REVIEWS


The essays offered in this volume are, (1) Keeping Secrets, (2) Enmity and Envy, (3) Conduct of Secretaries, (4) Life and Afterlife, (5) Earnest and Jest, (6) Homesickness, (7) Maids and Youths, (8) Superiority of the Belly, (9) Virtues of the Turks. It is not made clear, in the short 'Note on the Translation' (p. 219), whether the translation aims at being a help to undergraduates studying Arabic, or at presenting a view of a work of Arabic literature for the general, non-Arabist public. However, many of the observations made below apply to both types of readership, even if a few apply only to one or the other. There is a comprehensive Bibliography and an 'annotated' index of proper names.

Three things strike one immediately on looking at this book. The first is the dearth of explanatory comment: the footnotes are, with only one or two exceptions, devoted solely to giving the source for the quotations which the author has included in his essays. Yet time and time again, the Western reader is confronted with passages which, presented in a simple translation without explanatory comment, remain totally unintelligible. To offer any translation of al-Jāḥīz without such comment is disastrous.

The second matter is that of the text. Essay no. 8 is translated from a MS in the British Library, the rest from 'Abd al-Salam Muhammad Hārūn's edition. Unfortunately, this cannot be said to be a fully satisfactory one; a certain number of the readings are dubious, and perhaps one or two actually wrong. Textual comment on such passages is vitally necessary for the student of Arabic, and even for the non-Arabist in cases where a literal rendering of Hārūn's text produces nonsense. But to these problems Hutchins shows a complete indifference.

The third is the English style of the translation. This is rarely satisfactory, and overall the rendering displays a deep lack of sensitivity to the English language; words are semantically misused, the phraseology stilted and unnatural, and in many places virtually unintelligible to the ordinary reader. One feature that is specially regrettable is Hutchins' tendency to break up the author's long sentences into short staccato English ones punctuated by full stops. Even where this does not lead (as it does sometimes) to actual mistranslation, it makes it extremely difficult for the student of Arabic to detect the structure of the original; and for the non-Arabist it obliterates the most characteristic feature of the author's style. In translating al-Jāḥīz, one should bear in mind Peter Newmark's dictum (A Textbook of Translation, New York etc., 1988, p. 32), 'If long sentences and complicated structures are an essential part of the text and are characteristic of the author ... you should reproduce a corresponding deviation from the target language norms in your own version'.

In the essay on 'Enmity and Envy', the reader can see these points exemplified by comparing Hutchins' version with my own attempt in JAL 18 (1987), pp. 22-45.
The following detailed observations are culled, by way of exemplifying the qualities of Hutchins’ versions, from two essays only: ‘Keeping Secrets’ and ‘Maids and Youths’. Page references are to Hutchins’ book.

P. 14. The author’s lexicographical remark “aql can be called aql or hijr” is untranslatable, and can only be clarified by an explanatory comment; Hutchins’ rendering “The intellect is called a shackle and a restraint” is by itself inadequate. The point is that in the everyday usage of the author’s time aql meant “mind, intellect”, but the lexicographers claim that it originally meant “control, restraint”, a notion ordinarily expressed by hijr; however, the latter word is also ambivalent, and in the Qur’an is used for “mind” in the quotation from S.89,5 which follows, hal fi dalika qasamun li-dhi hijrin (as is recognised by all commentators and all translators, e.g. Arberry’s “a mindful man”). Hutchins’ rendering here “Is there in that an oath for one with restraint” is a mistranslation, as well as being virtually unintelligible. It needs further to be remarked that in classical Arabic both hal and halla can be used indifferently in the sense of Latin anné or of Latin nonne, and it is certainly the latter that is intended here, although the only translation that has made this clear is the German one of R. Paret, “Ist das nicht für jemand, der Verstand hat, ein (wirksamer) Schwur?” Secondly ‘oath’ is unintelligible without the preceding context, which consists of a series of oath-formulae, “By the dawn, ...”; and these formulae are then said to justify the Prophet’s declarations—hence Zamakhshari’s comment that qasam here means “the thing sworn” (muqsam): i.e. the oath-formulae validate, for a thinking man, the Prophet’s message. All this cries aloud for comment.

A little further on, the author says that the breast (sadr), as a repository of thoughts, finds them too heavy a burden and seeks relief by putting them into speech. He then goes on, šumma la yakâdu ‘an yusfiyahu ‘an yuxtaba bihi nafsahu fi xilwatihī hattā yuṣīli bihi ilā gāyrihī. Hutchins’ version, “It is hardly cured, however, when a person tells something to himself in private but does not communicate it to another person” is a free paraphrase which, on the one hand, makes it extremely difficult for the student of Arabic to understand how it matches the original; and on the other hand, both for him and for the general reader, makes incomprehensible the remark a few lines later that “if reason takes control of the tongue it prevents this practise”: the practice in question is in fact that of telling another person, which has not figured positively in Hutchins’ version. A more literal rendering is needed, something like, “For a person to utter his thought to himself in private will hardly afford him any relief until he communicates it to another person”.

P. 19. Hutchins: “Many a statement filling the inside of a scroll has been learned in its entirety including a damaging section, from what is peeled off or a stamp, from someone’s glancing at the book, or by a letter showing through from the back”. The phrase ‘what is peeled off’ is a literal translation of Hārün’s gloss for saxā‘ah, given in his footnote, as mà nqašara; this is a typical example of a totally useless gloss extracted from the lexica: every saxā‘ah is ‘something peeled off’, but not everything ‘peeled off’ is a saxā‘ah. The word has several specialised meanings (including “meninx”, which obviously could not be replaced by what is peeled off!), and here describes the narrow strip of parchment used as a tape for fastening a scroll, and on top of which is placed the wax seal-impression of the writer. As for mà fihi l-dararu minhu bi ... this seems to me to mean not “a damaging section”, but “a part of it where there is damage occasioned by fastening-tape and seal”.

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