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elucidations; . . . they manifest a confidence, an originality and a certain unself-consciousness characteristic of all great art Translation robs them of the greater part of their artistic and emotive force, yet what remains over is by no means negligible, provided the translator abandons all attempts to press them into a prefabricated mould of committed prosody and stylized diction."²⁹

²⁹ Ibid., p. 254.

and I said to the night, when it stretched
its lazy loins
followed by its fat buttocks, and
heaved off its heavy breast, 27
"Well now, you tedious night,"

In his study of the Seven Odes, Arberry raises a question: "Are the Mu'allaqat great poetry, as the Arabs would have us believe? If so, are they translatable in such a manner as to compel recognition of their greatness; or do they contain intrinsic difficulties defying adequate translation, so that they cannot ever command the attention readily accorded to Homer, Vergil, Dante? On the other hand, are they so flawed, in general composition or in particular detail, as to merit relegation to the status of the venerable but curious rather than beautiful?" 28 Arberry reaches a conclusion and says that "the Mu'allaqat are supremely fine poems judged by Arab standards. . . . They represent the climax of an artistic impulse whose origins are beyond our

27 The Seven Odes, p. 64.

28 Ibid., p. 246.

producing these patterns within the rigid and traditional framework of the original remains unsolved. The mechanics of a classical Arabic poem compels a poet to adhere not only to a unified rhythm, but to fashion also sixty or more two-part lines with the same combination of terminal consonant and vowel. This restriction is basic to any appreciation of Arabic poetry, and the realization of its vital function might intensify the translators awareness of his foredoomed failure to do justice to his original. A master poet in Arabic builds up each line from the first syllable so that the rhyme-word at its end is not merely appropriate but inevitable. The pleasure a native Arab feels at hearing such poetry can never be conveyed through translation.

The other difficulty that faces the translator is reproducing the precision and compactness of the original language. The desert poet, gifted with keen power of observation, strove hard to match his visual and emotive detection of minute differences with an

War is a dire friend, as you have known
by experience; nor is this a new or a
doubtful assertion concerning her.

When you expelled her from your plains,
you expelled her covered with infamy;
but, when you kindled her flame,
she blazed and raged.

She ground you, as the mill grinds the corn
with its lower stone: like a female
camel she became pregnant; she
bore twice in one year; and at her
last labor, she was the mother
of twins. ²⁴

The same lines done by Lyalls in 1878:

And War is not aught but what ye know
well and have tasted oft:
not of her are the tales ye tell a doubtful
or idle thing.

When ye set her on feet, ye start her
with words or little praise;
but the mind for her grows with her
growth, till she bursts into
blazing flame.

She will grind you as grist of the mill
that falls on the skin beneath;
year by year shall her womb
conceive, and the fruit thereof
shall be twins. ²⁵

The immediate problem of recreating an equivalent
pattern of thoughts and sound is admirably solved by
Lyall, Nicholson and Arberry. But the problem of

²⁴ Works, X 49.

²⁵ Arberry, The Seven Odes, p.111

If thou art unable to repel the stroke
of death, allow me, before it comes 21
to enjoy the good, which I possess.

And in Blunts' way:

You only revile me. Yet say, ye
philosophers,
was the same wealth eternal I
squandered in feasting you?
Could all you my fate hinder? Friends,
run we ahead of it,
rather our lives enjoying, since 22
Time will not wait for us.

And in Nicholson's:

Canst thou make me immortal, O thou that
blamest me so
For haunting the battle and living the
pleasures that fly?
If thou hast not the power to ward me
from death, let me go
To meet him and scatter the wealth in my
hand, here I die. 23

The "Maallaka" of Zeheir has been rendered into English
by the same poets. Zeheir, in a role as a mediator, first
delivered the poem at a peace conference. Here are three
lines done by Jones in rhythmic prose:

21 Works, X, 32

22 The Poetical Works, p.87

23 A Literary History, p. 108

A white pale virgin pearl such lustre keeps,
Fed with clear water in untrodden deeps.
Half-turned away, a slant soft cheek, and eye
Of timid antelope with fawn close by,
She lets appear. ²⁰

In this attempt, similar to FitzGerald's free rendering of the "Rubaiyat", the translator does not literally follow the original yet produces a version where the freshness of an uninhibited nature is retained.

