INTRODUCTION

THE Koran, the Sacred Book of Islam, comprises in its 114 Suras or chapters the total of revelations believed to have been communicated to the Prophet Muhammad, as a final expression of God's will and purpose for man. These revelations were supernaturally received, in circumstances of a trance-like nature, over a considerable number of years intermittently, the first (Sura XCVI) dating from about A.D. 610 and the last shortly before Muhammad's death in A.D. 632. It is uncertain whether the whole of the text was committed to writing during the Prophet's lifetime; he himself is said to have been illiterate, and merely to have ‘recited’ the words he heard out of heaven. Tradition relates that a few years after his death the scattered fragments were collected together from ‘scraps of parchment and leather, tablets of stone, ribs of palm branches, camels' shoulder-blades and ribs, pieces of board, and the breasts of men’—this last phrase referring to the retentive memories of the Prophet's immediate followers. It was during the reign of the third caliph 'Uthmān (644—56) that the definitive canon was established by a panel of editors directed by the Prophet's amanuensis Zaid ibn Thabit. To these men belongs the responsibility for the accepted arrangement of the text, an arrangement which is very far from being chronological or rationally coherent; the principle followed seems to have been to place the Suras in diminishing order of their length with the solitary exception of the first Sura, called ‘The Opening’. Apart from certain orthographical modifications of the originally somewhat primitive method of writing, intended to render unambiguous and easy the task of reading and recitation, the Koran as printed in the twentieth century is identical with the Koran as authorized by 'Uthmān more than 1,300 years ago.

Since the Koran is to the faithful Muslim the very Word of God, from earliest times orthodox opinion has rigidly maintained that it is untranslatable, a miracle of speech which it would be blasphemous to attempt to imitate. It is thus the duty of every believer to learn to understand its meaning in the original Arabic; to assist him in this not always easy labour he has at his disposal a great range of commentaries, some of immense length, compiled by learned exegetes in every century down to the present day. For all that, the Koran has been translated many times and into many languages, first into Latin circa 1143; the earliest English version appeared in 1657. The most esteemed English translations are those of Sale (1734), Rodwell (1861), Palmer (1880), and Pickthall (1930). In all these versions, with the exception of Rodwell's, the traditional order of the Suras has been followed; Rodwell attempted a chronological rearrangement, foreshadowing the far more radical recasting of Richard Bell (1937-9).

In making the present attempt to improve on the performance of my predecessors, and to produce something which might be accepted as echoing however faintly the sublime rhetoric of the Arabic Koran, I have been at pains to study the intricate and richly varied rhythms which—apart from the message itself—constitute the Koran's undeniable claim to rank amongst the greatest literary masterpieces of mankind. (The summary result of my investigation is printed in my The Holy Koran, published by Allen & Unwin in 1953.) This very characteristic feature —‘that inimitable symphony’, as the believing Pickthall described his Holy Book, ‘the very sounds of which move men to tears and ecstasy’—has been almost totally ignored by previous translators; it is therefore not surprising that what they have wrought sounds dull and flat indeed in comparison with the splendidly decorated original. For the Koran is neither prose nor poetry, but a unique fusion of both.
The verses into which it is divided—and the reckoning by fives and tens goes back to ancient times—are threaded together by loose rhymes into shorter or longer sequences within the Sura; the rhythms of those sequences vary sensibly according to the subject-matter, swinging from the steady march of straightforward narrative or enunciation (tales of the ancient prophets, formulations of ritual and law) to the impetuous haste of ecstatic ejaculation (the majesty of God, the imminence of the Last Day, the torments of Hell, and the delights of Paradise). I have striven to devise rhythmic patterns and sequence-groupings in correspondence with what the Arabic presents, paragraphing the grouped sequences as they seem to form original units of revelation.

The reader of the Koran, particularly if he has to depend upon a version, however accurate linguistically, is certain to be puzzled and dismayed by the apparently random nature of many of the Suras. This famous inconsequence has often been attributed to clumsy patchwork on the part of the first editors. I believe it to be rather of the very nature of the Book itself. In many passages it is stated that the Koran had been sent down ‘confirming what was before it’, by which was meant the Torah and the Gospel; the contents of the Jewish and Christian scriptures, excepting such falsifications as had been introduced into them, were therefore taken as true and known. All truth was thus present simultaneously within the Prophet’s enraptured soul; all truth, however fragmented, revealed itself in his inspired utterance. The reader of the Muslim scriptures must strive to attain the same all-embracing apprehension. The sudden fluctuations of theme and mood will then no longer present such difficulties as have bewildered critics ambitious to measure the ocean of prophetic eloquence with the thimble of pedestrian analysis. Each Sura will now be seen to be a unity within itself, and the whole Koran will be recognized as a single revelation, self-consistent to the highest degree. Though half a mortal lifetime was needed for the message to be received and communicated, the message itself, being of the eternal, is one message in eternity, however heterogeneous its temporal expression may appear to be.

There is a repertory of familiar themes running through the whole Koran; each Sura elaborates or adumbrates one or more—often many—of these. To take a very straightforward instance: Sura XII consists almost entirely of a recital of the story of Joseph, with dramatic hiatuses emphasizing that the story is a familiar one, retold as a reminder of God’s dealings with men and how He delivers out of evil and rewards His faithful messengers, a moral driven home in the epilogue. Sura XXVIII somewhat similarly relates incidents from the life of Moses, but the narrative is broken up to introduce a number of favourite leitmotivs: refutation of those who denied Muhammad’s mission, the Last Day, and the Judgement, the Unity of God, woven backwards and forwards into the pattern of the composition. Sura XIX (and there are several others like it) follows a somewhat more complex scheme; episodes are sketched from the lives of a series of prophets in illustration of the Divine mercy, followed by a statement of the contrasting fates awaiting those who disbelieve and those who believe. The short Sura XCIII exhibits a simple but perfect rhetorical balance: an opening adjuration by contrasted light and darkness introduces three triplets matching exactly together. Sura LV, a triumphant hymn to the power and glory of God, the terrors of Hell, and the joys of Paradise, is knit together by a running refrain as the tension is built up from a quiet and meditative beginning to an unbearably
tremendous close. So the pattern of each Sura can be methodically analysed into its component parts, seen as motives common to the whole Koran, treated in each context individually and with an astonishing wealth and variety of rhetoric and rhythm. All previous versions of the Koran, like the original text itself, having been printed as continuous prose, the rhapsodic nature of its composition has been largely lost to ear and sight; by showing the text as here presented, some faint impression may be given of its dramatic impact and most moving beauty. I have called my version an interpretation, conceding the orthodox claim that the Koran (like all other literary masterpieces) is untranslatable; in making this interpretation I have considered the opinions of the learned commentators, and when (as not infrequently) they have differed, I have been eclectic in deciding between alternative explanations. I have tried to compose clear and unmannered English, avoiding the ‘Biblical’ style favoured by some of my predecessors. There is however one feature of antique usage which I have deliberately retained; it is absolutely necessary, if confusion is to be avoided, to mark the distinction between the second person singular and the second person plural. As footnotes and glosses do not interrupt the smooth flow of the Arabic Koran, so in this English interpretation footnotes and glosses have been deliberately avoided; readers anxious for further guidance should consult the earlier annotated versions.

This task was undertaken, not lightly, and carried to its conclusion at a time of great personal distress, through which it comforted and sustained the writer in a manner for which he will always be grateful. He therefore acknowledges his gratitude to whatever power or Power inspired the man and the Prophet who first recited these scriptures. I pray that this interpretation, poor echo though it is of the glorious original, may instruct, please, and in some degree inspire those who read it.

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Citation: