Article

More Gravy than the Grave: classical Arabic lexical monographs in translation

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Abstract With the appearance of Ramzi Baalbaki's *The Arabic Lexicographical Tradition* in 2014, the early history of Arabic language scholarship lies open for appreciation as never before. Meanwhile, the tradition's surviving texts remain closed to non-readers of Arabic. This essay suggests that an English-language readership would rejoice in access to selected 'Abbāsid-era lexical monographs through the medium of critical translation. Besides the primary-source value of these texts to cultural studies, anthropology and intellectual history (not to mention their appeal to bare logophilia), I point out their power to induce in the modern reader a ludic estrangement from the dominant categoricities through which the world's *realia* are rendered unto knowledge. By virtue of this disorienting, category-lifting power, I argue that lexical monographs that were current over a thousand years ago might well serve today's *avant-garde* reading public as a hedonic resource.

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What is more timely than an untimely fascination? An attachment to some outmoded form or praxis seems rather one of the most characteristic postmodern affectations going. Not that the present age presents a shortage of the off-beat, but for certain spans of attention and imagination only the long-ago will do. Antiquity is always there, as is the Early Modern. And on the timeline in between there is the Early Modern's cauldron, or its cradle if you like. Although 'medieval'

ill describes the Arabo-Islamic culture of this period (which has more of the character of a classical period), this issue of *postmedieval* seems a good place to explain some of my attachment to a little-known branch of Arabic literature that blossomed from the eighth to the tenth centuries CE, and of my aims in translating a representative selection into English.

‘Literature’ is a word I use advisedly, because the texts I have in mind are not typically identified with the belles-lettristic Arabic prose genres known collectively as *adab* (viz. ‘literary prose’). The prose treatises I have in mind are works of thematic lexicography produced during the first great heyday of Arabic linguistic science. Their sources were early Arabic poetry and the testimony of Bedouin informants, and in this sense they are secondary scholarly works (Baalbaki, 2014, 7–36). In fact, they served as basic reference works for much of the ‘Abbāsid era, and were drawn on by *adab* writers as a matter of course (Schoeler, 2009, 105–107). Even so, the authors of lexical treatises were no secondary bunch, but mainstream academic culture heroes, and anyone with a reading knowledge of Classical Arabic literature will be able to name three or four without effort.¹

Thematic lexicographical monographs function more like thesauri than dictionaries, assembling all the vocabulary pertaining to a given aspect of traditional Bedouin life (such as the camel, the horse, the wind and the rain, weaponry, the cultivation of the palm, and so on). Some are no more than wordlists, while others overflow with glosses and references to poetry, history and folklore. The interest of these texts to cultural studies, anthropology and global intellectual history is easy to see; that they are unknown in translation is at the same time no great surprise, insofar as monolingual works of lexicography are felt to be particular to the needs of the language group.

Translation always involves repurpose to some degree. In passing from one language into another, texts are read by new lights and coded according to other knowledge systems. The case I outline here may come as a ‘stress test’ for this commonsense insight. Certainly my appeal to the literary merits of thematic lexicography goes against the source tradition’s grain, inviting the question: If a text is not coded as fine art within its source tradition, what then are the ethics of its target language presentation as a fine arts text? Classical Arabic poetry is underrepresented in English-language translation as it is. For the translator to prioritize a derivative form and dilate on its charms as I am about to do is to court reproach from partisans of poetic tradition – most justifiably the early ‘Abbāsid-era poets whose fate it was to put up with the grammarians of Iraq and their pretensions to linguistic authority. Take for example these lines by Ru’ba ibn al-‘Ajjāj (d. 762 CE), a poet of Basra who was a much-tapped source of lexical data for the philologists of his day:

My compositions are the work of a master-composer.
Picture me relying on notebooks – propping myself

1 More than one ‘Abbāsid-era grammarian appears in the *Thousand and One Nights*: al-Aṣma‘ī (d. 828 CE) in his historical role as companion to Hārūn al-Rashīd (r. 786–809), and al-Mubarrad (d. 900) as the sub-narrator of ‘The Tale of the Mad Lover.’

on a plucked twig of words gone by!
 The linguistic scholar [*al-naḥwiyy*] lacks my insight into these things,
 no matter how he contorts his face and sets his jaw a-kilter.
 He seems keenly versed, and good at getting his point across,
 until language rears up in me, effortless, aright.
 What hides from others behind an inaccessible veil
 is subservient to me. What I go up against
 goes down fast inside my strong, encircling rope. (Ahlwardt, 1903, 61)²

More violent denunciations of academic linguistic research come from philologists themselves. The *Attic Nights* of Aulus Gellius (d. ca. 180 CE) presents a scene in which a mad grammarian of Rome named Domitius Insanus rebuked a philosopher for prying too fastidiously into the minutiae of early Latin (18.7):

Future goodness has no hope, if words and mastery over words are all you brilliant practitioners of philosophy have at heart. Let me just send you the book where you'll find what you're after. Even as I – a grammarian! – seek out the principles of living and acting, you philosophers are nothing (as the elder Cato said) but “dead men's wrappers,” the way you collect glosses and word-lists – grisly things, and absurd and futile as the laments of hired mourners. If only we lacked the ability to speak! Shamelessness would have a lot less to work with. (Jordan, 1860, 87 [no. 19]; Marshall, 1968, II.548).

