

LITERARY STYLE—TRANSLATION *

prepared by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice

From the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá

Regarding the translation of the Books and Tablets of the Blessed Beauty, ere long will translations be made into every tongue, with power, clarity and grace. At such time as they are translated, conformably to the originals, and with power and grace of style, the splendours of their inner meanings will be shed abroad, and will illumine the eyes of all mankind. Do thy very best to ensure that the translation is in conformity with the original.

(“Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá”, number 31.13)

From the writings of Shoghi Effendi and letters written on his behalf

This is one more attempt to introduce to the West, in language however inadequate, this book of unsurpassed pre-eminence among the writings of the Author of the Bahá’í Revelation. The hope is that it may assist others in their efforts to approach what must always be regarded as the unattainable goal—a befitting rendering of Bahá’u’lláh’s matchless utterance.

(Shoghi Effendi, Foreword to “The Kitáb-i-Iqán” (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1985)

It must have been very distasteful to you to read some of the off-hand and ungrammatical translations that more out of necessity than choice won circulation and were even published. Furthermore, it was always the expressed wish and desire of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to have proper and adequate translations that would not only convey the true spirit of the original but also possess some literary merit. And for this he emphasized the necessity of a board of translators. Such a board it has unfortunately been impossible to form as yet.

(28 March 1926 to an individual believer)

Shoghi Effendi hopes that before long we will obtain a group of competent English and Persian scholars who would devote their whole time and energy to the translation of the Words and bring out things that are really deserving. For whatever we have at present, even the very

* This compilation was first posted in plain-text at http://worldlanguageprocess.org/essays/uhj_on_gender.htm (2002). It was formatted and reposted at https://bahai-library.com/compilation_literary_style_translation (2021).

best, is only a mediocre rendering of the Persian or Arabic beauty of style and fertility of language that we find in the original.

(4 July 1929 to an individual believer)

Shoghi Effendi wishes me also to express his deep-felt appreciation of your intention to study the Qur'án. The knowledge of this revealed holy Book is, indeed, indispensable to every Bahá'í who wishes to adequately understand the writings of Bahá'u'lláh. And in view of that the Guardian has been invariably encouraging the friends to make as thorough a study of this Book as possible, particularly in their Summer Schools. Sale's translation is the most scholarly we have, but Rodwell's version is more literary, and hence easier for reading.

(23 November 1934 to an individual believer)

He feels the highest literary standard possible should be maintained in any future translations of Bahá'í writings into Spanish, and for this reason he heartily welcomes the suggestion to refer such work to Spanish professors....

(14 December 1938 to an individual believer)

There is no objection to using, in translations of the Master's words, a uniform style such as "he does" or "he doeth". It certainly creates a ridiculous impression to use both. One or the other may be chosen.

In Persian it is impolite not to use the word "Hadrát" before the name of the Prophet, so that strictly speaking a proper translation should always have "His Holiness Moses" etc.; however, as this seems peculiar in English, and not in the best usage of our language, he feels it can be dispensed with. Pronouns referring to the Manifestation, or the Master, should, however, invariably be capitalized.

(8 November 1948 to a National Spiritual Assembly)

Shoghi Effendi himself uses the King James version of the Bible, both because it is an authoritative one and in beautiful English.

(28 October 1949 to an individual believer)

He is interested in accomplishing two things—he would like in the European languages to have as much uniformity with the English translations as possible; he does not wish the Bahá'í translations to be in any way a flagrant violation of the rules of the language into which our literature is being translated.

Your Committee must conscientiously study this question, and then do the best you can to have the Bahá'í literature in French meet the high standards of the French language and grammar.

If the possessive and demonstrative adjectives and pronouns in French are never capitalized where they stand for “God”, then this should not be done in the Bahá'í literature. If there is a precedent for doing so in the French language, however, they should be. The same is true of the attributes of God.

(15 February 1957 to the National Translation and Publication Committee of France)

From letters written by the Universal House of Justice

We realise that translation is a very difficult task and that however good a translation is there are always differences of opinion, both as to accuracy and style. However, in translating Bahá'í Scripture it is important to remember that the style in the original is an exalted one and this aspect should not be lost when it is translated into other languages. It can be noted, for example, that when the beloved Guardian was making his translations into English he used a style that is far from being that of modern English usage but is admirably suited to the richness and imagery of the original.

(12 August 1973 to a National Spiritual Assembly)

A translation should of course be as true as possible to the original while being in the best possible style of the language into which it is being translated. However, you should realize that it will not be possible to translate the Tablets adequately into easy, modern Dutch. Many of the original Writings of Bahá'u'lláh and ‘Abdu'l-Bahá are written in very exalted and poetic Persian and Arabic and therefore a similar flavour should be attempted in the language into which it is translated. You will see, for example, that in translating the Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh into English the beloved Guardian has created a very beautiful and poetic style in English using many words which might be considered archaic and are reminiscent of the English used by the translators of the King James version of the Bible.

As you point out, a literal translation is often a bad one because it can produce a phraseology or imagery that would convey the wrong impression, thus a translator is at times compelled to convey the meaning of the original by means of a form of words suited to the language. However, a person translating the Bahá'í Writings must always bear in mind that he or she is dealing with the Word of God, and, when striving to convey the meaning of the original, he should exert his utmost to make his rendering both faithful and befitting.

