I have been translating short and medium-length suras into cadenced, rhyming English prose for some years. Although I have at various points explained some of my choices in these earlier translations, I have not as yet described the translation process itself. Translators sometimes explain their general principles and strategies in an introduction or a preface, but they rarely delve into the actual nuts and bolts of the translation process. This is regrettable, in the first place because this denies the reader information about the kinds of choices the translator has made, and in the second place because this implies – through silence – that the choices are innocent. I have been rendering Qur’anic passages rhythmically and into rhyme because I wish to underscore the importance of rhythm and rhyme in the original. The process and methodology behind how I do so is important, this is why I explain it here. In order to do so properly, however, I realised I would need to record the entire process from beginning to end. Effectively that meant I would have to do so for a brand new translation; if I used a translation I had already done, I might not recall choices I had made early in the process. The sura I have selected is Sūrat al-Ghāshiya, Q. 88, the full Arabic text of which is overleaf.
1. Process

First Run

Fig. 1 below shows my first run through the sura – sketched out in pencil on a piece of graph paper. My first step was to write the endwords/rhymewords on the right-hand side in Arabic. Because Q. 88 is a short sura and because it rhymes (though not uniformly), I wanted to keep all the words on one sheet. Each row represents one verse; and each column represents a cluster of rhyming words. Laying the sura out like this allowed me to visualise its sound structure, and also the morphology of the endwords. The circled words toward the bottom are the sura’s three hapaxes\(^2\) – the one on the left (\(sūṭiḥat\)) is an endword, the two on the right (\(n̄amāriqu, z̄arābiyyu\)) are not.
Fig. 1.
The sura’s rhyme scheme (which I heuristically number into clusters I to VI below) is:

I

ghāshiya

I*

khāshiʿa

nāṣiba

I

ḥāmiya

āniya

II

darīc

jūc

I*

nāʿima

I

rådiya

ʿāliya

lāghiya

jāriya

III

marfūʿa

mawdūʿa

masfūfa

mabthūtha

IV

khuliqat

rušʿat

nuṣḥat

sātiḥat

V

mudhakkir

mušayṭir

V*

dafar

akbar

VI

iyābahum

ḥisābahum

In fig. 1, reproduced above, I attempt to show visually the alignment of identical or similar rhyme. The grouping into Roman numeral rhyme clusters signals this too. Thus II, III, and IV are discrete rhyme clusters, but I and V are reprised. The asterisks on I and V signal the fact that these groups do not analogously rhyme with unasterisked-I and unasterisked-V: thus, khāshiʿa, nāṣiba, and nāʿima (I*) are of the same morphological pattern as ghāshiya (I), but the final rhyme sounds are different: -ʿa, -ba, and -ma, as opposed to -ya, respectively.
My next step was to do a quick translation. The first verse, and therefore first endword/rhymeword, is *al-ghāshiya*, which gives the sura its name. *Al-Ghāshiya* is a feminine singular active participle from the triliteral root *gh-sh-y*, with the basic meanings of ‘to cover, wrap, envelop, conceal, veil, overcome, overwhelm, be dark’. I did not think I would be able to replicate (and sustain) active participles as the rhymewords in the English (nor would it necessarily have been desirable to do so), so I was content with the choice of *Concealment* for *al-ghāshiya* (as opposed to the active participle, *Concealer*). What is more, I was able to capitalise the word, something that can be done in English but not in Arabic.3

By picking *Concealment*, I was more or less committing to the -ent rhyme sound for at least seven rhyming (active participle) words, namely: *al-ghāshiya*, ḥāmiya, āniya, ṭādiya, ʿaliya, lāghiya, and jāriya. That number increases to ten if nāṣiba, khāshiʿa, and nāʿima are included. These last three do not, strictly speaking, rhyme with the other seven words, but as active participles they are morphologically and therefore aurally very closely resonant.

Now, when I say I was committing to -ent, this does not mean I had decided once and for all that this would be the rhyme (though it turns out that I did stay with it4), but rather that I would test it out. Below I reproduce the English that appears on the top left-hand side of fig. 1:

*Rhyme, as I hope is somewhat clear from the above, is not completely driving my choices, but it is playing a role: despondent is in brackets; languescent is set apart; vehement and violent are both contenders, though the former has already superseded the latter; and there is a question mark in brackets after Spring in the hope that I can later find an -ent word. As for thorns, it corresponds to a new rhyme cluster (II) in Arabic (ḍarīʿ), and would need to rhyme with, and only with, the next endword/rhymeword (jūʿ), something I have indicated with a downward-pointing arrow; I have not supplied a translation of jūʿ (lit. hunger) yet. At this point the translation is still in*
its early stages and I have taken no firm decisions. Instead, I let the material ‘go cold’, as George Makdisi used to advise, not just so that I can translate better, but so that I can understand better. (It took me years to realise that translating and understanding were sometimes versions of one another).

