!
Upon that day the recourse shall be to thy Lord.
Upon that day man shall be told his former deeds and his latter;
nay, man shall be a clear proof against himself,
even though he offer his excuses.

Move not thy tongue with it
to hasten it;
Ours it is to gather it, and to recite it,
So, when We recite it, follow thou its recitation.
Then Ours it is to explain it.

No indeed; but you love the hasty world,
and leave be the Hereafter.
Upon that day faces shall be radiant,
gazing upon their Lord;
and upon that day faces shall be scowling,
thou mightest think the Calamity has been wreaked on them.

No indeed; when it reaches the clavicles
and it is said, 'Who is an enchanter?'
and he thinks that it is the parting

(55) Ibid., p. xii.

and leg is intertwined with leg,
upon that day unto thy Lord shall be the driving.

For he confirmed it not, and did not pray,
but he cried it lies, and he turned away
then he went to his household arrogantly.

Nearer to thee and nearer
then nearer to thee and nearer!
What, does man reckon he shall be left to
roam at will?
Was he not a sperm-drop spilled?
Then he was a blood-clot, and He created and formed,
and He made of him two kinds, male and female.
What, is He not able to quicken the dead?(56)

The questions that spring to mind now are: (1) Is this an accurate rendering of the original? (2) Are the rhythmic patterns and sequence groupings here convincing? (3) And do the grouped sequences really form original units of revelation? Arberry's work does not include the Arabic Text. But here is *Sūra* LXXV in Arabic:

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

لَا أُقْسِمُ بِيَوْمِ الْقِيَامَةِ ﴿١﴾ وَلَا أُقْسِمُ بِالنَّفْسِ اللَّوَّامَةِ ﴿٢﴾ أَيَحْسَبُ الْإِنسَانُ أَلَّن نَّجْمَعَ عِظَامَهُ ﴿٣﴾ بَلَىٰ قَادِرِينَ عَلَىٰ أَن نُّسَوِّيَ بَنَانَهُ ﴿٤﴾ بَلْ
يُرِيدُ الْإِنسَانُ لِيَفْجُرَ أَمَامَهُ ﴿٥﴾ يَسْأَلُ أَيَّانَ يَوْمُ الْقِيَامَةِ ﴿٦﴾ فَإِذَا بَرِقَ الْبَصَرُ ﴿٧﴾ وَخَسَفَ الْقَمَرُ ﴿٨﴾ وَجُمِعَ الشَّمْسُ وَالْقَمَرُ ﴿٩﴾ يَقُولُ الْإِنسَانُ يَوْمَئِذٍ
أَيْنَ الْمَفَرُّ ﴿١٠﴾ كَلَّا لَا وَزَرَ ﴿١١﴾ إِلَىٰ رَبِّكَ يَوْمَئِذٍ الْمُسْتَقَرُّ ﴿١٢﴾ يُنَبَّأُ الْإِنسَانُ يَوْمَئِذٍ بِمَا قَدَّمَ وَأَخَّرَ ﴿١٣﴾ بَلِ الْإِنسَانُ عَلَىٰ نَفْسِهِ بَصِيرَةٌ ﴿١٤﴾ وَلَوْ أَلْقَىٰ
مَعَاذِيرَهُ ﴿١٥﴾ لَا تُحَرِّكْ بِهِ لِسَانَكَ لِتَعْجَلَ بِهِ ﴿١٦﴾ إِنَّ عَلَيْنَا جَمْعَهُ وَقُرْآنَهُ ﴿١٧﴾ فَإِذَا قَرَأْنَاهُ فَاتَّبِعْ قُرْآنَهُ ﴿١٨﴾ ثُمَّ إِنَّ عَلَيْنَا بَيَانَهُ ﴿١٩﴾
كَلَّا بَلْ تُحِبُّونَ الْعَاجِلَةَ ﴿٢٠﴾ وَتَذَرُونَ الْآخِرَةَ ﴿٢١﴾ وُجُوهٌ يَوْمَئِذٍ نَّاضِرَةٌ ﴿٢٢﴾ إِلَىٰ رَبِّهَا نَاظِرَةٌ ﴿٢٣﴾ وَوُجُوهٌ يَوْمَئِذٍ بَاسِرَةٌ ﴿٢٤﴾ تَظُنُّ أَن يُفْعَلَ بِهَا فَاقِرَةٌ ﴿٢٥﴾
كَلَّا إِذَا بَلَغَتِ التَّرَاقِيَ ﴿٢٦﴾ وَقِيلَ مَنْ ۜ رَاقٍ ﴿٢٧﴾ وَظَنَّ أَنَّهُ الْفِرَاقُ ﴿٢٨﴾ وَالْتَفَّتِ السَّاقُ بِالسَّاقِ ﴿٢٩﴾ إِلَىٰ رَبِّكَ يَوْمَئِذٍ الْمَسَاقُ ﴿٣٠﴾ فَلَا صَدَّقَ وَلَا صَلَّىٰ
﴿٣١﴾ وَلَٰكِن كَذَّبَ وَتَوَلَّىٰ ﴿٣٢﴾ ثُمَّ ذَهَبَ إِلَىٰ أَهْلِهِ يَتَمَطَّىٰ ﴿٣٣﴾ أَوْلَىٰ لَكَ فَأَوْلَىٰ ﴿٣٤﴾ ثُمَّ أَوْلَىٰ لَكَ فَأَوْلَىٰ ﴿٣٥﴾ أَيَحْسَبُ الْإِنسَانُ أَن يُتْرَكَ سُدًى ﴿٣٦﴾
أَلَمْ يَكُ نُطْفَةً مِّن مَّنِيٍّ يُمْنَىٰ ﴿٣٧﴾ ثُمَّ كَانَ عَلَقَةً فَخَلَقَ فَسَوَّىٰ ﴿٣٨﴾ فَجَعَلَ مِنْهُ الزَّوْجَيْنِ الذَّكَرَ وَالْأُنثَىٰ ﴿٣٩﴾ أَلَيْسَ ذَٰلِكَ بِقَادِرٍ عَلَىٰ أَن يُحْيِيَ الْمَوْتَىٰ ﴿٤٠﴾

