Al-Ṣafadī on the Two Methods of Translation

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Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn Ḥalīl b. Aybak al-Ṣafadī (1297–1363) was a well-travelled and prolific intellectual, literary critic, biographer, copyist, and poet. He is called Al-Ṣafadī for his hometown Ṣafad. At twenty years old he went to Damascus and met Ibn Taymiyya and during his life would spend much time there, in Aleppo, and in Cairo, with intellectual contacts wherever he travelled. A skilled writer, he held posts of government service, yet “possibly spending more time on his scholarly work than his government employment” (Rosenthal). Among his own manuscript copies made by him are Garrett 1907 (298B) and Gotha 1731 (Pertsch, 3.19). A poet himself, his Al-ġayṭ al-muṣaǧǧam is a commentary on the Lāmiyyat al-ʿaḡām of Al-Ṭuḡrāʾī (1061–1120/1).

Rosenthal calls his works “uniformly instructive and

\*Notices of typos, etc., may be sent to this address.


consistently entertaining,” marked both by reliability and originality. He died in Damascus on July 23, 1363 during an outbreak of the plague.

Al-Ṣafadī’s work in the Cairo edition has not always been available or easily discoverable to those who might wish to read the passage in Arabic, and even with the text at hand, the layout and typography of these nineteenth-century Egyptian editions is hardly welcoming, at least to non-native readers of Arabic: the type is small, word spaces are sometimes smaller than expected, it is not always clear if a connecting line between letters is there, letter shapes themselves sometimes do not seem whole, telling one dot from two or three is sometimes a guess, and sometimes the dots simply are not there.

The passage below, especially since the time Rosenthal translated it, has become well known, and even though the simple presentation of translation technique into a dichotomy does not do justice to the real situation, those interested in translations, Graeco-Arabic and otherwise, should be familiar with Al-Ṣafadī’s words. So, then, given the interest of the passage, it will be of use to some students and scholars who study (Graeco-Arabic) translation to have a cleaner presentation of the text. Below I give it in a sufficiently large and readable typeface, separated into paragraphs to match Rosenthal’s translation, and I have also added a few vowels, šadda, and hamza. Rosenthal’s translation itself follows the Arabic text.

Perhaps this very small excerpt, with the links given above, will kindle more interest both in Al-ġayṭ al-musaḡğam and in Lāmiyyat al-ʿaḡam.

Arabic text

في النقل طريقان أحدهما طريق يوحنان بن البطريق وابن الناعمة الحمصي وغيرهما وهو أن ينظر إلى كل كلمة من الكلمات اليونانية وما تدل عليه من المعنى


Rosenthal’s English translation

The translators use two methods of translation. One of them is that of Yuḥannā b. al-Bīṭrīq, Ibn al-Nāʿimah al-Ḥimṣī and others. According to this method, the translator studies each individual Greek word and its meaning, chooses an Arabic word of corresponding meaning and uses it. Then he turns to the next word and proceeds in the same manner until in the end he has rendered into Arabic the text he wishes to translate. This method is bad for two reasons. First, it is impossible to find Arabic expressions corresponding to all Greek words and, therefore, through this method many Greek words remain untranslated. Second, certain syntactical combinations in the one language do not always necessarily correspond to similar combinations in the other; besides, the use of metaphors, which are frequent in every language, causes additional mistakes.

The second method is that of Hunain b. Ishāq, al-Jauharī and others. Here the translator considers a whole sentence, ascertains its full meaning and then expresses it in Arabic with a sentence identical in meaning, without concern for the correspondence of individual
words. This method is superior, and hence there is no need to improve the works of Ḥunain b. Isḥāq. The exception is those dealing with mathematical sciences, which he had not mastered, in contrast with works on medicine, logic, natural science and metaphysics whose Arabic translations require no corrections at all. On the other hand, Euclid has been improved by Thābit b. Qurrah al-Ḥarrānī, as have been the *Almagest* and the *Intermediate Works*.\(^6\)

\(^6\)That is, the works to be studied between the student’s reading of Euclid and the *Almagest*. See Rosenthal, *Classical Heritage*, 269.