

“The Loeb Library”, said Virginia Woolf in 1917 in this publication, “with its Greek or Latin on one side of the page and its English on the other, came as a gift of freedom to a very obscure but not altogether undeserving class.” This class was that of the amateur with a smattering of Greek, who no longer needed to rely on “chance quotations” but could “read a whole play at a time, with his feet on the fender”. The Library of Arabic Literature (LAL), a series of pre-modern Arabic texts presented in facing-page Arabic and English, offers this same gift of freedom but of necessity to a far greater range of amateurs than Woolf’s, as readers with a smattering of Arabic in the anglophone world are few and far between.

These LAL translations can be pored over by experts and students of the classical Arabic tradition, and the same books offer the non-Arabist, scholar and amateur alike, immediate access to the rich colour of the classical Arabic tradition. The key to this is that these beautifully produced books, published by New York University Press supported by a grant from the New York University Abu Dhabi Institute, cost less than \$40 for a hardback, with cheaper paperbacks promised in the future. Pre-modern Arabic culture will be available for the first time and to previously unattained standards to, in Virginia Woolf’s own categorization, the “common reader”.

I am reminded of those field guides that promise help to both the uninitiated and expert: experienced botanists can find the geographical distribution or the number of stamens of rare orchids (and perhaps find something new and thus change future editions), and the beginner can identify the same flower through photographs grouped by nothing more technical than colour. But this dichotomy masks the true scope of the LAL, for the categories “expert” and “amateur” are like atoms, at first glance coherent entities but on closer inspection yielding ever more parts. As the editors claim, sending these editions out into the world is to perform an experiment: they will be read in new and varied contexts, no doubt feeding back into the field and hence into the series itself. European history seminars may read texts fundamental to their period but hitherto inaccessible; those Arab teenagers with better English than classical Arabic (and they are not so rare) may read and learn more about their background (and in this age of unrest perhaps gain alternative viewpoints regarding their heritage); Western commentators may attain a more nuanced history, in which civilizations are not monolithic or isolated, and thus not subject to “clashes”.

And the study and teaching of medieval Arabic thought and literary creativity will be revolutionized: just as the Loeb has helped generations of Classics students through their set texts, so will students of Arabic have an easier way into understanding and translating foundational works. This is not necessarily the cheating that so many associate with the Loeb Library (as when, on being taxed by his tutor

# More and better

## In the Library of Arabic Literature

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on a translation suspiciously close to Loeb’s, Boris Johnson notoriously apologized, saying “I was so busy, I forgot to put in the mistakes”).

As for the “expert” reader who can read the left-hand side of the page (in a wonderfully clear Arabic font, with generous spacing; very much easier to read than most existing editions), she is a rare bird, even among Arabists. Classical Arabic is a small field, despite being as old as Classics, and shrinking, still relying on many of the towering achievements of the mostly German nineteenth-century Orientalists (a label which was not then perjorative). Many of the translations in regular use today are over 100 years old, and, as good as they are, they only scratch the surface of the vast output, from over a millennium of activity, of Arab writers and scholars. Thus the LAL is starting with only a fraction of the resources – in existing editions, translations and numbers of scholars – that were available to the Loeb editors a century ago.

And so the manifold achievements in medieval Arabic, from philosophy to poetry, still remain inaccessible to all but a tiny minority of the non-Arab world. Many have heard of the central figures in the Arabic tradition, or rather the figures who were relevant to the later, Latin tradition – Avicenna, Averroes, al-Ghazali – but the full corpora of even these major figures are not available in English, let alone the work of the many thinkers who did not find a home in the Latin tradition. And this situation is not restricted to the amateur: more is accessible to Arabists, of course, but the field is also in desperate need of the work of the LAL, for many of these texts remain un- or poorly edited.

The situation was described in 2002 by Dimitri Gutas (a scholar in the best tradition of the nineteenth-century Orientalists, with most of the Middle Eastern and European languages, old and new, at his disposal) in a now classic essay, “The Study of Arabic Philosophy in the Twentieth Century: An essay on the historiography of Arabic philosophy”. In this clarion call to classical Arabists he sets out reasons for the reputation of the field as impenetrable, reasons which are depressingly familiar since Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) but nevertheless endemic: the view of Arabs as mystical irrationalists who merely “preserved” Greek philosophy for later Europeans because their only interest was in the relation of philosophy to religion, their own intellectual endeavours fading away with al-Ghazali (in the twelfth century) once the torch of learning had been passed to the West. Gutas easily demolishes the grounds for these views, found in various combinations in academe (listing philosophers from the ninth to the eighteenth centuries, including such figures as Ibn Taymiyya in the fourteenth, al-Jurjani in the fifteenth, al-Yanyawi in the seventeenth and so on) but rather despairingly wonders why they persist.

