The Open Court

A MONTHLY MAGAZINE


Editor: Dr. Paul Carus,
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CHICAGO

The Open Court Publishing Company

LONDON: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., Ltd.

Single copies, 10 cents (6d.). Annually, $1.00. In the U. P. U., 5s. 6d.

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The Open Court Publishing Company

324 DEARBORN ST., CHICAGO, ILL.

General Agencies:

Agencies for Open Court Publications in the United States and foreign countries are given below. Publications may be examined and orders filled at any of these places.

In the United States:

CHICAGO:
At the Office of the Publishers, 324 Dearborn St.
A. C. McClurg & Co., Corner Wabash Ave. and Madison St.
Brentano's, 218 Wabash Ave.
Charles McDonald, 5 Monroe St.

NEW YORK:
Lemcke & Buechner, 812 Broadway.
Brentano's, 31 Union Square.

BOSTON:
Dambell & Upham, 823 Washington St.

CAMBRIDGE, MASS.
Harvard Co-operative Society.

Foreign Countries:

AMSTERDAM:
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THE OPEN COURT PUBLISHING CO., CHICAGO, 324 Dearborn St.
CONFUCIUS.
RHYME AND RHYTHM IN THE KORAN.

BY WILLIAM F. WARREN.

FEW English readers of the Koran realise that it is a book of poetry, and that its rhyme and rhythm have immensely helped its currency in all lands where the Arabic language is spoken. Our prose translations can give no adequate idea of the flow and cadence of the original. An unrhymed paraphrase even in the musical Arabic would as little represent the real Koran as an English prose paraphrase of Tennyson’s Bugle Song would represent that masterpiece of melody. Undoubtedly the metrical swing of the book explains in some measure the great prominence given to the intoning and reciting of it in the mosques and schools of the Mohammedan world.

To illustrate these metrical movements, alliterations, and phonetic returns at intervals to a thematic keynote or sound, the last two of the one hundred and fourteen Suras are perhaps as good as any. In Rodman’s translation they read as follows:

Sura cxiii.
_in the name of God, etc._
Say: I betake me for refuge to the Lord of the Daybreak
Against the mischief of his creation;
And against the mischief of the first darkness when it overspreadeth;
And against the mischief of enchantresses;
And against the mischief of the envier when he envieth.

Sura cxiv.
_in the name of God, etc._
Say: I betake me for refuge to the Lord of Men,
The King of men,
The God of men,
Against the mischief of the stealthily withdrawing whisperer,
Who whispereth in man’s breast—
Against djinn and men.

The original has been transliterated by an expert, Professor H. G. Mitchell, as follows:

**SURA cxiii.**

Bismi 'llahi 'l'rrahmani 'l'rrahimi.

Kul 'a'udhu bi rabbiki ('l)falaki
Min sharri nà halaka
Wamin sharri gásikan 'idhà wakaba
Wamin sharri ('l)naffáhati fi ('l)ukudi
Wamin sharri hásidin 'idhà hasada.

**SURA cxiv.**

Bismi 'llahi 'l'rrahmani 'l'rrahimi.

Kul 'a'udhu bi rabbiki ('l)ynası
Maliki ('l)ynası
'ilahi ('l)ynası
Min sharri ('l)ivasası ('l)'ennası
('l)'addhâ yuvasvası fi sudârî ('l)ynası
Mina ('l)'innati wa('l)ynası.

I hope I shall not be mistaken for a master in the tongue if I say that no knowledge of Arabic is needed to enable one to see and to hear the difference between Rodman’s version and the original. The one is stiff, hampered, and not very clear prose; the other is poetry, measured, melodious, rememberable. It is not the highest order of poetry—the matter is too often sacrificed to form for that—but it is poetry that charms the popular ear, and wins for itself a place in the popular memory.