Certain pieces of Arabic poetry, which survived, have been composed on the spur of the moment. Tarafa Ibn El-Abd was such a poet, and his "Meallaka" is marked by casualness and swiftness which does not leave room for close connections between the movements of the poem. Tarafa was killed when he was twenty-six, yet his poem had the honor to be suspended on the walls of Ka'aba. Here are three versions of two lines from Tarafa's "Meallak":

In Jones' way:

O thou, who censur'st me for engaging
in combats and pursuing pleasures, wilt
thou, if I avoid them, insure my
immortality?

²⁰ Nicholson, A Literary History, p. 106

the verse to contract or to interpolate".¹⁹ The highly idiomatic and condensed language of the Moallakat might have sounded colloquial to a Bedouin, but Arberry's translation does not strike the modern reader as such. His is a direct, precise, vivid, and vigorous twentieth century version, but the little-used words and compound disturb the smoothness of the original.

R.A. Nicholson, who remarked of Imr al-Qais that "his daring images and exquisitely worded pictures of life in the desert set the translator a hard task, while the state of the text only makes harder", chose an early scene for his attempt in which rhyme is retained but rhythm abandoned.

How many a noble tent hath oped its treasure
To me, and I have ta'en my full of pleasure,
Passing the warders who with eager speed
Had slain me, if they might but hush the deed,
What time in heaven the Pleiades unfold
A belt of orient gems distinct with gold!
I entered
Fair in her colour, splendid in her grace,
Her bosom smooth as mirror's polished face:

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 60.

the wildest beasts at evening drowned in the
furthest reaches
of the wide watercourse lay like drawn
bulbs of wild onion. 18

Arberry has the usual translator's problem of "how best to convey in his own idiom the impression made upon his mind by words uttered fourteen hundred years ago, in a remote desert land, at the first dawn of an exotic literature. Most of those who have faced this enigma appear to have felt that 'antique' Arabic demands for its adequate presentation some kind of 'antique' English. For my own part I cannot share this view; Imr al-Qais and his kind speak into my ear a natural, even at times a colloquial language; such, I feel sure, was the effect they produced on their first audience. In the versions which I have made I have sought to resolve the difficulty of idiomatic equivalence on these lines; and I think that the result is a gain in vigor and clarity. I have also tried to follow the original rhythms, without rhyming, but not so slavishly as to be compelled by the vigor of

18 Arberry, The Seven Odes, p.66

cumbered the hollow places, drowned
in the night-trouble. 17

Though travelers, scholars, and poets themselves,
the Blunts fall short in conveying the magnificence of
the original; the spirit of FitzGerald was invoked in
vain. Their translation was never printed again.

The best translation so far achieved is that of Arthur
J. Arberry, published in 1957. Here is his version given
for the sake of comparison:

Friend, do you see yonder lightning? Look,
there goes its glitter
flashing like two hands now in the
heaped-up, crowned stormcloud.
Brilliantly it shines - so flames the lamp of
an anchorite
as he slops the oil over the twisted wick.
In the morning the topmost peak of El-Mujaimir
was a spindle's whorl cluttered with
all the scum of the torrent;
it had flung over the desert of El-Ghabeet
its cargo
like a Yemeni merchant unpacking his
laden bags.
In the morning the songbirds all along the
broad valley
quaffed the choicest of sweet wines
rich with spices;

17 The Poetical Works of Wilfred Scawen Blunt
(London, 1914) II, 82.

English prosody to take in the exciting rhythms newly discovered in the East."¹⁵ Tennyson's debt in his "Locksley Hall" to Jones' version of the "Moallaka" of Imr Al-Qais has been shown by professor E.Keoppel.¹⁶

The Blunts use the same metre, but the language they employ to represent the archaic Arabic is the English Biblical Style. Their version of the same quotation runs as follows:

Friend, thou seest the lightning. Mark where
it wavereth,
gleaneth like fingers, clasped in the
cloud-rivers.
Like a lamp new-lighted, so is the flash of it,
trimmed by a hermit nightly pouring oil-sesame.
Nay, but ye Majeymir, tall-peaked at dawn of day,
showed like a spinster's distaff tossed
on the flood-water.

