

Ibn 'Arabī's rhetoric of realisation: Keys to reading and 'translating' the Meccan illuminations

. Pt. 2, Rhetoric, language, and the challenges of translation

Author: James Winston Morris

Persistent link: <http://hdl.handle.net/2345/4141>

This work is posted on [eScholarship@BC](#),
Boston College University Libraries.

Published in *Journal of the Muhyiddīn Ibn 'Arabī Society*, vol. 34, pp. 103-144, 2003

Use of this resource is governed by the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons "Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States" (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/us/>)

Ibn 'Arabī's Rhetoric of Realisation: Keys to Reading and "Translating" the *Meccan Illuminations*

James Morris

Part II Rhetoric, Language and the Challenges of Translation

To recapitulate Part I, each distinctive feature of Ibn 'Arabī's characteristic rhetoric in his *Meccan Illuminations* is carefully constructed to provoke and to support in each reader the essential human process of realisation (*tahqīq*), or our gradually unfolding active spiritual intelligence of the infinite divine "Signs". His distinctive language is designed to support this process appropriately, at each level of realisation, no matter what the particular circumstances, background and spiritual preparedness of each reader. The different facets of this process can be broadly described consecutively, though in reality they typically take place through a continual kind of ongoing inner dialogue involving every relevant dimension of our experience. It begins by his awakening our awareness of what we truly *do* know (in the essential spiritual sense of *ma'rifa*, the explicit title-subject of most of this book's 560 chapters), and by simultaneously revealing, with unavoidable intensity, the immensity of our corresponding, normally unconscious, spiritual ignorance. Secondly, Ibn 'Arabī constantly provides a vast spectrum of reminders and guidelines (both symbolic and intellectual) – drawn primarily from the Qur'an and hadith, combined with his own and other knowers' more persuasively direct and detailed experiential accounts – of the particular spiritual realities, practices, intentions and principles that we need to actualise in order to begin to

move from that initially awakened awareness of ignorance to those manifold forms of inspired knowing of the Real which are the primary subject of this immense work. Next, the combination and motivating existential effects of these two first stages of realisation gradually oblige his engaged readers to turn their attention to the necessary forms of right action and to other previously neglected spiritual resources – always with a newly refined intention, seriousness and clearer awareness of the actual goals of those essential actions and experiences.⁷⁰ And finally, he constantly impels all of his readers to recall, ponder and reflect about – the constantly repeated Qur'anic directives of *tafakkur*, *tadabbur*, *dhikr*, *tadhakkur*, *i'tibār*, "travelling", *nazar*, and so on - the actual lessons and meanings to be drawn from their necessarily unique, gradually unfolding personal experience of each of those three equally indispensable preceding elements. Once we keep these four essential dimensions of realisation in mind, the guiding purposes behind almost all of Ibn 'Arabī's initially strange, always challenging, and rarely imitated forms of writing quickly begin to come into clearer perspective.

"SCATTERING": THE PUZZLE EFFECT

There can be no question that Ibn 'Arabī's intentional scattering (*tabdīd*) of the most central spiritual teachings of his *Futūhāt* – openly announced at two key points in his Introduction, and even more emphatically highlighted by his opening quotation there of three authoritative statements about the special sensitivity of some of the highest, most esoteric oral Prophetic teachings (as discussed in Part I) - is directly inspired by similar structures of exposition and symbolism in the Qur'an itself. The complexity and richness of this central rhetorical feature is of course not simply "textual": the existential depths and presuppositions of this dimension of the Qur'an - and its intimate connection to each of the actual processes of spiritual realization

70. As already indicated, those readers who somehow fail to actualise and focus on this absolutely essential third step soon come to find these purely textual "openings" themselves of relatively little lasting value.