For persist they do. These pernicious images of Arabs have skewed the vision by

influencing the texts selected for translation, how they have been edited and studied, and what questions have been asked of them, ultimately preserving large amounts of the field in a fossilized state. They have also proved durable outside academe, greatly influencing the public perception of Arabic philosophy and culture, and political thinking right up to the neocon agenda. What is to be done about this tenacious picture is much harder to address, but the Library of Arabic Literature, in bringing more and better translations than ever before to a wide audience, will provide the basis of more straightforward, less paranoid and racist, understandings of the history of Arabic thought and literature.

But this is all to ignore a fundamental chal-



Anatomy of the eye; from the *Treaty on the Eye* by Al-Mutadibid, Arabic manuscript

lenge – and thus achievement – of such a project: the translation process itself. Translation is a struggle, and the result inevitably a compromise between literal and lucid; a struggle to preserve word associations and cultural references (often impossible, for example, in the case of puns or other wordplay). If literal translation is aimed for, results are clunky and sometimes downright incomprehensible – as undergraduate language examinations show. Mechanical replacement, word by word, sacrifices sense – as Google Translate proves. This is even more acute in unrelated languages where there are no cognates, such as between Greek and Arabic, or Arabic and English, and yet further accentuated when the subject matter is unfamiliar.

I cannot help but see parallels to the so-called translation movement, beginning in eighth-century Baghdad and lasting a century and a half; one of the richest intellectual periods in history, comparable to fifth-century

Athens, the Renaissance or the Enlightenment. The explosion of interest in philosophy and literature – in the broadest senses – at this time was fuelled by an intensive and lasting commitment to translation, an activity at the heart of many other intellectual flowerings. Greek works on medicine, logic, natural sciences, mathematical sciences, metaphysics – the list goes on and on – were translated into Arabic (mostly from Syriac) and formed the basis of curricula and debates, often public and fiery. But the label “translation movement” tells only half the story. For translation, as those working in Baghdad knew only too well, is never, and can never be, a transparent conduit of ideas from one language to another. Whole conceptual frameworks are involved, and if they are not already in place can require Herculean efforts to create, mould or adapt.

These struggles (and accompanying creativity and intellectual solutions) were repeated from Arabic into other languages, most immediately Hebrew and Latin; the twelfth century saw another “translation movement” in Andalusia, from Arabic to Latin, helped by the creation of chairs of Arabic in the new universities of Toledo, Padua and Paris (hence my claim that the discipline of classical Arabic is as old as Classics). As with the Baghdadi translation movement it was not only texts themselves that were circulated, debated, absorbed and so on, but practices too; curricula were reproduced in Arabic and then European settings, as were forms and methods of argument, training and debate – it could not have been otherwise. And so the Library of Arabic Literature rests on a tradition of intellectual cross-pollination between Arabic and Western thought and cultures.

To say that the Library of Arabic Literature is an ambitious project is like saying the Baghdadi translation movement was merely a pastime, for there is more, vastly more, material available. This was a culture with a huge respect for putting knowledge in writing, crucially made possible by the appearance of paper (some forms of which were named after wealthy patrons of the translation movement, such as ja’far, after Ja’fari al-Barmaki), which liberated the production, copying and circulation of texts from the painstaking and expensive production of parchment. And what was available was multiplied many times over, with repeated translations and increasing commentaries, introductions, re-interpretations, not to mention new works. Just how much is left to us in the twenty-first century is not even quantifiable: cataloguing of manuscripts is patchy and what is squirrelled away in private libraries across the Islamic world cannot easily be estimated. (Recent events have exacerbated the problems; the destruction by Islamists of the library in Timbuktu, home to thousands of unique medieval manuscripts, was widely reported; it is only thanks to the Prince Claus Fund for Culture and Development that as much as 95 per cent of the collection was smuggled to safety, though it is still in a precarious position.)

And cataloguing is only the start of what is necessary to get to translations: in between is the immense and meticulous step of editing, a task requiring perseverance and a range of skills that are being taught less and less in academe, where the highest rewards in the current Research Excellence Framework come with a monograph. Initially, the Library of Arabic

**Dickens, Multiple Personality, & [the creative process in] Writers**  
an essay posted at  
[multiplewriters.blogspot.com](http://multiplewriters.blogspot.com)

Literature was conceived of as a translation project, but it was very quickly accepted that quality translations were simply not possible without quality editions, which the discipline also lacks. It is a symbiotic relationship: good editions are often based on prior translations, for translation is the real test of understanding what the text says and thus where there may be errors or omissions in the manuscripts, but at the same time a good translation needs to identify as closely as possible what the author may actually have said, thus relying on the painstaking work involved in editing. The simultaneous work of editing and translation that LAL provides, the need for which seems obvious in retrospect, is advancing the state of the field in both areas while aiding the quality of both.