On the lower third of fig. 1 the word fashioned appears next to the Arabic word khuliqat (lit. was created) and is bisected by a long arrow that runs down the left-hand side. Here, I am drawing the connection between nāṣiba (currently rendered [weary]) and nuṣibat (currently unrendered), because they share the same triliteral root n-ṣ-b. In the middle of the page, still in the bottom quadrant, I have tried to render the rhyme cluster khuliqat / ruʿfīʿat / nuṣibat / suṭihat (this last is a hapax) with upheld / uplifted / upraised / apportioned. As will be clear, rather than rhyme, I sought to use an initial up-/ap- sound in all four words to mirror the closing -at sound in the Arabic.

Second Run

Several months later I went back to the translation and decided to produce a full draft. The printed top half of fig. 2 shows what I came up with:

Since it is difficult to ignore my later editing (in pen, pencil, and highlighter), I reproduce this first full version minus editorial interventions below:

The Enfoldment (Second Draft)

1Have you had word of the Enfoldment? 2A day when faces will be diffident, 3Laboring, defeated, 4admitted into a fire vehement, 5given drink from a fountain fulminant! 6For food they shall have only thorny bracken, 7which will neither sate their hunger nor fatten.

8A day too of faces delighted, 9their effort a source of contentment, 10in a lofty garden recumbent, 11hearing therein no prattlement. 12And graced with a spring effluent, 13raised couches therein decked out, 14cups set out, 15cushions laid out, 16and carpets spread out.

17Do people not wonder how camels were fashioned? 18How the heavens on high were fastened? 19How mountains ranges were battened? 20How the level earth was flattened?

21Go ahead and remind! You were sent to remind, 22not to dictate and mind. 23But for any who turn away and disbelieve, 24God’s great punishment will be without reprieve!

25In the end, they return to Us, 26and their Accounting must go through Us.

As this shows, I retained the opening -ent rhyme, but I have chosen a different word – Enfoldment rather than Concealment. I did so in part because enfoldment has both the meaning of ‘to cover and conceal’ on the one hand, and ‘to overcome and
Fig. 2.

Have you heard word of the Enfoldment? 2
A day when faces will be diffident,
Laboring and defeated, 
Admitted to a fire vehement, 
Given drink from a fountain fulminating? 
For food they shall have only thorny bracken, 
which will neither sate their hunger nor fatten.

But in the end, they return to Us, 
and their Accounting must go through Us.

Raised couches therein decked out, 
Cups set out, 
Cushions laid out 
and carpets spread out.

Uplifted / set forth / arrayed / outspread
Made? / displayed / arrayed / laid
overwhelm’ on the other. (There was another reason too – on which more below.) With -ent in place, I set about to address the seven further endwords/rhymewords that would be needed, while (a) remaining alert to the possible need for a slightly different rhyme for khāshiʿa, and for nāsiba, and nāʿima, and (b) wishing still to signal the morphological similarity of these three words to the other seven. The ten English endwords/rhymewords in the version above are:

- Enfoldment
- diffident
- defeated
- vehement
- fulminant
- contentment
- recumbent
- prattlement
- effluent

My solution for nāṣiba (defeated) and nāʿima (delighted), both of which have an n as the initial root letter, was to mirror this shared root letter by using two words in English that began with de- and end in -ed. As for khāshiʿa (diffident), I also used a word that began with a di- sound, but that ended with an -ent sound. As we will see below, I decided to differentiate the translation of nāʿima. Happily, the rhyme sound -ent seemed to work.

As for the sequence of four passive participles modifying the four nouns in verses 13–16 (sururun marfūʿa / akwābun mawḏūʿa / namāriqu masfūfa / zarábiyyu mabthūtha), I was happy with the decision to render the nouns in English with words beginning with the letter c (couches, cups, cushions, carpets). The verbs with which I combined them, however, all of which use the preposition out (decked out, set out, laid out, spread out), struck me as too ordinary. The fact that zarábiyyu and namāriqu are both hapaxes, underscored the need for me to find language that was more remarkable.