– are especially evident when we take to heart the very gradual process of the actual public revelation of its verses, so intimately linked to key events in the life of the Prophet and his nascent community. Of course many different Islamic traditions subsequently brought together and elaborately synthesised, within the next few centuries, the extraordinary literary, symbolic, intellectual, theological and many other relevant harmonies and unities to be found throughout the Qur'anic teaching. But the very familiarity of all those later traditions can make it especially difficult for later educated readers (whether Muslim or not) approaching the Qur'an under the familiar influence of those complex later bodies of interpretation to appreciate the *original rhetorical effects* of that constant scattering of key teachings – typically combining awestruck poetic admiration with subsequent waves of deeper puzzlement and even utter confusion – which are still so strikingly evident whenever one is teaching students who are encountering the Qur'an for the first time.

In fact, the *Futūhāt* tends to restore all its readers, at least from time to time, to that primordial state of wonder or open "bewilderment" (*hayra*), not least through the clashes of interpretation and perspective which Ibn 'Arabī constantly orchestrates there by rapidly switching registers – usually without bothering to inform his readers – from one to another of the many traditional religious, philological and intellectual disciplines (each claiming to be "sciences" or "bodies of knowledge", *'ulūm*) that were familiar to his original readers. Since the resulting puzzlement this work often evokes is, in so many such places, clearly intentional – nowhere more obviously than in the complex, initially mystifying poems opening each of its 560 chapters – and sometimes playfully ironic, this characteristic rhetorical procedure often confronts translators, and their readers, with a particularly poignant dilemma.⁷¹ In short, conscientious translators of the *Meccan Illuminations* – especially if they choose to provide readers of a particular chapter with key relevant information that is to be

71. This is yet another constant challenge which has no doubt played its role in delaying the publication of many longer, integral translations from the *Futūhāt*.

found in earlier or later chapters not yet available in complete translated form - frequently find themselves unintentionally subverting many of the potentially important challenges and intended rhetorical demands of Ibn 'Arabī's method of "scattering". Or in other cases (as occasionally happens with embarrassing cases of unrecognised printing or editorial errors) translators and careful readers can sometimes find themselves interpreting and inappropriately explaining certain mystifying points which Ibn 'Arabī may simply have intended as playful riddles or ironically intriguing dead-ends (*fausses pistes*), like those so integral to modern video and computer games: enigmatic lines quite possibly designed to distract, and eventually to admonish and instruct, overly systematic, foolishly "literal", lazy or too-pedestrian readers unable to discern what is truly essential.⁷²

Since in the case of the *Futūhāt*, readers are necessarily at the mercy of their translators - and since translators, precisely to the extent that they take their task seriously, are always at the mercy of a host of only too painfully familiar risks and uncertainties - the most important lesson here may turn out to be what has already been said regarding the practical importance of profoundly trusting one's own intuitions and seasoned judgment as to what is truly spiritually essential (i.e., for one's self at the present moment). Since we do know, and have just seen,⁷³ something of what Ibn 'Arabī considered most indispensable for his ideal readers, those consciously involved in the tasks of spiritual

72. For those young enough to have grown up with a long firsthand acquaintance with the traditional formats of most challenging video and computer games, there are a host of close analogies between their familiar "quest" structures and many key structural and rhetorical features of the *Futūhāt* - especially those having to do with this text's intentional and integral features of *multi-dimensionality* (complexly related "levels" and scattered inherent preconditions for their perception and comprehension) and *integral interactivity* (unique to each player's particular qualities) - that are not so readily suggested by the analogy with earlier, more familiar kinds of puzzles, which we may tend to conceive of as somehow objectively existing and separate from their players.