In reality, LAL's choices of texts were bounded by so many pragmatic constraints – available expertise being the main consideration – that ultimately, despite the huge amount of material, these initial texts were virtually self-selecting. But that does not mean limited, nor does it mean options are closed. For one hugely exciting effect of the project as a whole, with its scholarly standards yet accessibly lucid prose, is that with the appearance of each text the field widens, and the possibilities for further translations with it.

And despite the restrictions, the first texts to be published are extremely varied in age, genre and subject matter: the Sufi texts (including a sixteenth-century text by 'Ai' shah al-Ba'uniyah, the first woman to feature in the series, coming out in February 2014) will no doubt

prove instantly popular, but there is so much more to be discovered by new audiences, less familiar and perhaps more exciting for that. An early Islamic legal text (in fact the earliest that survives; it is by al-Shafi'i, d. 820, founder of the still influential Shafi'i school of Islamic law), more readable than it sounds, was greeted with excitement in various reports in the Middle East – LAL is providing easy access to primary texts in an area which is being bitterly fought over, often violently, throughout the Islamic world. (It might also plant the notion in Western readers that "sharia" might not always be used correctly in Western media.) Both the biting mocking eleventh-century *Epistle of Forgiveness* by the Syrian maverick (and vegan) al-Ma'arri, and the nineteenth-century *Leg Over Leg* by the Lebanese intellectual Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq, have long been held to be untranslatable and so are appearing, in their entirety, in English for the first time. The latter has been compared to Laurence Sterne's work in its satirical language and portrayal of his life and times through the adventures and misadventures of the protagonist – condemned at the time for its criticism of authority and so abridged in later versions (this translation is based on the first, that is unabridged, version). Both these works and others in the series are examples of texts that are hugely enjoyable in themselves; this library isn't just a representation of Arabic history for the sake of understanding the culture, but also in order to share the pleasure of reading. And a thirteenth-century cookery manual is also on the list, Ibn al-'Adim's *Scents and*

*Flavors the Banqueter Savors*, which will give English-speaking readers access not just to the literary, but also the gastronomic culture (a large part concerns the right perfumes to use to go with food and dining etiquette).

The acid test for the notion of translation is poetry: many believe that a poem can never be expressed in a language other than its original; "it were as wise to cast a violet into a crucible", says Shelley in his *Defence of Poetry* (1821), "that you might discover the formal principles of its colour and odour, as to seek to transfuse from one language into another the creation of a poet". The editors of the Library of Arabic Literature, judging from the list of volumes of both pre-Islamic and Classical Arabic poetry in the pipeline (not to mention the lines of poetry that pepper prose as a matter of course, even in al-Shafi'i's legal text), would disagree, though they acknowledge that there can never be one definitive version in another language – in fact, in many cases there are no definitive Arabic versions, which, in offering a multitude of alternative readings from the very beginning, frees up the editors and translators to create imaginative versions in English. LAL is publishing multiple translations of each Arabic poem from different pens, hoping to communicate the spirit of the poetry and simultaneously acknowledging the range of potential readings.

And it is not just in the amount and range of material that the scope of the project is formidable. Its aim for scholarly standards yet lucid accessibility for the non-Arabic reader has re-

sulted in an approach rarely seen in academe: intensive collaboration. Each translator has an assigned project editor selected from the editorial board, and the work goes back and forth repeatedly, often with appeals to other members of the board. Twice-yearly meetings of the group involve workshops on various aspects of translation. Each text must of course be taken on its own merits, balancing the requirements of the different audiences – the translations may not be complete reimaginings, but, as the philosophers in Baghdad knew full well, literal translations can be of no use at all. There is also a balance to be struck between conveying sense that invokes familiarity, and conveying cultural context which may well involve deep "unlikeness", in Virginia Woolf's words concerning Greek writings; in the words of the theorist of translation Lawrence Venuti, "domesticating" versus "foreignizing".

LAL's motto for translation could be Primo Levi's view on writing: "He who does not know how to communicate, or communicates badly . . . is unhappy, and spreads unhappiness around him. If he communicates badly deliberately, he is wicked or at least a discourteous person, because he imposes labour, anguish, or boredom on his readers". The Library of Arabic Literature does none of these things and will, one hopes, spread happiness to its plethora of audiences. Let us hope that the generous funding provided by enlightened researchers at the NYU Abu Dhabi Institute continues, so that the legacy will prove as foundational and durable as Loeb's.