**Third Run**

If we factor in my edits – those scribbled in pen, pencil, and highlighter – the translation now reads as follows (with inserted material shown in boxes, and with deleted material struck through):
The Enfoldment (Third Draft)

In the lower half of fig. 2, we see evidence of my dissatisfaction with my choices regarding rhyme cluster III, where I reproduced verses 13–15 and then experimented with some alternatives, both printed and handwritten:

1. Have you had word reached you of the Enfoldment? 2. On that day some when faces will be diffident, 3. laboring, and defeated, 4. admitted into a fire vehement, 5. given made to drink from a fountain fulminant! 6. For food they shall have only thorny bracken, 7. which that will neither sate satisfy their hunger nor fatten.

8. A that day too of faces will be delighted jubilant/triumphant; 9. their efforts a their source of contentment; 10. They will be in a lofty garden recumbent, hearing therein no free of all prattlement. 11. And graced with a fountain fulminant, 12. the raised couches therein decked out, 13. cups passed about, 14. cushions set out, 16. and carpets spread out.

17. Do people not wonder how camels were fashioned? 18. How the heavens on high were fastened? 19. How mountains ranges were batten’d? 20. How the level earth flattened?

21. Go ahead and remind them! You were sent to remind, 22. not to dictate and mind. 23. But for any those who turn away and disbelieve, 24. God’s great punishment will be without have no reprieve!

25. In the end, they all return to Us. 26. And their Accounting will depend on Us.

In the lower half of fig. 2, we see evidence of my dissatisfaction with my choices regarding rhyme cluster III, where I reproduced verses 13–15 and then experimented with some alternatives, both printed and handwritten:

Uplifted / set forth / arrayed / outspread

cups / cushions / carpets

made? / displayed / arrayed / laid

raised

couches loftily conveyed
goblets / cups beautifully displayed

and carpets richly laid

Fourth Run

Taking all of the above into account, I produced the following translation, which ‘accepts’ some of my changes and ‘rejects’ others:
In the name of God, full of Compassion, ever Compassionate

1 Has word reached you of the Enfoldment? 2 A Day when faces will be diffident,
3 Labouring and defeated, 4 admitted into a Fire vehement, 5 given drink from a fountain fulminant! 6 For food they shall have only thorny bracken, 7 that neither satisfies nor fattens.

8 A day too of faces delighted, 9 – their effort a source of contentment, 10 in a lofty Garden recumbent, 11 free of idle rant, 12 graced with a fountain effluent. 13 And with couches laid out, 14 cups passed about, 15 cushions set out, 16 and carpets spread out.

17 Do they really not wonder how camels were fashioned? 18 How the high heavens were fastened? 19 How the mountains were battened? 20 And the level earth flattened?

21 Go ahead – remind them! You were sent to remind, 22 not to oversee and mind. 23 But if any turn away and disbelieve, 24 The punishment from God will have no reprieve! 25 In the end, they return to Us! 26 And their Accounting will depend on Us!

Now that I had a version with which I was modestly satisfied, the time had come to test it out. I did so during a public lecture at the University of Notre Dame. 5 Devin Stewart was in attendance; I had shown him and Joseph Lowry earlier attempts – as I always do – but this was the first time Stewart was seeing this particular version. In the Q&A, he pointed out a problem with enföldment, namely that it does not have the same stress pattern as diffident, véhement and fúlminant. The stress is on the second syllable in enföldment, whereas on the subsequent words in the translation stress is on the first syllable. Stewart later suggested tegument, but I decided this was not workable because of a decision I had made early on that I now disclose: namely to use f sounds in every verse, except in v. 19 and in vv. 23–6. This decision is an attempt to use a repeated sound in the English, the f sound in order to evoke repeated aural patterning in the Arabic. 6 My ‘theory’ is that the repeated Arabic sound or pattern in the English need not always correspond to repeated sound or pattern in the Arabic: what matters is the fact of replication of an aural feature. The choice of f was dictated by my decision to use enföldment to render ghāshiya. Had I decided to use concealment, I would have tried to repeat a hard or soft C/S sound throughout.

2. Translation

Below is the translation as it now stands, with final (though not immutable) decisions discussed in the notes that follow.
THE ENFOLDMENT

In the name of God, full of Compassion, ever Compassionate

1 Has word reached you of the Enfoldment? 2 That Day some faces will be diffident, 3 labouring and defeated, 4 admitted to a Fire vehement, 5 given drink from a Fount fulminant! 6 For food only thorns and bracken, 7 that will not satisfy their hunger, not fatten.

8 That Day some faces will be jubilant, 9 – their efforts their source of contentment – 10 in a lofty Garden recumbent, 11 free of idle prattlement, 12 and graced with a Fountain effluent. 13 There, couches will be loftily conveyed, 14 cups carefully displayed, 15 cushions plentifully arrayed, 16 carpets beautifully laid.