73. In the key passages from his Introduction to the *Futūhāt* translated and discussed in Part I.

realisation (the *muhaqqiqūn*), those opening cautions should be sufficient to remind us that the verification and illumination he aims to evoke in his readers ultimately comes from sources well beyond both the obstacles and the limited sorts of assistance provided by philological learning. In other words, here again the *Futūhāt*, when approached in the context of realisation, are above all a kind of very practical handbook of spiritual intelligence. For most of the artificial intellectual, literary and linguistic puzzles Ibn 'Arabī's work abounds in, however challenging, eventually prove resolvable - at that same intellectual level - by drawing on information and insights that can usually be found elsewhere in his writings, or in their wider historical contexts. But the actual reward for such purely intellectual solutions, beyond motivating curious readers to continue exploring this vast work, often proves to be relatively superficial and passing. Yet as his readers repeatedly discover, the spiritually decisive difference between restricted conceptual solutions and authentically transforming spiritual ones - the fundamental contrast between those narrowly intellectual discoveries, and the exponentially expanding rewards of his intended forms of reading and investigation - gradually becomes clearly, unforgettably apparent. And it is through such repeated contrasting experiences and life-experiments, of course, that the Shaykh's deeper perspectives of far-sighted spiritual discernment and genuine spiritual intelligence gradually unfold.

RESOLVING INCOHERENCE – RE-CREATING THE SYMPHONY

Even more than the far shorter and more compressed *Fusūs al-Hikam* - which has itself already generated dozens of vast commentaries over the centuries - the *Meccan Illuminations* undeniably give almost all their readers an initial troubling sense of disorder, abrupt changes of topic and perspective, and apparent "incoherence" of all sorts. To begin with, it is important to emphasise that this initial impression was surely just as true for Ibn 'Arabī's own original, highly qualified Muslim audiences, and that therefore in most respects - even allowing for the additional challenges of translation - this distinctive rhetorical

feature is entirely intentional. (In particular, these highly distinctive characteristics of the *Futūhāt* cannot simply be dismissed or ignored as the presumably chaotic result of that "inspired" character of this writing which Ibn 'Arabī himself has highlighted and openly claimed in a number of famous passages. And the forms of intentional scattering of premises and allusions discussed in the preceding section explain only a small part of this wider impression of difficulty and disarray.) In practice, readers who seriously study the *Futūhāt* for a considerable time slowly come to appreciate the very precise intentions – and corresponding practical spiritual and intellectual results – that help to account for this central aspect of Ibn 'Arabī's writing, so that this work gradually becomes increasingly coherent, penetrating, and impressively revelatory over time.

Now since readers dependent on translations have not yet experienced the full set of demands that Ibn 'Arabī's rhetoric in the *Futūhāt*, within longer and entire chapters, constantly places upon them, it is important to highlight at the start some of the most basic ways translators are often obliged to betray certain of Ibn 'Arabī's most recurrent original rhetorical intentions, while at the same time often finding it virtually impossible to convey other equally vital rhetorical features. As with the other problematic aspects of translation – and compensatory reading and study strategies – discussed below, simply being aware of these constant challenges can already help careful readers to mentally adjust and compensate for the sometimes widely different approaches that can be taken, usually with the best of intentions, by various translators. The following points include some of the most obviously important considerations, but each translator and student of the *Futūhāt* in the original could easily add many additional items not cited here.

To begin with, apart from the most obvious distinctions between its titles, opening poetry and subsequent prose, it is particularly important to keep in mind that the Arabic of each chapter of Ibn 'Arabī's work typically contains almost none of the internal divisions or (unambiguous) markers corresponding to the standard divisions of sections, paragraphs, sentences and the like normally taken for granted by readers in Western

languages.⁷⁴ Precisely in the longer and more complex chapters, translators (and even some Arabic editors) are sorely tempted to provide their timorous readers with various kinds of "section headings", "tables of contents" or other clearer sub-divisions of the chapter in question; and there are cases where that procedure may actually serve a useful, relatively harmless mnemonic purpose. However, our own experience of extended reading in the *Futūhāt*- including the modern critical Arabic edition by the late Osman Yahya, which abounds in all sorts of such well-intended reader's aids - would indicate that those particular added helpers can often turn out to be seriously misleading, not to mention potentially quite embarrassing. For it all too frequently happens, after repeated readings, that what initially seemed like an obvious, but inexplicable excursus, digression, sudden change of topic or the like eventually comes into clearer focus as an integral part of an underlying, essential, and spiritually or intellectually meaningful progression of Ibn 'Arabī's discussion, once that particular section is viewed from a different point of view. This often happens, for example, in relation to the larger unifying perspectives that are suggested by, among