It is now time to answer the three questions.

Question No. 1 deals with meaning. On the whole, there is nothing fundamentally wrong with Arberry's translation of the meanings of the *Sūra*. The present writer would however disagree with him on translating the following:

(56) Ibid., pp. 619–20.

(a) بِٱلنَّفْسِ ٱللَّوَّامَةِ in verse 2; it should be "the self-reproaching soul" and not "the reproachful soul."

(b) نَّجْمَعَ عِظَامَهُۥ in verse 3; it should be "put his bones together again" or "assemble his bones" and not "gather his bones."

(c) Verse No. 33 ثُمَّ ذَهَبَ إِلَىٰٓ أَهْلِهِۦ يَتَمَطَّىٰٓ ; it should be "Then did he stalk to his household in full conceit" and not "then he went to his household arrogantly."

Questions 2 and 3, which deal with what Arberry calls "rhythmic patterns," are discussed in Part IV under "Reproducing the 'sublime rhetoric' of the original."

Muslim and pro-Muslim translators, it would seem, also have problems with translating the Quran, but, as we have seen, their problems seem to spring from the fact that each has his own philosophy of how he should translate the Book. Moreover, all translators discussed here are convinced that, in addition to translating the meanings of the Quran, they should try and reproduce its "sublime rhetoric," hence some of the mistakes discussed under the examples cited. One should however mention here that they at least tried to be fair to the original.

Enough has been said about accuracy in translating the Quran. The versions discussed in this section are all well-known and widely-read by scholars and/or general readers all over the world.

In Section III I propose to discuss English translators' attempts to change the present order of the Quran.

III

Translators' Attempts to Change the Present Order of the Quran

The *sūras* of the Quran were arranged by the Prophet during his lifetime under the guidance of Allah. Attempts have been made by Rodwell (see above) and others to arrange the *sūras* in chronological order, but a strictly chronological arrangement is bound to lead to the fragmentation or mutilation of many of the *sūras* as we now know them. Arberry is correct when he writes: "Each Sura will now be seen to be a unity within itself, and the whole Koran will be recognized as a single revelation, self-consistent to the highest degree."(57) Arberry's statement reminds us of what Abul Aʿala Maudūdi, an authority on the subject, has to say on "the order of the Quran":

(57) Ibid., p. xi.

It should ... be noted that the sūrahs of the Qurān were not arranged in the present order by his successors but by the Holy Prophet himself under the guidance of Allah. Whenever a sūrah was revealed, he would send for one of his amanuenses and dictate it word for word and direct him to place it after such and such and before such and such a sūrah. Likewise in the case of a discourse or passage or verse that was not meant to be an independent sūrah by itself, he would direct him to the exact place where it was to be put in the sūrah of which it was to form a part. Then he used to recite the Qurān during the *Salāt* (Prescribed prayer) and on other occasions in the same order and direct his Companions to remember and recite it in the same order. Thus it is an established fact that the sūrahs of the Qurān were arranged in the present order on the same day that the Qurān was completed by the one to whom it was revealed under the guidance of the One who revealed it.(58)

But, unlike Arberry, some English scholars do not seem to know much about the significance of the present order of the *sūras*. We have already referred to Rodwell's arrangement of the *sūras* in a rough chronological order. And now it is time to discuss this arrangement in some detail. The following "Index"(59) gives a complete picture of what Rodwell had in mind. (The figures of the first column show the number of the Suras in Rodwell's edition; those of the second, the numbers in the Arabic text).