Cloud-wrecked lay the valley piled with
the lead of it,
high as in rocks the Yemani heapeth
his corn-measures.
Seemed it then the song-birds, wine-drunk
at sun-rising,
loud through the valley shouted,
maddened with spiceries,
While the wild beast corpses, grouped like
great bulbs upturn

¹⁵ Arberry, The Seven Odes, p.55

¹⁶ Englische Studies, XXVIII, p.400 ff. Quotations of the article appears in English in Marie E. de Meester, Oriental Influences (Heidelberg, 1915) pp.52-4.

At earliest dawn on the morrow the birds
 were chirping blithe,
 as though they had drunken draughts of
 riot in fiery wine;
 And at even the drowned beasts lay where
 the torrent had borne them, dead,
 high up on the valley rides like earth-
 stained roots of squills. 12

This is a sensitive and scholarly rendering which preserves the grandeur of the original. The little-used words, which the poets of the Muallakat were fond of, are meant to convey the archaic quality of ancient Arabic. Lyall's unrhymed adaptation of the "long metre", called Bacchius or amphibrachys,¹³ is an attempt to render the metre of the original. It is interesting to note that Lyall in his introduction points out that "in Mr. Browning's 'Abt Vogler' we constantly find lines which completely fulfill the requirements of an English Tawil."¹⁴ This observation, Arberry writes, "reminds us of the extent to which the Victorian poets, Tennyson among them, sought to extend

12 Arberry, The Seven Odes, pp.55-6.

13 In English, e.g.: Forgotten, forgotten, unwanted, he wandered.

14 Charles J. Lyall, "Some Aspects of Ancient Arabic Poetry", Proceedings of the British Academy, 1917-1918, VIII, 366-7.

The beasts of the wood, drowned in the floods
of night, float, like the roots of wild
onions, at the distant edge of the lake. 11

In this direct translation, Jones does not impair
the vigor of the original. The freshness of the images
is retained but the compactness of the original is
sacrificed. His classical bias is at work in the
selection of vocabulary and grace of movement.

Sir Charles Lyall translated the same "Meallaka" in
1877 and here is his version of the same passage:

O Friend - see the lightning there ! it
flickered, and now is gone,
as though flashed a pair of hands
in the pillar of crowned cloud.
Nay, was it its blaze, or the lamps of a
hermit that dwells alone,
and pours o'er the twisted wicks the oil
from his slender cruse?
And the topmost crest on the morrow of
al-Mujaimir's cairn was heaped with
the flood-borne wrack like wool
on a distaff wound.

11 Work, X, 18-19

intensely national stamp of the ideas, the strange local colour of the imagery, and the obstinately idiomatic style".¹⁰

A specimen from each of these translators should illustrate their achievements. Jones' poetic prose though obsolete, is still fairly good. Here is an example from his version of *Imr al-Qais* describing a rainy storm.

O Friend, seest thou the lightning, whose
flashes resemble the quick glance of two
hands amid clouds raised above clouds?

The fire of it gleams like the lamps of
a hermit, when the oil, poured on them,
shakes the cord by which they are suspended.

The summit of *Mogaimir*, covered with
the rubbish which the torrent has rolled
down, looks in the morning like the top of
a spindle encircled with wool.

The cloud unloads its freight on the desert
of *Ghabeit*, like a merchant of *Yemen* alighting
with his bales of rich apparel.

The small birds of the valley warble at
day-break, as if they had taken their early
draught of generous wine mixed with spice.

10

Reynold A. Nicholson, *A literary History of the
Arabs* (New York, 1907) p.xi.