Domitius, it is explained, suffered from ‘the disorder called *melancholy*’ – not the inward-turning gloom of the Renaissance, but the schizoaffective disorder of antiquity – and I find in his words a broken-minded brilliance that is irreducible to literary convention (Cato the Elder's precedent notwithstanding, nor less Matthew 23:27). To say that philological texts are trappings for lifeless speech is to engage a familiar metaphor, but here philosophers are themselves the dead's trappings [*mortualia*], and philological research their accompanying dirge – the furthest thing, in other words, from helping us fit a living language to our thoughts.³

There is more than one way to attend to this tirade. *Attic Nights* is, among other things, a guide to the finer points of elite acculturation during the late Pax Romana, and niceties of Latin grammar and vocabulary are chief among them. Domitius's protest against the fetish for classical linguistic standards is therefore not to be identified with the prevailing ideology of the text. And yet his point is allowed to hit home. Philology can definitely be described as a work of artificial mourning. It is also the work of empire. (Who is surprised to learn that the first grammar of Castilian was published in 1492?) For the grammarians of eighth to tenth century Iraq, the delimitation of an uncorrupted Arabic vocabulary was no abstract intellectual puzzle – not when competency in the idealized language was mandatory for aspirants to bureaucratic or religious authority (at a time when fifty million subjects lived within the Caliphate's jurisdiction).⁴

2 Translated by me, as are the passages ahead from *Attic Nights*, the *Book of Rain* and the *Book of the Well*.

3 On the figurative uses of *mortualia* (an emendation of *mortuaria*, which appears in all manuscripts of *Attic Nights*), see Tränkle (1983, 110–11).

4 See Carter (1983), and for further correlation of early-ʿAbbāsīd linguistic scholarship with the Second Sophistic, Versteegh (1987).

As for philology's 'good side,' far be it from the translator to reduce such a thing to just one angle. My primary claim for thematic lexicography's transporting powers is that it offers the modern intellect momentary liberation from the dominant categoricalities now framing general knowledge of the world. As an example, I submit this short passage from the *Book of Rain* by Abū Zayd al-Anṣārī (d. 830) in which basic names for rain are interleaved with words for rain beheld from a distance before it hits the ground:

Al-ghayth ['Rain'] is a name for rain in general. *Al-sabal* ['The Trailing Garment'] is rain that hangs between cloud and earth, from the point of its leaving the cloud to its impact on the ground. A rain of little breadth may be called *al-saḥāba* [a 'cloud'], whether its drops are few or many, much like *al-shu'būb* [a 'cloudburst']. Similar to *al-sabal* are *al-athānīn* ['The Chin-Hairs'], which is another name for rain [that dangles] between cloud and earth. (Cheikho, 1905, 9)

At the outside margin of natural-historical genera, typologies like these abound in the *Book of Rain*. But the charms of thematic lexicography are not limited to questions of categoricity, and neither are its theoretical applications. Here I would like to use it to explore a thesis of Bakhtin's that is of no small import to practicing poets (my translation work's likeliest audience), to the effect that the bare lexical meaning of any given word is without inherent emotional charge. No matter how affecting its referent (Bakhtin's example: *radost* 'joy'), until that word is used in an utterance and made into a lived event, its 'neutral, dictionary form' is emotive only *in potentia* (Bakhtin, 1986, 87). This of course assumes an *alphabetically-ordered* dictionary, in which words are arranged by their phonetic components, each with its assigned place in the alphabet's sequential order. Its semantic neutrality is one of the reasons alphabetic writing is so highly praised. Alphabetic order is a helpful finding aid precisely because it arranges words in ways that are not meaningful.

As for the thesaurus, I think Bakhtin would say that a string of lexical alternatives (strung as it were upon the axis of selection) is no more emotive than a lexical definition. And in the thesaurus too there is alphabetic order. So what of lexical monography? Are the contents of thematic lexica without emotion? As a test case, I present an early page from my in-progress translation of the *Book of the Well* by Muḥammad ibn Ziyād al-A'rābī (d. 846). As the title suggests, the book's theme is digging – not just wells but graves, shelters, and pits in general. In the following section, it is mostly the digging of water-wells that is at issue:

The verbs *a'āna* and *a'yāna* mean 'to cause water to emerge,' while *aṣlada* and *akdā* mean 'to reach a hard place' in one's digging. Abū Zayd al-Anṣārī attested the verse:

Yā 'Uthma adrakanī fa-inna rakiyyatī
ṣaladat fa-a'yat an tabiḍḍa bi-mā'ihā

O Uthmān, [my water] has run out. My well
is [sunk in] **hard rock**, and resists all efforts to get a trickle going.