1	96	18	90	35	79	52	76	69	18
2	74	19	105	36	77	53	44	70	32
3	73	20	106	37	78	54	50	71	41
4	93	21	97	38	88	55	20	72	45
5	94	22	86	39	89	56	26	73	16
6	113	23	91	40	75	57	15	74	30
7	114	24	80	41	83	58	19	75	11
8	1	25	87	42	69	59	38	76	14
9	109	26	95	43	51	60	36	77	12
10	112	27	103	44	52	61	43	78	40
11	111	28	85	45	56	62	72	79	28
12	108	29	101	46	53	63	67	80	39
13	104	30	99	47	70	64	23	81	29
14	107	31	82	48	55	65	21	82	31
15	102	32	81	49	54	66	25	83	42
16	92	33	84	50	37	67	17	84	10
17	68	34	100	51	71	68	27	85	34

(58) A.A. Maududi's "Introduction" to A.Y. Ali's *The Holy Quran* (U.S.A., 1975), p. xxxii. For more on "order" see whole "Introduction" esp. pp. xxxi–xxxii.

(59) *The Koran*, translated by J.M. Rodwell (London, 1909), p. xv.

86	35	93	64	100	4	107	22	114	5
87	7	94	62	101	65	108	48		
88	46	95	8	102	59	109	66		
89	6	96	47	103	33	110	60		
90	13	97	3	104	63	111	110		
91	2	98	61	105	24	112	49		
92	98	99	57	106	58	113	9		

This "arrangement" prompts a few remarks:

(a) It is not original; it is based on work done by Weil, Muir, and Nöldeke.

(b) None of these writers is sure that his proposed "arrangement" is, from the point of view of chronology, correct.

(c) Most of these writers' conclusions are based on pure conjecture.

(d) The Quran in its present order forms an organic whole. If you are going to consider the Opening Chapter (Sura I, *Fātiha*) number 8 (see "Index" above), then there is something organically wrong with your "arrangement."

A far more radical recasting has been attempted by Richard Bell. Bell, whose hypothesis is that "the present form of the Quran rests upon a careful reproduction of a confusion of written documents,"(60) set out in *The Quran Translated* (1937) to rearrange the contents of the Suras. In this connection he points out in the "Preface" that.

> all the possibilities of confusion in written documents have had to be considered - corrections, interlinear additions, additions on the margin, deletions and substitutions, pieces cut off from a passage and wrongly placed, passages written on the back of others and then read continuously, front and back following each other.(61)

Later on Bell explains that " the surahs have been kept in their usual order, and only such rearrangements of their contents made as seemed necessary to remove the confusions above referred to."(62)

Bell's radical recasting of the *sūras* in the light of "all the possibilities of confusion in written documents" seems to imply that (a) the Prophet's amanuenses were a lot of incompetent people, that (b) the Prophet did not "recite the Quran during the

(60) R. Bell, *The Quran Translated* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1937), p. vi.
(61) Bell, p. vii.
(62) Ibid.

Salāt ... and on other occasions in the same order" and that (c) he did not "direct his Companions to remember and recite it in the same order."

Bell's notion of the need for "a thorough arrangement of the Qurān in chronological order" (which, he points out, "remains a complicated problem which, must be left to others to solve"),(63) and his idea of rearranging the contents of the *sūras* point to his inability to understand the wisdom underlying the order of the Quran. Of the wisdom of the present order Maudūdī writes:

> Though it was to be the Book for all times, it had to be revealed piece-meal in twenty-three years according to the needs and requirements of the different stages through which the Islamic Movement was passing. It is obvious that the sequence of the revelations that suited the gradual evolution of the Movement could not in any way be suitable after the completion of the Quran. Then another order, suited to the changed conditions, was needed. In the early stages of the Movement the Qurān addressed those people who were totally ignorant of Islam and, therefore, naturally it had first of all to teach them the basic articles of Faith. But after its completion the Qurān was primarily concerned with those who had accepted Islam and formed a community for carrying on the work entrusted to it by the Holy Prophet. Obviously, the order of the complete Book had to be different from its chronological order to suit the requirements of the Muslim Community for all times. Then the Qurān had, first of all, to acquaint the Muslims thoroughly with their duties concerning the regulation of their lives. It had also to prepare them for carrying its message to the outer world which was ignorant of Islam. It had also to warn them of the mischiefs and evils that appeared among the followers of the former Prophets so that they should be on their guard against them. Hence Al-Baqarah and similar Madanī sūrahs, and not Al-'Alaq and similar Makki sūrahs, had to be placed in the beginning of the Qūran. In this connection, another thing should also be kept in view. It does not suit the purpose of the Qurān that all the sūrahs dealing with similar topics should be grouped together. In order to avoid one-sidedness at any stage of its study, it is essential that the Makkī sūrahs revealed at the earliest stages of the Movement should come between those revealed in the later stages so that the entire picture of the complete Islam should always remain before the reader. That is the wisdom of the present order.(64)

Bell's argument bristles with difficulties and his conclusions are never final (he uses the words "provisional" & "provisionally" in dealing with every aspect of the recasting process, see pp. v-viii). The reader thus feels that recasting the *sūras* in this rather "arbitrary" (Bell's word, see his "Preface", p. viii) manner has been a pointless exercise.