17 Do people not wonder how camels were fashioned? 18 How the high heavens were fastened? 19 How mountain cliffs were battened? 20 How the level earth was flattened?

21 Go ahead and remind them! You were sent to remind, 22 not to dictate and to mind. 23 But for those who turn away and disbelieve, 24 they will receive God’s Punishment without reprieve!

25 In the end, all must return to Us! 26 And all their Accounting must go through Us!

Notes to the Translation

Verse 1. I began with Have you had word of, but soon realised that Has word reached you of nicely conveys hal atāka ḥadith ...

Verse 2. A day has become That Day. That better conveys the adverbial yawmaʾidhin. I chose to capitalise Day for two reasons: (a) this better evokes the Day of Judgement; (b) as I noted above, capitalised words attract the attention of the reader.

Verse 3. Labouring, defeated became Labouring and defeated. The and seemed to me rhetorically powerful. As for defeated, it is the third endword/rhymeword in a sequence with the f sound: Enfoldment, diffident, defeated, and mirrors, I hope, the way in which the words are morphologically similar but not perfect rhymes.

Verse 4. Fire is capitalised since it is Hellfire that is being described.

Verse 5. I vacillated between given drink and made to drink. Both work for me, though I opted for the former. The big change is from fountain to Fount. This was because I wanted the word to mirror the same word in v. 12 (both ‘āyn), but still show some qualitative difference – because one is in Hell and one in Paradise.

Verses 6 and 7. Literally v. 6 might be rendered There is not for them food except from a thorny plant. And v. 7 might be rendered Which does not fatten or free from hunger. With these two verses, rhyme dictated my choice. I was able to rhyme fatten with bracken.
Verse 8. For *That Day*, see the note to v. 2 above. I changed the earlier *delighted* to *jubilant* to render *nāʿima*. I had initially chosen *delighted* because it began with *de-* and ended in -ed, echoing *defeated* in v. 3. In the end, I decided that the -ant (> -ent) ending here was more important.

Verse 9. I like the repetition of *their* to convey what is being described, which is why *their effort a source of contentment* became *their efforts their source of contentment*.

Verse 10. *Garden* is capitalised, as *Fire* was in v. 4.

Verse 11. I had considered *idle rant* over *prattlement* for *lāghiya*, but unlike the other endwords I used, *rant* has a long a and is monosyllabic, so *prattlement* seemed preferable. I added *idle* for rhythm.

Verse 12. *Spring* gave way to *Fountain*, just as *Spring* gave way to *Fount* in v. 5. This choice was not dictated by the desire for an *f* sound, something already taken care of by the use of *fulminant* (v. 5) and *effluent* (v. 12). Rather, I wanted a word that could be both the same and different, and *Fount/ain* worked; the *f* was an unexpected bonus.

Verses 13–16. I kept the hard *c*-nouns, but decided that the -ayed/-aid sound was preferable to using *out*, hence *conveyed*, *displayed*, *arrayed*, and *laid* rather than *decked out* and so on. The adverbs *loftily*, *carefully*, *plentifully*, and *beautifully* are not in the Arabic, but they are, I would argue, implied and they reinforce the similar aural texture of the four clusters.

Verse 17. Literally, the Arabic reads *Do they not wonder*, but I thought *people* better conveyed the sense. I also wanted a close rhyme for this cluster (IV), which comprises feminine singular passive participles.

Verse 18. It was important not to capitalise *heavens*, as the sky is meant, not Paradise.

Verse 19. Although I was pleased with the sequence *fashioned, fastened, battened, flattened*, it is clear that *battened* (rendering *nuṣibat*) is the only verb that does not begin with an *f*. I had initially wanted to connect the rendering of *nuṣibat* with *nāṣiba* in v. 3, because the two words share the same trilateral root, *n-*ṣ-*b*, but could not do so in a satisfactory way. Instead, I decided to ‘link’ a different word from this first part of the sura to one in the later part, thus *fatten* (v. 7) and *flattened* (v. 20). For me, aural resonances and lexical echoes are important to replicate – but they need not be in the same places where they occur in the Arabic. And I resolved the absence of an *f* in *battened* (to my satisfaction at least), by changing *mountains* or *mountain ranges* to *mountain cliffs*.