Ajbala is ‘to run up against a boulder’ in one’s digging, and *ashaba* is ‘to run into dry earth,’ making further digging useless.

Earth removed from a well is called *najītha*, *nabītha*, *nathīla*, *thalla* and *safāt*, as in the verse by Abū Dhu’ayb al-Hudhālī (d. ca. 649):

Wa-qad arsalū furrātahum fa-ta’aththalū
qalīban safāhā ka-’l-imā’i ‘l-qawā’idi

After their diggers were sent out, they excavated
a well-shaft, **whose displaced clods** leapt
from their seats as readily as slave girls.⁵

Water that a community finds agreeable is called *namīr* (also *namir*), whether or not the water is fresh-tasting, and whether it is used for macerating leather hides (in order to scrape them clean of hair) or for sustaining the body. Ḥātim al-Ṭā’ī (fl. 2nd half of 6th c.) said:

Fa-suqaytu bi-’l-mā’i ‘n-namīri wa-lam
uttrak ulāṭimu ḥam’ata ‘l-ḥafri

To drink, I was given **life-sustaining** water, nor was I
left to beat against dark clay [at the bottom] of a digging-site.

And another said:

Qad ja’alat wa-’l-ḥamdu li-’llāhi taqir
min mā’i ‘iddin fī julūdiḥa namir

God be praised, [the tribe] left off its travels
thanks to water from an unstinting source that was **good for soaking** hides.
(‘Abd al-Tawwāb, 1970, 56–57)

This exploration was not altogether necessary. Bakhtin already granted the emotional force of ‘those examples from school readers with which children study their native language and which, of course, are always expressive’ (Bakhtin, 1986, 89). How much more so the verses marshaled above, speaking out of lives lived and lost along the narrowest of hydrological margins? In which the grim futility of a well-digger’s efforts (scrabbling in the clay at the bottom of a pit, or chiseling at a stone stratum of unknown thickness) is a poetic trope? In which what sustains the human body shares a name with what’s good for preparing animal hides (leather being the material from which water-bags and well-buckets were made)?

That emotion is conveyed in the *Book of the Well*’s poetic testimonia is therefore no daring claim. Whether the vocabulary it assembles carries an

5 In the poetry of Abū Dhu’ayb’s tribe (Hudhayl), the well is a frequent euphemism for the grave, and so it seems here. In more than one of Abū Dhu’ayb’s poems, a body being lowered into a grave is called a ‘bucket’ [*ḍhanūb*].

emotional charge is another question. If the verses were taken out, the remainder would be a catalogue of technical terms with short definitions – exactly the sort of thing Bakhtin and Domitius would set apart from living speech. Bakhtin’s point is that speech is a tissue spun and woven from *la parole*, re-imbued with emotive force every time we make an utterance or commit a sentence to paper. It is not from an asyntactic repository of infinitival forms that we draw our words, but from expressive utterances in the world at large. Be that as it may I think the case for emotion in the *Book of the Well* makes itself. Lacking alphabetic order, it does not lend itself to targeted reference: if there’s a specific word you’re after, you must read until you find it. To call it an ‘immersive’ reading experience is a regrettable play on words, but also accurate. Where words for sweet abundance tumble over words for drought and bitterness and thirst, it is hard to avoid self-invested reflection on basic needs. If you are a drinker of water (what was called ‘the mirror of Narcissus’ in the medieval West), the pathos of the *Book of the Well* will be your pathos, too.

I don’t mean to suggest that the translator’s project stands or falls on a stair of emotion. (What was the question but an heuristic pretense for elaborating my untimely fascination?) I do mean to suggest that thematic lexicography presents wonderful opportunities for thinking historically about affect, technology, ecology and other critical concerns. From more than one disciplinary perspective, this primary-source value is in gross excess of anything to be said for its literary form.

The immanent forms of thematic lexicography are, however, key to its literary charm. Lexical monographs are agglutinative, acclimatic, and reflect little effort to create a managed experience for the silent reader. (This is only natural, as they were produced by and for a community of specialists working in a still-primarily oral information culture.) In translation, they risk coming across like sports of form, appearing as they do in isolation from their generic matrix.⁶ In any case, the genre to which these texts belong had a virtual endpoint in the tenth century when, with the transposition of their contents into ever-more-compendious and easily-browsed works, lexical monography more or less came to an end as academic practice. And so the early ‘Abbāsid-era achievements in the medium were never surpassed.