Another arrangement-exercise, based this time on the unity of the *sūras*, has been attempted by another scholar. N.J. Dawood, who abandons the traditional arrangement in his translation, has a completely different view of the sequence. In

(63) Ibid., p. vi.
(64) "Introduction" to A.Y. Ali's *The Holy Qur'ān* (U.S.A., 1975), pp. xxxi–xxxii.

this connection he writes:

> The present sequence, while not following a strictly chronological order, begins with the more Biblical and poetic revelations and ends with the much longer, and often more topical, chapters.(65)

Dawood then points out that

> the new arrangement is primarily intended for the uninitiated reader who, undrstandably, is often put off by such mundane chapters as "The Cow" or "Women," which are traditionally placed at the beginning of the book.(66)

The question here is: why should the "uninitiated reader ... be put off by such mundane chapters as "The Cow" or "Women"? The "uninitiated reader" knows only too well that he is going to read a holy book and not, for example, "Philosophy Made Easy" or "Mathematics Without Tears," where the author simplifies his subject or introduces the easy bits first to encourage the reader to learn. As we have seen earlier, there is a serious purpose behind placing "such mundane chapters" at the beginning of the Quran.

The "new arrangement" is not however Dawood's only concession to the reader. The language he uses in his work is more or less that of everyday English. Furthermore, his translation tends to be broad in many places.

So much for the attempts made by English translators to change the present order of the Quran: Rodwell's attempt is related to his pre-occupation with chronology, Bell's to his inability to see coherent and consistent reading in the longer *sūras*, and Dawood's to his desire to please the "uninitiated reader."

IV
General Observations

This section deals with some of the problems which translators of the Quran have to face. Many of the recommendations proposed here are based on the facts which emerged during our discussion of specific translations in Sections II & III.

Translation Should Always Be from the Original Arabic

To avoid the errors committed by Ross and Sale (i.e. errors characteristic of second remove translations) one should always translate from the original Arabic. Now

---

(65) *The Koran* (Penguin Classics Series) (Harmondsworth, 1979), p. 11.
(66) Ibid.

this means that the translator should not venture into the field of translating this Book, if he is not a scholar of Arabic. It goes without saying that his mother tongue should be English. Scholars of Arabic who come from bilingual communities (where one of the two languages is English) are of course capable of undertaking this mammoth task.

The Source Language

Arabic is not an easy language to translate from. This is especially so when the target language is English. For the two languages are so widely and radically different in both structure and genius that "literal" translation cannot be achieved without looking rugged, dreary and incomprehensible.

The difficulties naturally emanate from linguistic and stylistic differences. To give a few examples:

(a) In Arabic both the noun and the verb are extremely flexible. In this respect one Arabist has this to say:

> Arabic is fitted to express relations with more conciseness than the Aryan languages because of the extraordinary flexibility of the verb and noun. Thus, the ideas: break, shatter, try to break, cause to break, allow to be broken, break one another, ask some one to break, pretend to break, are among many variations of the fundamental verbal theme which can, or could, be expressed by vowel changes and consonantal augments without the aid of the supplementary verbs and pronouns which we have to employ in English. The noun, too, has an appropriate form for many diverse things, such as the time and place of an action, bodily defects, diseases, instruments, colours, trades and so on.(67)

After citing the forms derived from one root ("d-w-r", an intransitive verb, "which, in its simplest form, means to turn or revolve), the writer goes on to say: "None of these forms is fortuitous, but is predetermined by the structural genius of the Arabic language."(68)

(b) Closely related to the point discussed above is the point about the rhythm inherent in the language. In discussing "the triliteral root" peculiar to Arabic, Alfred Guillaume points to a very important characteristic of the language:

> The triliteral root with its ramifications through a thousand forms, each of which has an assonance with the same form of another root, produces a rhythm in Arabic as natural as it is inevitable.(69)

(67) See T.W. Arnold and A. Guillaume, "Preface," *The Legacy of Islam* (London: Oxford University Press, 1931), pp. vi–vii.
(68) Arnold, p. vii.
(69) Ibid.

This natural and inevitable rhythm is obviously difficult to reproduce in a different language.

(c) The verb in relation to time: when encountered alone, the Arabic verb, which carries only a limited idea of time, refers, roughly speaking, to the past or the present. With other "indications," however, it is capable of expressing all sorts of tenses. This is not the case in English, where a verb is usually very closely tied to the idea of time. The flexibility of the Arabic verb vs. the rigidity of its English counterpart can lead to wrong or inexact translation.

(d) A large number of Arabic verbs cannot be translated into English on a one-to-one basis, e.g. استوى، أسرف، طغى، أمات etc. And so each of these must be rendered by a combination of words. But finding the right combination can sometimes be elusive in the extreme.

(e) In English grammar, where only the singular and the plural exist, there is no single word to convey the sense of the Arabic dual (المثنى) in nouns or in verbs, in the second or in the third person.

(f) In English, the feminine plural is not distinguishable from the masculine. For both are covered by the same pronoun. In Arabic the feminine plural (in the second and in the third persons) is always distinguishable from the masculine.