74. In certain longer chapters, Ibn 'Arabī does sometimes highlight particular internal "sections" (*fasl*), "adjunct discussions" or "appendices" (*wasl*), and other more significantly named chapter subdivisions; but those explicit subdivisions are relatively rare – highlighting their potential interpretive importance – and usually of only limited assistance. As noted below (n. 75), one gradually learns from experience that it is indispensable for conscientious translators to give *only* Ibn 'Arabī's own section divisions, and to avoid the common temptation to add clarifying or helpful subheadings (see also n. 3 in Part I) that inevitably turn out to obscure – or even to render completely invisible – the highly intentional, complex web-like interplay of topics and allusions, extending across the entire book, that forms such a key feature of the rhetoric of the *Meccan Illuminations*. In reality, it is actually quite impossible for unsuspecting modern readers to tune out elaborate internal outlines and subheadings that have been added by a helpful translator or editor, when they have been conditioned by a lifetime of practice to consider such markers automatically as an author's key, normally reliable and essential guides – often considerably more so than the following prose they summarise and introduce – to the actual process of reading and intended understanding.

others, the opening poems, hidden Qur'anic parallelisms (e.g., in the order of chapters and their subjects, each corresponding to successive Suras of the Qur'an, throughout Part IV, the *fasl al-manāzil*), or Ibn 'Arabī's own extremely revealing discussion of the particular "secrets" or "hidden meanings" (*asrār*) and progressive contributions of each chapter of the *Futūhāt* in his long, penultimate Chapter 559.

In other words, in most cases that we have examined closely, Ibn 'Arabī's apparently incoherent shifts of topic, language or perspective do eventually turn out to be powerfully effective literary devices quite intentionally meant to puzzle, provoke, and stimulate his students – or to simultaneously reveal and "de-construct" the unconscious perspectives, assumptions and expectations brought to his text by different types of readers. So precisely when translators have provided such additional artificial headings and sub-divisions, readers need to be extremely cautious – indeed systematically suspicious – about those additions, with the goal of ideally seeking to read and understand that chapter, if at all possible, as it would actually be encountered *without* any such potentially misleading supplements.⁷⁵

75. In addition, this same caution is also applicable, of course, to translators' unavoidable choices of paragraph divisions (likewise not present as such in Arabic), although the degree of potential interpretive danger and misrepresentation involved in those choices is normally somewhat less severe.

Besides M. Gloton's above-mentioned French translation of chapter 178 (n.3 in Part I), another even more egregious illustration of this danger – although, in this context, following an approach clearly explicable in terms of the particular translator's own guiding personal interests – can be found in E. Winkel's pioneering English translation (from most of chapter 68), *Mysteries of Purity: Ibn 'Arabī's asrār al-tahārah* (Notre Dame, Cross Roads Books, 1995). This version adds almost a hundred of the translator's own highly detailed titles and subheadings – while silently omitting all of Ibn Arabī's own explicit section divisions, his indispensable opening poems, etc. While this peculiar editorial procedure – again, silently imposed and entirely unexplained – is comprehensible in light of this translator's own quite explicit, over-riding particular interests (also expressed in his closely related interpretive study, at n.40 in Part I) and those of the particular pietistic audience he is apparently addressing, such unacknowledged additions and omissions make it virtually impossible for other readers

Secondly, every translator of Ibn 'Arabī (not just from the *Futūhāt*, in this case) is well aware of the kinds of potential distortions and misrepresentations that can flow from the usual need, in translating normal modern English prose, to provide (a) relatively short sentences, with (b) clearly defined punctuation breaks, and (c) some meaningful variety of sentence connectors and conjunctions. The problems these standard expectations create, at every stage and on virtually every line, even of relatively straightforward Arabic prose, are formidable and should constantly be kept in mind by those limited to reading in translation, for the following essential reasons. First of all, Ibn 'Arabī's usual discursive prose style in the *Meccan Illuminations* – which is distinctively different, incidentally, from the quite astonishing, often highly innovative and experimental range of various challenging prose and rhymed-prose styles he adopted or created, almost like different dramatic *personae*, in other shorter works, especially from the earlier Andalusian and Maghrebi period of his life – is to create extremely long, integral phrases, with a multitude of relevant qualifiers and asides, carefully developing *all the many facets of a single thought*, much as we are used to reading, for example, in classical German philosophical and academic literature. In other words, in many cases a typical single coherent prose "sentence" of the *Futūhāt*, in this sense, if translated honestly and more exactly, would often require a lengthy page or more of English.⁷⁶