Verse 20. The word *earth* here I take in its meaning of ‘ground’, which is why it is not capitalised and why I felt I could insert *level*. This insertion inspired the subsequent insertion of *high* before *heavens* in v. 18.
Verse 21. Literally, the Arabic reads So remind. I render it Go ahead and remind as that is how I rendered it in an echo passage, viz. Q ʿA LĀ 87:9.⁹

Verse 22. This verse was difficult to translate because of the rhyme required by remind in the preceding verse, and the fact that it is still addressed to an addressee (presumably the Prophet Muhammad). Thus You were sent to remind, not to dictate and to mind renders what literally might be translated Indeed you are a reminder, you are not an overseer over them.

Verses 23 and 24. At one point I considered rendering these verses But for any who turn away and abjure, God’s punishment will be most severe. But I preferred the stronger rhyme of disbelieve/reprieve to abjure/severe; I then added receive to v. 24 to reinforce that rhyme.

Verses 25 and 26. I tried out many (similar) versions. In the end, I liked all in the first verse to describe everyone, and in the second verse to describe the balance sheet. The capitalisation of Us (i.e. God) and Accounting add to the force of this closing ‘couplet’.

The Endwords/Rhymewords

I list below the corresponding endwords/rhymewords, as has been my practice with all my earlier translations:

1. ghāshiya 1. Enfoldment 13. conveyed
2. khāshiya 2. diffident 14. displayed
3. nāṣiba 3. defeated 15. arrayed
4. hāmiya 4. vehement 16. laid
5. āniya 5. fulminant 17. fashioned
6. ḍarīʿ 6. bracken 18. fastened
7. jūʿ 7. fatten 19. batten
8. nāʿima 8. jubilant 20. flattened
10. ʿāliya 10. recumbent 22. mind
11. ṣāghiya 11. prattlement 23. disbelieve
12. ḃāriya 12. effluent 24. reprieve
13. marfāʿa
14. mawdūʿa
15. masfūqa
16. mabhūtha
17. khulīqat
18. ruṣīʿat
19. nuṣibat
20. suṭīḥat
21. mudhakkir
22. muṣayṭır
23. kafar
24. akbar
25. iyābahum
26. ḥisābahum
NOTES

I am grateful to Joe Lowry and Devin Stewart for their continued feedback. I also thank Gabriel Reynolds for inviting me to the University of Notre Dame to give a lecture on Qur’an translation – that opportunity was important in helping me think through how I make choices as a translator. I thank Maryam Toorawa for going over the penultimate draft of this piece for intelligibility. I thank David Powers for reading the final draft and offering very valuable feedback on both the essay and the translation. As always I am grateful to the Journal of Qur’anic Studies for its support of my efforts and, as always, I welcome scholarly feedback (smtoorawa@cornell.edu).


2 To identify hapaxes, I rely on my catalogue in ‘Hapaxes in the Qur’an’.


4 When I translated the mono-endrhyming Q A‘LĀ 87 (see my ‘Sūrat al-Rahmān (Q. 55), ‘Sūrat al-A‘lā (Q. 87) and Sūrat al-Balad (Q. 90) Translated’, p. 152), I initially chose the rhyme sound -ing/-in(e), which yielded the following endwords/rhymewords: sing, everything, decreeing, Spring, unbearing, thing, clandestine, undemanding, reminding, God-fearing, unheedng, burning, dying, unceasing, invoking, live in, everlasting, beginning, bring. I was unhappy with some of my renderings, notably the closing verse, Scriptures We caused Abraham and Moses to bring. I therefore decided to use the rhyme sound -or/-er/-ure, which yielded the endwords/rhymewords: honour, measure, order, pasture, wither, misremember, disclosure, easier, reminder, God-fearer, over, Fire, either, prosper, offer, lower, better, earlier, Scripture. The last verse now reads, in the Scrolls of Abraham, in Moses’ Scripture, with which I am much happier.

5 Toorawa, ‘How (Not) to Translate the Qur’an’.

6 I employed repeated aural patterning in my translation of Q ŢĀRIQ 87 too. There, I used recurring n, t, s, and r sounds: see Toorawa, ‘Sūrat al-Ṭāriq (Q. 86) Translated’.

7 I have, however, on occasion used ‘corresponding’ rhyme sounds. See e.g. my translation of Q RAHMĀN 55 in ‘Sūrat al-Rahmān (Q. 55), ‘Sūrat al-A‘lā (Q. 87) and Sūrat al-Balad (Q. 90) Translated’, pp. 149–52.

8 For more on the strategy of replicating aural patterning in the English translation at places different from the ones where the Arabic does so, see Toorawa, ‘Sūrat Maryam (Q. 19)’.


Bibliography