(g) Repetition of synonyms for the sake of emphasis is fairly common in Arabic. When used properly, the device enhances the meaning and adds beauty to it. In translation this literary merit usually loses both effect and beauty. Consider these examples: إِنَّا نَحْنُ نَزَّلْنَا الذِّكْرَ إِنَّا نَحْنُ نُحْيِي الْمَوْتَىٰ وَإِنَّا لَنَحْنُ نُحْيِي وَنُمِيتُ

In all three examples "we" is repeated three times (each figures in a different form). The repetition has both meaning and effect. But in English the repetition is not likely to impress anybody. For one "we" is enough. In sentences like these the emphasis, or part of it, is usually lost in translation.

(h) Ellipsis occurs fairly frequently in Arabic. This is a mark of good style. When the reader comes across the device, he has to mentally supply the suppressed subject or predicate to get the message.

Literal translation is obviously out of the question here. The translator must supply the omitted words or phrases, otherwise the message will not be clear. In translating good Arabic poetry or prose, this can be a very difficult job, if the translator seeks to reproduce the spirit of the original.

(i) This brings us to another difficulty - abrupt grammatical transition in the

same sentence of person, or of number or of verb. The practice, which is again fairly common in Arabic, is pretty rare in English. It has its appeal in Arabic which is not easy to reproduce in English.

(j) There is also the problem of pronouns in relation to antecedents. To avoid ambiguity in the English text, the translator must make it quite clear that the particular pronoun refers to a certain person. Owing to abrupt grammatical transition, however, the job can be very tricky. This is especially so, if the writing is esoteric or old.

(k) Real equivalence: many of the Arabic and English words, considered by many to be synonyms, do not in fact mean the same. The Arabic word زكاة for example, does not really mean "alms" or "alms-giving." It is much more than that. This applies to many of the Arabic religious terms. They simply do not have real equivalents in English.

There is also the point about the abundance in Arabic of words which are closely related but different in meaning, e.g. قَادِرٌ ، قَدِيرٌ ، مُقْتَدِرٌ. English is comparatively poor in this respect, which is not likely to help the translator in finding equivalents to express words which belong to this category.(70)

These linguistic and stylistic difficulties (the above survey does not pretend to be exhaustive) are greatly compounded when one tries to translate the Quran. For the Quran has "its own extremely individual qualities." Arberry sums up these qualities when he writes:

> The Koran undeniably abounds in fine writing; ... ; the language is highly idiomatic, yet for the most part delusively simple; the rhythms and rhymes are inseparable features of its impressive eloquence, and these are indeed inimitable.(71)

Now to say this of the nature of the Book and of the source language in relation to the target is not to say that we should despair of translating the Quran, but to say that the translator of this great work must be equally great, in the sense that he must really be well-versed in the two languages, source and target.

Some of the translations discussed in the previous sections have been prepared by writers who had little knowledge of Arabic. They were thus unable to understand the Arabic text and so they either translated from other translations (which made the meaning only more remote from the original) or produced distorted versions of the Arabic Quran. These translations do in fact prove that "a little knowledge is a dangerous thing."

---

(70) For more on the subject see "Aids to translating the Quran" in this section.
(71) *The Holy Koran* (London, 1953), p. 28.

Incorporating Arabic Words into the Translation

In this respect one scholar writes:

> Almost all languages spoken by Muslims have translations of the Qur'ān in them. Usually the Text is printed with the translation. If the language is underdeveloped, many of the Arabic words of the Qur'ân are taken over bodily into it for want of corresponding words in the language. Even in cultivated languages like Persian or Turkish, the introduction of religious terms from Arabic gave a body of words which were common to the whole Islamic world, and thus cemented the unity of the Muslim Brotherhood which is typified by the *Qibla*. Where the notion itself is new to the speakers of polished languages, they are glad to borrow the Arabic word expressing that notion and all the associations connected with it. Such a word is *Qibla*.(72)

The last two sentences sum up the case for introducing Arabic words into the new text. "When the notion is new" to the speakers of the target language, the translator should use the Arabic word, because it expresses "that notion and all the associations connected with it."

Modern scholarship seems to favor this view. For in discussing Islamic literature writers nowadays speak of *aṣḥāb* (Companions), *ḥadīth* (Traditions), *tafsīr* (exegesis) and *ʿulamā* (those well-versed in the sciences of the Quran). That is to say they mention the Arabic term first and then give the nearest equivalent (or words to explain or paraphrase the concept) in brackets.

This is not to imply that the translation should read like a string of transliterated Arabic words punctuated with brackets. But, as pointed out earlier, it means that the method should be adopted when the notion is new to the speakers of the target language. It should also be adopted when the Arabic word is so pregnant with meaning that translating fails to do it justice.

In translating however the explanation should be in a footnote because brackets used in the body of the translation are usually reserved for the sole purpose of adding cementing words, i.e. words, not in the original but, added to render certain parts of the translation comprehensible.

Reproducing "the Sublime Rhetoric" of the Original

Attempts to reproduce "the sublime rhetoric" of the original or devise varied rhythms or rhythmic patterns to suit changes in subject-matter or tone in the original have not always been successful. Small wonder, the Book is inimitable. Unless one

---

(72) A.Y. Ali, *The Holy Quran* (U.S.A., 1975), p. xiv.

is therefore really "inspired," one should not attempt to reproduce this aspect in his translation. For one is likely to end up with a jingly or inorganic string of rhythmic patterns, which may produce the wrong effect or give the the wrong impression.