approaching this version from many other possible perspectives to have any sense of the host of other potential levels of meaning, problems, and essential intended connections between this chapter and many other chapters and topics scattered throughout the *Futūhāt* (especially the following chapters on the prescribed acts of worship). As W. Chittick has carefully pointed out in his rich discussion of key translation issues in *SDG* (pp.xxv-xxi, and related appendices and index), the wide-ranging *collective responsibilities and perspectives* involved in translating larger parts of an immense work like the *Futūhāt* today are now far weightier and more demanding than with the idiosyncratic solo approaches that were once unavoidable for earlier generations of pioneering scholars simply intent on "introducing" particular ideas or larger themes from Ibn Arabī, or the "teachings of Sufism" and the like.

76. One encounters quite similar complexities when translating the

Since today's readers of English translations, unlike German ones, would normally find a more exact rendering of Ibn 'Arabī's longer phrases intolerable (if not simply incomprehensible), translators are understandably obliged to break up these discussion-wholes – which typically carefully reflect *alternative facets or perspectives for viewing a single subject*, much like turning around a multi-faceted gemstone or prism held up to the light – into a much longer series of what readers often naturally expect to be logically "consecutive", "progressive" or "sequential" statements. But that sort of horizontal, sequential expectation by English readers - and the translator's attempt to cater to it - can be highly misleading, since the actual distinctive logic and progression of Ibn 'Arabī's presentation and development of topics is normally to be grasped (just as throughout the Qur'an itself) through a kind of intentionally vertiginous, highly demanding vertical "jumping" back and forth between the various epistemological levels and aspects of realisation discussed in detail in the preceding sections (in Part I). Something of what is so often lost even in this relatively uncontroversial, almost unavoidable conversion to today's normal English prose can easily be imagined, as being roughly comparable to the challenge of creating a popular students' guide to Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, from which all foreign languages and learned allusions have been carefully excluded.

In this regard, one of the most obvious challenges facing any translator is the rendering (into English or other European languages) of the tiny range of connective particles actually found

equally challenging Arabic prose of Ibn Khaldūn, despite other egregious differences of style and subject.

77. The inherent ambiguities and wide range of possible connections implied by the most common Arabic connective particles (*wa-* ["and"] and *fa-* ["then" or "so"]) are such that translators are constantly presented with a much larger set of possible equivalents in English or French - while in perhaps the majority of cases, the most neutral and literally "accurate" translation (i.e., without *adding* the appearance of particular sorts of logical, causal or temporal connections that may or may not be intended) would in reality be to add yet another in a long set of consecutive "ands". This is an area in which any translator could add their own much longer series of

in Ibn 'Arabī's Arabic.⁷⁷ Again, most English readers would not tolerate – nor could they reasonably be expected to effectively "re-translate" – all the daunting ambiguities so often intentionally created by Ibn 'Arabī's stringing together dozens of "ands"⁷⁸ and the handful of other particles which may in fact be intended to convey all sorts of logical, temporal, contrastive, expository or simply unavoidable alternative forms of connection and separation. Time and again, it is all too clear – above all to the translators themselves, who must constantly decide such issues for their otherwise unsuspecting readers – that the problematic uncertainty and ambiguity of these same constantly repeated particles is often intentionally meant to oblige Ibn 'Arabī's readers to think through *several* apparently possible meanings, interpretations or allusions of the longer phrase and context in question.