To put it another way, the genre is long dead. This brings us to my essay’s title, which plays on the words of Scrooge – ‘There’s more of *gravy* than of *grave* about you’ – to Marley’s Ghost in *A Christmas Carol*. Now by ‘gravy’ I do not mean what Scrooge did, i.e. a dyspeptic hallucination caused by eating too much gravy. By ‘grave,’ however, we mean the same propensity of the dead to haunt the living. As Ian Baucom points out, it is a propensity held in common by ghosts and literary genres, which haunt the present by imposing the ideological structures of past generations upon it. At least it is true of *still-viable* genres that they ‘not only inhabit individual moments, they travel through time. Synchronically present in a given moment, genres also link that moment,

6 For this reason, the necessary endpoint of my work on classical Arabic lexical monographs is a representative anthology of translations with an unexotic, quietist title. *Classical Arabic Lexical Monographs* will do just fine.

diachronically, to earlier moments, earlier times. At the level of form, then, genre is the presence of the past in the present' (Baucom, 2001, 163). What, then, of lapsed genres *not* currently haunting the present? How far beyond the grave are they? Am I? In bringing them before an English-language readership, what metaphor shall I draw from the world of specters and spiritualism to explain what I am doing?

I cannot think of a single one. My process as a translator is wholly pragmatic, involving no otherworldly states or transmissions. My target idiom (flat discursive US English of the late twentieth century) simulates the academic prose of a bygone era, and is not calculated to bestir the dead. My claim is that premodern lexicography's power to jar modern thought free from its channels derives from nothing ghostlier than its work of *categorization and classification*, which confronts the modern thinker with heteroschematic templates for constellating once-familiar entities. This was the source of Foucault's hilarity on encountering Borges's well-known 'Chinese encyclopedia' – an imaginary work of pre-modern erudition which divided the animal kingdom into '(a) those belonging to the Emperor, (b) the embalmed, (c) pets, (d) suckling pigs,' all the way up to '(n) those that look like bugs from far away.'⁷ In this theater of epistemic incommensurability, reason dissolves into laughter – not at what is alien so much as at the absurd outlay of energy it takes to uphold one's own native arbitremes. The moment that our categorical furniture stands revealed as a fort of Procrustean sofa cushions is a comic moment, which is to say a *liberating* moment, and ever since Foucault the 'Chinese encyclopedia' has been its emblem. As a fictional emblem, it is well chosen – and I notice that where the premise of conceptual relativism is discounted by analytical philosophers, it is not without recourse to science-fictional analogies (like the translatability of Plutonian into the language of Saturn) more fanciful still.⁸ For a non-fictional basis upon which the effects of categorical self-estrangement may be enjoyed or dismissed, I suggest a turn to premodern philology, where the lack of outright risibility is made up for by linguistic authenticity and historical warrant.

With that, I want to go back to what Baucom says about genre, because it applies to the lexicon as well. A genre is a category, but it is also *composed of* categories and other norms that function together as 'a cognitive space of flow – an epistemological structure that, as it achieves a (generally metropolitan) hegemony, is capable of expanding its range of address and subordinating virtually every corner of the globe to its design' (Baucom, 2001, 163). Of dominant genres (like the novel) and taxonomies (like Linnaean classification) this is admirably descriptive, not least because it highlights the difficulty of stepping outside them. For the transformative possibilities of an *avant-garde* to be actualized, such a step is required, and I re-submit that medieval Arabic lexicography presents twenty-first-century thought with a beneficially unfamiliar landing.

What is more, the step is fun. If I point this out, and suggest my translations as a source of gratification, I hope it's OK. The scholarly translator of premodern

7 'El idioma analítico de John Wilkins' is the title of Borges's essay, which appeared in *La Nación* (Buenos Aires) for February 8, 1942, and in English at Borges (1964); see furthermore the preface to Foucault (1970).

8 As in Davidson (1984), and for that matter Rorty (1982).

texts is no doubt well advised to disattend to questions of twenty-first-century literary aesthetics, but to be silent about readerly pleasure serves no purpose. Thematic lexicography can scarcely be expected to delight new readers without a cheerleader. This too is my role, and it calls for exuberant claims. To what shall I compare the intellectual charge to be had from thematic lexicography, but the gravy of my title? This gravy stands for what gives relish to the life of the mind in concentrated doses.

About the Author

David Larsen teaches in the Liberal Studies Program at New York University. He was a 2010–11 Fulbright research fellow in Cairo, Egypt. His translation of the *Names of the Lion* by Ibn Khālawayh came out in 2009 from Atticus/Finch, and his translation of the *Book of Rain* by Abū Zayd al-Anṣārī is forthcoming from eth press. His poetry collection *The Thorn* appeared in 2005 from Faux Press (E-mail: david.larsen@nyu.edu).

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