Take, for example, Arberry's translation of *Sūra* LXXV quoted earlier. The original Arabic consists of 40 short verses. Some of the verses are very short indeed, no more than two words. Rhyme is a striking feature of the *Sūra*. In certain places, especially the first 12 verses, groups of verses have the same rhyme. The *Sūra* is divided into two sections: Section I from verse 1 to verse 30; Section II from 31 to 40. The first section is divided into five paragraphs. These sub-divisions are: 1-2, 3-6, 7-15, 16-19, and 20–30. The second section is divided into two paragraphs. The two subdivisions are: 31-35, 36-40. The rhythms of the whole *Sūra* give the impression of "impetuous haste" and (in some places) impatience. What about Arberry's translation? His lines tend to be long and the tempo is a bit slow and leisurely, to say nothing of his inexact formula of divisions and subdivisions.

Biblical Style

The translator of the Quran should avoid the Biblical style favored by the earlier translators.(73) The reason for this is that the Quran is not the Bible. Every holy book is written in a different language. Thus to use the "Biblical" style in translating the Quran does not help in reproducing the spirit of the original Arabic. The right policy is to try "to compose clear and unmannered English,"(74) because it is, as pointed out above, almost impossible to solve the riddle of the Quran's *iʿjāz*, let alone reproduce it.

Order

A translator's job is to translate, and not rearrange the chapters or contents of a certain work. This is one of the essentials of translating. The principle applies to all types of translating. The original is always sacrosanct. Why should the Quran be different? The translator of the Quran should translate the Book as it is. Any remarks on chronology, contents or order should find a place in an introduction, or better still in a separate treatise. And before pontificating on these matters one should study the subject(s) thoroughly. The question "why the surahs of the Quran were not arranged in the sequence in which they were revealed" is, as we have seen, "based on ignorance of the wisdom underlying the present order of the Quran."

---

(73) To these we should also add A. Majid who tried in his translation (*The Holy Quran*, Lahore: M. Ashraf, 1943) "to follow closely the style and phraseology of the Authorised Version of the English Bible."

(74) See: Arberry (1964), p. xii.

The trouble with most European translators of the Quran is that, because they have little knowledge of the Arabic language, they do not read the longer and more reliable commentaries. If they do, the charges of "wearisome repetition and jumbled confusion" they level at the Quran will disappear. For they will find

(a) that the present order of the Book is significant in the extreme;
(b) that the Quran forms "a thoroughly coherent and consistent reading"; and
(c) that there is a serious purpose behind repetition in this Holy Book.(75)

Learning from One's Predecessors

Before embarking on a translation of the Quran, one should read as many English translations as possible. For one is bound to learn something from each. To give a few examples from the translations discussed here: from Pickthall's one learns to choose befitting language; from Arberry's one learns that one should "compose clear and unmannered English"; from Ali's one learns how to present his translation in such a manner as to really help the reader to understand the meaning of the text; from those who sought to change the order, or the contents of the *sūras*, of the Quran, one learns not to pontificate on any point before making a thorough study of the particular point.

The Right to Compare

The translator should not deprive the reader of the opportunity of comparison. The Arabic text should therefore be given side by side with the English translation. Muslim translators of the Quran abide by the "rule". (The early editions of Pickthall's translation do not include the Arabic text). But, for obvious reasons, non-Muslim translators do not.

Explanatory Notes

The Quran is not an easy book to read. Explanatory notes should therefore be a feature of any new translation. (One of the demerits of Pickthall's translation is the fact that it has very few notes). These notes should however be as short as possible. And the object should be to give the reader a fairly complete but concise picture of what the translator understands to be the meaning of the text. The notes should not deal with theological controversies or polemical arguments. This does not mean that these are not necessary or valuable, but it means that, because the translator seeks to present the meaning of the text, controversies and arguments have no place in the

(75) In defending "repetition in the Quran" A.J. Arberry writes: "Truth cannot be dimmed by being frequently stated, but only gains in clarity and convincingness at every repetition." *The Holy Koran* (London, 1953), p. 27.

translation. They should be dealt with in a separate book.

Some translators do not very much believe in "notes." A.J. Arberry is one of them. In this connection, he writes in his "Introduction" to his work:

> As footnotes and glosses do not interrupt the smooth flow of the Arabic Koran, so in this English interpretation footnotes and glosses have been deliberately avoided; readers anxious for further guidance should consult the earlier annotated versions.(76)

Arberry is not perhaps fair here. Firstly, any interpretation is not the "Arabic Koran." Secondly, footnotes and glosses do not interrupt the "smooth flow" of any interpretation. One can always skip them, because they do not form an integral part of the main text. Thirdly, if the reader (who needs guidance) must consult the earlier annotated versions, why should he read Arberry's translation in particular?