Finally – and again partly reflecting earlier translators' dilemmas in creating understandable versions of the *Fusūs al-Hikam* – the density of surrounding explanation and contextualisation required by most readers of the *Futūhāt* in translation means that it is almost impossible to convey what we might call the "orchestral rhythm" or broadly "symphonic" effects of Ibn 'Arabī's prose throughout this majestic work. In Ibn 'Arabī's original Arabic, his extremely long, complex and demanding expository prose periods – truly a precise verbal representation of the "restrictive intellect" (*'aql*) in all of its dense complexity – are repeatedly, and often quite unexpectedly, dramatically punctuated and

such recurrent dilemmas, no doubt including all the common Qur'anic "emphatic" forms, usually rendered as "surely", "certainly", "verily", etc., in multiple contexts where the actually intended meaning might be best conveyed in oral/aural translation by *tone* and *vocal emphasis* (in American English, at least) rather than by any added words at all. In all such cases, translators seeking to be faithfully literal, and to catch the subtle nuances of each Arabic word, in fact also run the constant risk of unintentionally suggesting new meanings in translation which may not even be present in the original.

78. I.e., the Arabic *wa-* (or *fa-*), which can be translated by any number of widely varying English conjunctions, depending on context and (presumed) meaning.

juxtaposed with much shorter, powerfully shocking *direct* forms of expression. These latter include brief, telling experiential and scriptural allusions (*ishārāt*); hammer-like imperatives ("Know!" or "You must understand!"), or poignant invocations to his pointedly *individual* reader-companion ("May God grant you.. ."); and the familiar, highly evocative, near-poetic solemn cadences of Arabic rhymed-prose (*saj'*). As translators from the Arabic soon discover, such passages of rhymed prose are particularly impossible to translate into any effective English equivalent, given the special density of the allusions that Ibn 'Arabī normally packs into that particular rhetorical style. More often than not, each of these strikingly shorter forms of expression clearly corresponds to the hoped-for evocation - in properly prepared readers - of the higher levels of realisation discussed above, either of the inspired "knowledge of spiritual secrets" or even of more fully realised spiritual intelligence relating to the specific topic under discussion.

However, this full musical range of intended rhetorical effects becomes extremely difficult to carry over into translation - at least where accuracy and completeness are taken as equally essential requirements. Within a comprehensive *translation*, when all these powerfully "percussive" effects are embedded within pages of demanding prose and additional contextual explanation and footnotes, the resulting net effect might perhaps be compared to a radio announcer's "play-by-play account" of a visually and aurally unforgettable fireworks display.

Indeed, given the scope and variety of topics and rhetorical styles often included within a single extensive chapter of the *Futūhāt*, it is often helpful for readers to conceive of each specific topic and its distinctively corresponding "semantic fields" - for example, a typical mix of Qur'anic verses or shorter phrases, brief allusions to longer hadith, elaborate discussions of kalam theology, Sufi spiritual psychology, Aristotelian/Ptolemaic cosmology (or Galenic physiology), Arabic philology and linguistics, and so on - as representing by itself a single kind of "instrument" (or distinctive choral "voice"), whose coherent place, role and meaning within the larger whole of Ibn 'Arabī's guiding intention only very slowly and gradually comes into

place, through repeated reflection and re-reading. In reality, if we had not all so very recently grown accustomed – compared to the longer flow of human history – to the facile omnipresence of recorded music; and if we were instead obliged to decipher and re-create for ourselves, mentally and inwardly (or by playing successive individual instruments), our own orchestral scores whenever we wanted to re-experience a particularly moving symphonic or choral composition: then we would indeed have one of the most effective possible images for appreciating the actual rhetorical structures, the intense demands assumed on the part of each reader, and the polyvalent intended effects of these *Meccan Illuminations*.