The Arabic is so rich in open vowel sounds that a successful metrical paraphrase in any other tongue is extremely difficult. Probably a first-class genius, using the Persian or Italian language, could come nearer to a real reproduction of the original than any one else. In a moment of recklessness, one of especial audacity, the present writer once tried an experiment to see what could be done in this direction in German. Keeping as closely as possible to the original, his result was as follows:

**Im Namen Gottes, etc.**

Sprich:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>German</th>
<th>Arabic</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vor all’n Hexenmeistern,</td>
<td>Bismi 'llahi 'l'rrahmani 'l'rrahimi.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vor Menschen und Geistern,</td>
<td>Kul 'a'udhu bi rabbiki ('l)ynası</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zu Allah,</td>
<td>Maliki ('l)ynası</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zum Allerhöchsten,</td>
<td>'ilahi ('l)ynası</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Begeb’ ich mich.</td>
<td>Min sharri ('l)ivasası ('l)'ennası</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ach, ja,</td>
<td>('l)'addhâ yuvasvası fi sudârî ('l)ynası</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Akbar,</td>
<td>Mina ('l)'innati wa('l)ynası.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Menschenkönig, Menschenherr,</td>
<td>In den lichten Schöpfers Gnaden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gott der Menschen, immermehr</td>
<td>Begeb’ ich mich.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An Dich,</td>
<td>Jeder Zeit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wend’ ich mich herzinniglich.</td>
<td>Vor der finstern Schöpfung Schaden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In des Abtrünnigen Trug</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Des Flüsterers Lug</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Vor hässlichem Neid, —</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Des Abtrünnigen Trug</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Dissatisfied with this non-Koranic form of direct address, and especially with the frightful, if not unintelligible, compound with which it begins, he some days later tried again, and selecting \(u\) and \(a\) as the key-vowels, wrote in more condensed form the following:

\[
\text{In Gottes Namen, voll Erbarmen. Amen,}
\]
\[
\text{Nur zu Allah,}
\]
\[
\text{Aller Tage Schöpfer, täglich}
\]
\[
\text{Begeb' ich mich.}
\]
\[
\text{Vor dem Unheil der Natur.}
\]
\[
\text{Groll und List der Kreatur,}
\]
\[
\text{Neid des Neiders, Nachaufruhr.}
\]
\[
\text{Spukunft, und Hexenschwur,}
\]
\[
\text{Nur zu Allah,}
\]
\[
\text{Aller Menschen Schöpfer, ewiglich}
\]
\[
\text{Begeb' ich mich.}
\]

This, it will be observed, has fewer words, by more than a dozen, than the original, yet, thanks to easy German compounds, no idea is left unsuggested. It also gives a happier rendering for the ever recurring superscription of all the Suras save one; \textit{Bismi ('}llahi ('}rrahmani ('}rrahimi} than seems attainable in English.

By this time the curiosity to see what could be done in the vernacular became too strong to be resisted. The result was a new conviction of the inadequacy of English resources in the broad vowel sounds, and of the hopelessness of effort in this direction. Possibly a Tennyson or a Poe could overcome the difficulty; but the following was the best that any responding muse had to offer in answer to my invocation. The number of words is almost exactly the same as in the original. Perhaps some more practised hand will favor the readers of this with something more satisfactory.

\[
\text{In the name of God, etc.}
\]
\[
\text{Say:}
\]
\[
\text{Unto the Lord of Dawning Day}
\]
\[
\text{My soul from ill shall flee alway}
\]
\[
\text{From Nature's night,}
\]
\[
\text{Its hidden harm,}
\]
\[
\text{From ghostly sprite,}
\]
\[
\text{And witches' charm,}
\]
\[
\text{From envy's sting,}
\]
\[
\text{And tempter's lure,}
\]
\[
\text{Neath Allah's wing}
\]
\[
\text{I'll rest secure.}
\]
\[
\text{From men to God, man's Lord most high,}
\]
\[
\text{For refuge evermore I fly.}
\]