Aids to Translating the Quran

The vocabulary of the Quran is not easy to translate.(77) The reasons for this are:

(a) An appreciable number of the words is not used in "everyday classical Arabic."

(b) Each root-word in the vocabulary of classical Arabic is so pregnant with meaning that it is often difficult to interpret the language of the Quran on a one-to-one basis, "or by the use of the same word in all places where the original word occurs in the Text".(78) The Arabic word *ṣabr*, for example, implies many shades of meaning. It is therefore a gross error to use the English word "patience" in rendering it in all contexts.

(c) Seemingly similar, but in fact different, words are used in the Quran "to distinguish between things and ideas of a certain kind ..., for which there is only a general word in English,"(79) *bada‹a*, *khalaqa* (created); *‹afā*, *ghafara*, *ṣafaḥa* (forgave); *Raḥmān*, *Raḥīm* (merciful).

(d) Many words in the Quran have acquired other meanings. (This transformation is not of course peculiar to Arabic; all living languages undergo such transformations).

---

(76) Arberry (1964), p. xii.
(77) See also "The Source Language" above.
(78) See: Ali, *The Holy Quran* (U.S.A., 1975), p. x.
(79) See Ibid., p. xi.

The language problem is not however new, for

> even before the whole of the Quran was revealed, people used to ask the Apostle all sorts of questions as to the meaning of certain words in the verses revealed, or of their bearing on problems as they arose, or details of certain historical or spiritual matters on which they sought more light.(80)

These brief notes on the language of the Quran prompt a piece of advice: in rendering the meaning of the Quran, the translator should not jump to conclusions about the import or significance of a particular word, phrase or construction. In addition to the well-known dictionaries and grammars one should always consult the received commentaries.

In translating the Quran one should in fact use three kinds of books:

(a) dictionaries and general works of reference,
(b) previous commentaries, and
(c) previous translations.

A list of dictionaries and general works of reference and a list of commentaries will be found in A.Y. Ali, *The Holy Quran* (New York: The Muslim Students' Association of the United States and Canada, 1975).

In addition to these books, a good Arabic concordance to the Quran (e.g. Faidh-ullāh Bik Hasanī Maḳdissī, *Fath-ur-Rahman*, Cairo: Halabī Press, 1346 H., 1925 A.D.) is essential. For it has rightly been said that "the Quran is its best commentary." This is because passages in the Quran tend to elucidate one another. By careful comparison and collation of passages many difficulties are thus removed. The concordance mentioned here, full and easy to use, is invaluable in this connection.

This brings us to No. (c), previous translations, for a list of the well-known and widely-consulted ones, see section V, "Of References on English Translations of the Quran," of this paper.

V
Of References on English Translations of the Quran

Very little has been written on the English Translations of the Quran. The reason for this is not difficult to find. The writer must be well versed in the two languages (source and target) to be able to say with assurance whether a particular translation is good. That is why the main source for information on the subject remains the

(80) Ibid., p. ix.

translator's introduction to his work. In his introduction the translator usually tells us why he thinks his translation is better than the previous ones and writes in some detail about the difficulties he came across while translating the Book. (This applies to almost all the translations mentioned in this paper). The trouble with this source of information is that it is not always helpful or well-meaning. (See the part of Section II in which non-Muslim and anti-Muslim translators are discussed).

Some of these introductions are of course invaluable (e.g. Ali's, Arberry's, Pickthall's). Still when it comes to the technical side of the question one should not forget that the only way of judging the true worth of a translation is by comparing the English version and the Arabic original. But, as pointed out above, this needs skill in both the source and the target languages.

For references on all matters related to the Quran, the reader is referred to the section on "The Koran"/"The Quran" in *Index Islamicus*, compiled by J.D. Pearson, and published by Heffer and/or Mansell of London. Here is a list of the volumes available so far:

I. 1906–1955, published by Heffer in 1958, and by Mansell in 1974.
II. 1956–1960, published by Heffer in 1962, and by Mansell in 1973.
III. 1961–1965, published by Heffer in 1967, and by Mansell in 1974.
IV. 1966–1970, published by Mansell in 1972.
V. 1971–1975, published by Mansell in 1977.
VI. 1976–1980, published by Mansell in 1983.

References on translating the Quran are not however very many here. Of the six hundred or so entries which appear in the sections on The Quran, about twenty deal with the question of translation. Some of these deal with the technical aspect of the question, which is the subject of this paper, the rest deal with related points (e.g. inimitability, collection, interpretation etc.).

Here is a list of the articles relevant to the present study: (Entries are arranged in chronological order.)