In the Literary History of the Arabs, completed in 1907, Reynold A. Nicholson, the Orientalist "Dervish", gave many translations of selected passages from the Ma'allakat. These versions, not of equal excellence, are distinguished by sound scholarship and a certain degree of virtuosity. In his translation of the poem of Ta'abata Sharran, a poem which had already been rendered into German by Goethe, who used an earlier Latin version, Nicholson rhymes his lines and endeavors to imitate the metre of the original. On the problem of translation he says: "In the verse-translations I have tried to represent the spirit and feeling of the original poems. This aim precludes verbal fidelity, which can only be attained through the disenchanting medium of prose . . . To reproduce a typical Arabic ode, e.g., one of the Mu'allaqat ("Suspended Poems"), in a shape at once intelligible and attractive to English readers is probably beyond the powers of any translator. Even in those passages which seem best suited for the purpose we are baffled again and again by the

still further obscured by medieval commentators, learned in everything except personal knowledge of the customs and ways of Bedouin thought . . . In dealing with these, the present translators have had the advantage of their long experience of the desert and desert practices." ⁸ For their method of translation the Blunts say: "A far more serious difficulty has been so to simplify and arrange the verses as to make them run easily and intelligibly to English ears. An absolutely verbal rendering of verse in another language is nearly always a betrayal Fitzgerald's free-handed method is really the only fair one, and Fitzgerald's has been the model taken by the present translators. These portions especially of the Odes which deal with local events and tribal politics have needed a courageous handling". ⁹

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., pp. 29-30.

were sufficiently on their guard against men, when they had irritated even to fury."⁶ Jones understood the power of persuasion which is fully brought out by recitation.

Two more attempts at the courageous rendering of the Meallakat into English were made during the early years of the twentieth century. In 1903 Wilfred Scawen Blunt and his wife Lady Anne Blunt published a new translation called "The Seven Golden Odes of Pagan Arabia". Their aim was "to produce a volume, not for scholars only, but also for all lovers of strange and beautiful verse, such a volume, if possible, as was produced forty years ago by Fitzgerald, when he gifted English poetry with the glorious 'Quatrains of Omar Khayyam!'"⁷ The Blunts did not underestimate the difficulty of their undertaking. "The text of the Meallakat, in itself obscure, has for centuries been

⁶ The Works of Sir William Jones, vol.X, pp.23-4.

⁷ Arberry, The Seven Odes, p.28

means a swimmer, or a steed in the position of forelegs spread forward together. Palmer succeeded in his purpose at the price of suppressing the imaginative suggestiveness of the original.

In the *Maallakat* there is much that is simply untranslatable. These poems were composed to be read aloud and their charm, eloquence and vigor could be brought fully by recitation. In his "argument" on the poem of Hareth, Jones alludes to the poet Amr, "The Regicide", and to Harb al-Bassos, the forty-year war between the two tribes of Beer and Tagleb in the sixth century and concludes: "This oration, or poem, or whatever it may be denominated, had its full effect on the mind of the royal empire (The King of Hira) who decided the course in favor of the Becrites, and lost his life for a decision apparently just. He must have remarked the fiery spirit of the poet Amru from the style of his eloquence, as Caesar first discovered the impetuous vehemence of Brutus's temper from his speech, delivered at Nice, in favour of King Deiotarus; but neither the Arabian nor the Roman tyrant

translation:

But if my valour needeth warranty,
Go ask the here horseman of thy tribe,
Ask them how fares it, when I once bestride
My steed, when every lance my turn assails,
Now rushing singly to defy the host,
Now plunging headlong where the bowmen crowd.
Each glad survivor of the fierce affray
Will tell thee truly how I love the fight,
How little care I have to share the spoils. ⁵

There is always a risk taken by translators in rendering the literature of one language into another. The versions of Shakespeare in Arabic are all pale, colorless, lacking the suggestiveness and imaginative depth of the original. It is equally similar in the case of Palmer's *Antara*. In comparing his translation with the original Arabic, Palmer's method, though vivid and direct, gives the implied meaning which *Antara* only suggests through series of images. The metaphor that suggests the steed in *Antara*, for example, consists of two words: the first means a special kind of saddle used for gallop, the second,

⁵ Ibid., p. 176.

gave a translation of the "Meallaka" of Antara Al-Absi, the "Black Knight", which was originally printed in the St. John's College magazine The Eagle³. "The imagery of the poem", Palmer says in an introduction to the poem, "though vigorous, as we might expect, is often extremely rude and erratic, passing with sudden transition from a gentle pastoral utterance to the fierce breathings of a battle and revenge; at one time dwelling fondly on the image of a beloved maiden, at another conjuring up, with grim delight, the image of a slaughtered foe. I have given it, as far as possible, in its native simplicity, without seeking, by suppression or embellishment, to adapt it to modern European taste."⁴. Here is an example of Palmer's

³ A.J. Arberry, Oriental Essays (New York, 1960) p. 138.