(29 October 1973 to an individual believer)

From letters written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice

Those who are entrusted with the task of translating the Sacred Writings from the original into English should study the original very closely, and then attempt to express as accurately and as beautifully as possible in English that which the original conveys. To do this they frequently have to use various different synonyms in English to give the best translation of the same Arabic or Persian word when it appears in different contexts. Conversely, they may have to use the same English word in different contexts to translate various different words in the original. In doing this they attempt to follow the example set by Shoghi Effendi in his magnificent translations.

(31 May 1981 to a National Translation and Revision Committee of a National Spiritual Assembly)

Translation is a very difficult art—an art in which absolute perfection is unattainable. However good a translation, there will always be those who would have preferred it otherwise, for taste, which is undefinable, plays such a large part in such judgements.

(20 September 1982 to an individual believer)

From memoranda prepared by the Research Department at the instruction of the Universal House of Justice

The question of which style of Swedish should be used for the translation of Bahá'í Writings is one that, we feel, must be decided by the National Assembly of Sweden after considering the views of those who are expert both in translation and in Swedish literary style. While it is not obligatory for them to follow the practice that the beloved Guardian adopted in English, it would be useful for them to bear in mind certain aspects of the problem which have been solved in English by Shoghi Effendi.

The originals of the Bahá'í Writings are not only in three different languages (Arabic, Persian and a few in Turkish), which have very different characteristics, but are also in a number of different styles. Some are highly poetic and metaphorical, others more precise and specific. In English-speaking countries, as in most others, religion and spirituality are in a phase of eclipse; therefore the vocabulary used to convey many profound religious concepts has fallen into disuse. To attempt to express the highly poetic and allusive terminology of the Bahá'í Writings in plain, modern English would either be banal or would make the passages sound very strange and foreign. The Guardian's use of a style of English that is slightly archaic, a style in which there is

an abundance of spiritual and poetic terminology, acts as a bridge between the English of today and the style of the Persian and Arabic Writings of the Founders of the Faith.

(1 July 1985 to the House of Justice from the Research Department for the Swedish Publishing Trust)

Those devoted believers who are currently engaged in translation work have a difficult task, for the originals of the Bahá'í Writings are not only in three different languages (Arabic, Persian, and a few in Turkish) but are also composed in a number of different styles. Some are highly poetic and metaphorical, others more precise and specific. The translators must study the original closely in order to attempt an accurate and beautiful rendition in English suitable for the style and language of the original text.

(27 May 1987 to an individual believer)

From “The Priceless Pearl”

THE WRITINGS OF THE GUARDIAN

In an age when people play football with words, kicking them right and left indiscriminately with no respect for either their meaning or correct usage, the style of Shoghi Effendi stands out in dazzling beauty. His joy in words was one of his strongest personal characteristics, whether he wrote in English—the language he had given his heart to—or in the mixture of Persian and Arabic he used in his general letters to the East. Although he was so simple in his personal tastes he had an innate love of richness which is manifest in the way he arranged and decorated various Bahá'í Holy Places, in the style of the Shrine of the Báb, in his preferences in architecture, and in his choice and combination of words. Of him it could be said, in the words of another great writer, Macaulay, that “he wrote in language ... precise and luminous.” Unlike so many people Shoghi Effendi wrote what he meant and meant exactly what he wrote. It is impossible to eliminate any word from one of his sentences without sacrificing part of the meaning, so concise, so pithy is his style....

The language in which Shoghi Effendi wrote, whether for the Bahá'ís of the West or of the East, has set a standard which should effectively prevent them from descending to the level of illiterate literates which often so sadly characterizes the present generation as far as the use and appreciation of words are concerned. He never compromised with the ignorance of his readers but expected them, in their thirst for knowledge, to overcome their ignorance. Shoghi Effendi chose, to the best of his great ability, the right vehicle for his thought and it made no difference to him whether the average person was going to know the word he used or not. After all, what one does not know one can find out. Although he had such a brilliant command of language he frequently

reinforced his knowledge by certainty through looking up the word he planned to use in Webster's big dictionary. Often one of my functions was to hand it to him and it was a weighty tome indeed! Not infrequently his choice would be the third or fourth usage of the word, sometimes bordering on the archaic, but it was the exact word that conveyed his meaning and so he used it. I remember my mother once saying that to become a Bahá'í was like entering a university, only one never finished learning, never graduated. In his translations of the Bahá'í writings, and above all in his own compositions, Shoghi Effendi set a standard that educates and raises the cultural level of the reader at the same time that it feeds his mind and soul with thoughts and truth....

The supreme importance of Shoghi Effendi's English translations and communications can never be sufficiently stressed because of his function as sole and authoritative interpreter of the Sacred Writings, appointed as such by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in His Will. There are many instances when, owing to the looseness of construction in Persian sentences, there could be an ambiguity in the mind of the reader regarding the meaning. Careful and correct English, not lending itself to ambiguity in the first place, became, when coupled with Shoghi Effendi's brilliant mind and his power as interpreter of the Holy Word, what we might well call the crystallizing vehicle of the teachings. Often by referring to Shoghi Effendi's translation into English the original meaning of the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, or 'Abdu'l-Bahá becomes clear and is thus safeguarded against misinterpretation in the future. He was meticulous in translating and made absolutely sure that the words he was using in English conveyed and did not depart from the original thought or the original words. One would have to have a mastery of Persian and Arabic to correctly understand what he did....

The Guardian was exceedingly cautious in everything that concerned the original Word and would never explain or comment on a text submitted to him in English (when it was not his own translation) until he had verified it with the original.

(Rúhíyyih Rabbani, *The Priceless Pearl* (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1969), pp. 196–204)