1. Pickthall, M., "Arabs and non-Arabs and the Question of Translating the Quran," *Islamic Culture*, 5 (1931), 422–33.

2. Badruddin Alavi, M., "Inimitability of the Qur'an," *Islamic Culture*, 24 (1950), 1–15.

3. Bausani, A., "On Some Recent Translations of the Qur'an," *Numen*, 4 (1957), 75–81.

4. Tibawi, A.L., "Is the Quran Translatable," *Muslim World*, 52 (1962), 4–16.

5. Rahbar, D., "Aspects of the Quran Translation," *Babel*, 9 (1963), 60–68.

6. Ajmal Khan, M., "An Inquiry into the Earliest Collection of the Qur'an," *Studies in Islam*, 1 (1964), 175–212.

7. Ben-Shemesh, A., "Some Suggestions to Qur'an Translators," *Arabica*, 16 (1969), 81–83; 17 (1970), 197–204.

8. Johns, A.H., "Qur'anic 'Translation': Some Remarks and Experiments," *'Milla wa-milla*, 18 (1978), 37–51.

9. Irving, T.B., "Terms and Concepts: Problems in Translating the Qur'an," *Islamic Perspectives: Studies in Honour of Syyid Abul A'la Mawdudi* (Leicester: Islamic Foundation, 1979) 121–34.

10. Irving, T.B., "Introduction to *The Noble Reading* (Translation of the Koran into Contemporary American English)", *Hamdard Islamicus*, 3, No. 2 (1980), 3–33.

The reader is also referred to the sporadic short articles that appear in popular magazines. These are not of course reliable, but when the writer is an expert in the field, or in a related field, the article is worth reading. The following, written by a professor of Arabic, is a case in point:

أحمد بسام ساعي، «القرآن الكريم هل حرفته الترجمة؟!» *المجلة*، العدد ٤٣، ١١ - ١٧/٥/١٩٨٨م، ص ص ٥٤ - ٥٧.

Finally, as pointed out above, because of the dearth of references on the technical side of the question, the main source of information on the subject remains the translator's introduction. Most of the translations discussed in this paper have introductions. Here is a list of these translations:

Early Translations: (Complete/exact bibliographical details are not available for these.)

1. Lewis Maracci's translation was published at Padua in 1698.

2. Robertus Retenensis's translation was made about 1143 but not published till 1543. The place of publication was Basle and the publisher Bibliander.

3. Andrew du Ryer's translation was published in Paris in 1647.

4. Alexander Ross's translation was published a few years after du Ryer's.

Modern Translations: (*Dates refer to editions used.*)

1. *The Holy Quran*, translation and commentary by A.Y. Ali. New York: The

Muslim Students' Association of the United States and Canada, 1975. (First edition, 1934).

2. *The Koran Interpreted*, by A.J. Arberry. London: Oxford University Press, 1964.

3. *The Quran Translated*, by R. Bell. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1937.

4. *The Koran*, translated with notes by N.J. Dawood. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979.

5. *The Quran*, translated by E.H. Palmer. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1880.

6. *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran*, by M. Pickthall. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1930.

– *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran*, by M. Pickthall. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1957.

– *The Glorious Koran*, a bilingual edition with English translation, Introduction and notes by M. Pickthall. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1976.

7. *The Koran*, translated from the Arabic by J.M. Rodwell. London: Dent, 1909. (Reprinted 1974).

8. *A Comprehensive Commentary on THE QURAN*, by G. Sale and E.M. Wherry, London: Kegan Paul, 1896. (Four volumes: comprising Sale's Translation and Preliminary Discourse, with additional notes and emendations together with a complete index to the Text, Preliminary Discourse, and Notes by the Rev. E.M. Wherry.)

In addition to these, the reader should also consult the introduction to the following new translation: *The Bounteous Koran* (a translation of meaning and Commentary) by M.M. Khatib, London: Macmillan Press, 1984. (The translation is here printed alongside the Arabic text.)

Afterword

This is the scope of the present essay. It does not claim to be exhaustive. As an introductory essay, it raises the main points about the subject and tries to discuss them in same detail.

From Section V, it is clear that more work on translating the Quran is badly needed and that any worthwhile contribution, in a field which lacks references, is welcome.

في ترجمة القرآن الكريم

عبدالمنعم أحمد حسني

أستاذ مشارك، قسم اللغة الإنجليزية، كلية الآداب، جامعة الملك سعود، الرياض، المملكة العربية السعودية

ملخص البحث. ينقسم هذا البحث إلى خمسة أجزاء:

الجزء الأول: ويحاول الإجابة على السؤال التالي: هل يجوز ترجمة القرآن الكريم؟

الجزء الثاني: لاشك أن الدقة اعتبار مهم جدًّا في ترجمة معاني القرآن الكريم. وفي هذا الجزء يبيِّن المؤلف أن معظم من ترجم القرآن من غير المسلمين لم يتحرى الدقة في ترجمته إما لجهل باللغة العربية أو لغرض الإساءة إلى الإسلام أو للسببين معًا.

الجزء الثالث: يناقش الكاتب في هذا الجزء محاولات بعض المترجمين إعادة ترتيب السور أو محتواها ويشير إلى حكمة الترتيب الحالي.

الجزء الرابع: وهو ملاحظات عامة على بعض القضايا التي أثيرت في الجزئين الثاني والثالث أثناء مناقشة اتجاهات بعض المترجمين في ترجمة القرآن الكريم وإعادة ترتيب سورة أو محتواها.

الجزء الخامس: عبارة عن مذكرة قصيرة عن ندرة المراجع في موضوع المقال الحالي.