⁴ Arberry, The Seven Odes, p. 174.

In England three attempts at translation were made during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. In 1877 Sir Charles J. Lyall proposed in the Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal to publish a translation of the "Suspended Poems" with the notices contained in Kitab al-Aghani (The Book of Songs) by Abu-al-Faraj Al-Isfahani. But Lyall never realized his plan. He only succeeded in publishing a large part of the introductory matter, and some fragments of the poems. In 1894, Captain F.E. Johnson published at Bombay a translation "intended to be nothing more than an aid to the (Indian) student, and for this reason it has been made as literal as possible". This attempt "adheres firmly to the tradition of the schoolboy's Latin crib and is understandably and deliberately, without literary value".²

Edward Henry Palmer (1840-1883), an Oriental linguist, and the editor of the Poetical Works of Beha-ed-Din Zohair (d.1279), published in 1877 a collection of his versions from the Persian and Arabic, together with his original pieces. In this anthology, Palmer

² A.J. Arberry, The Seven Odes (London, 1957) p.27.

One of the early translators of the Meallakat was Sir William Jones (1746-1794). Jones' primary concern was to give a faithful version of the original text which is extremely difficult. For this purpose he assiduously consulted the editions and commentaries of Tabrizi, Zausini, Sadi, Ansari, and Obcidella.¹ He succeeded in producing a faithful, phrase-by-phrase, translation which, although considered obsolete by modern Orientalists, and contains some minor errors, remains surprisingly good.

Jones' translation was gradually recognized as an important contribution to literary studies. Goethe who studied Oriental literature and greatly appreciated Jones' many-sided genius, quotes his estimate of the seven poets in the annotations of his own West-östlicher Divan. Two German translations and studies of the Meallakat appeared in 1843 and 1857.

¹ The Works of Sir William Jones, ed. Lord Teignmouth (London, 1807) p.xi

first, then if fortunate, would be transcribed.

(Much of this poetry was circulated orally). Then the poet moves to the main topic, whether it is praise of self, tribe, or patron, war and achievement in battle, making peace between warring tribes, horsemanship, hunting, expeditions, or turns back to love or war. The style is marked by precision, subtlety of variations, and richness of diction, resulting in epigrammatic terseness and dramatic intensity. The variety in diction, metaphor, and conceits are essential to redeem the monotony of the unvaried rhythm and rhyme throughout the poem which, in the case of a "Meallaka", consists of sixty to ninety lines.

The Meallakat had a literary tradition behind them. Poets ambitious for recognition would recite their choicest compositions at an annual fair held at Ukadh, near Mecca, a sort of poetical academy, and the poems voted worthy of the award were transcribed in letters of gold on fine Egyptian linen and suspended in the Ka'aba, Mecca's Holy Shrine.

The Moallakat, or the "Seven Golden Odes", or the "Suspended Poems", had a long history of translation and probable influence on English poetry. The Seven Poems are the most famous survivors of a vast mass of pre-Islamic poetry and some of the most valued poems in Arabic literature. They are pastoral, elegiac, and panegyric in mood, representing pictures of Bedouin life, and arranged in a conventional order. The poet starts by mentioning the ruins or deserted dwelling place of his beloved, or by picturing her departing caravan. Here, he commonly gives a description of a horse, a camel, or a gazelle. To this he links the erotic prelude, the violence of his passion and the beauty of the lady. This prelude might consist of various love episodes. Thus the poet should have secured an attentive audience, for the poems are composed to be recited

The Meallakat in English Literature

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