PRONOUN DANCING

One more limited and concrete – yet far from trivial – illustration of many of the key features of the *Futūhāt* discussed more broadly in the preceding sections, is the ongoing problem of Ibn 'Arabī's distinctive use of Arabic pronouns, which has already bedevilled the commentators of his *Fusūs al-Hikam* for many centuries, taking up many dense pages of their elaborate commentaries on that far shorter work. This recurrent problem – which again has profound Qur'anic antecedents⁷⁹ – is especially obvious in almost all of the poems introducing each of the chapters of the *Futūhāt*, which in most cases only become even remotely comprehensible, at their deeper levels, once the reader

79. Related pronominal structures, constantly recurring in Qur'anic passages familiar to every Arabic reader (and often highlighted or imitated by Ibn 'Arabī), have been revealingly discussed in other contexts by M. Sells: see his *Approaching the Qur'an*, and related discussions in *Early Islamic Mysticism* (Paulist Press "Classics of Western Spirituality" series, 1996), as well as the chapters on the *Fusūs al-Hikam* in the earlier study cited at n. 11 in Part I. These recurrent problems of ambiguity of reference are deeply complicated, of course, by the absence – for this purpose, at least – in classical Arabic of anything like our familiar forms of punctuation, which in the Qur'an often leads to multiple possible meaningful readings of the same passage, another Qur'anic literary feature that Ibn 'Arabī often imitates in his poetry, in particular.

has carefully gone through and studied the remaining prose chapter several times. So students of the *Futūhāt* commonly discover that Ibn 'Arabī has carefully established a kind of intricate "dance" of meaning between the allusions embedded in his opening poems and the relatively more prosaic sections of the subsequent body of each chapter – just as he has also done in the correspondences he develops between each chapter and his fertile discussion of its corresponding "secrets" or "inner meanings" in his penultimate chapter 559; or between each individual Sura of the Qur'an (beginning with the last) and the successive, extraordinarily demanding chapters of his long Part IV on the "Spiritual Waystations" or "Places of Descent" (*ḥaṣṣ al-manāzil*, chapters 270-383). In each of those situations, the dedicated reader – and *a fortiori*, the responsible translator – is obliged to go back and forth constantly between each of these highly complex potential keys to a given chapter, as the resulting meanings and subtle interconnections gradually fall into a clearer perspective.⁸⁰ Thus the eventual overall effects of this rhetorical procedure, especially the wide-ranging inner and outer demands involved, are quite comparable to the successive stages and dimensions involved in learning, for example, any similarly demanding spiritual arts and disciplines.

Returning to the problem of pronouns, in particular, Ibn 'Arabī's absolutely distinctive metaphysical poems, to begin with, are often intricately constructed from a host of purposefully vague and highly indeterminate pronouns (including similarly ambiguous verbal indicators) whose many possible referents each reader – and translator – must painstakingly decipher, weigh and eventually seek to comprehend in their larger context – all the while knowing, most annoyingly, that in many cases the indeterminacies involved are intentionally meant to

80. To the best of our knowledge, this absolutely fundamental feature of the *Futūhāt* (and many other of Ibn 'Arabī's more substantial writings) has been most beautifully and effectively evoked in M. Chodkiewicz's extraordinary volume *An Ocean Without Shore...* (n.11 in Part I), with its carefully illustrated suggestions that all of Ibn 'Arabī's writings together form a kind of single inextricable holographic "mirror" of the deeper meanings of the Qur'an.

have *multiple possible "right" answers*, each with a distinct meaning equally relevant to the subject at hand. Perhaps most frequently – as already familiar to all readers of his *Fusūs* – these characteristic ambiguities tend to reflect the ongoing, inseparable metaphysical interplay between the divine Names, attributes and qualities, on the one hand, and the more humanly immediate dimension of their endless manifestations (*mazāhir*, *tajalliyyāt*). In particular, Ibn 'Arabī loves to construct puzzling lines of poetry in which the decisive referents of absolutely key pronouns may be best supplied not by any visible proximate textual antecedents (as would be the case in normal Arabic prose), but by a gamut of "implied" subjects or objects that can only be inferred by a kind of inspired guessing from the wider contexts of the following chapter, related larger themes and allusions, and so on. If that were not enough, this unique metaphysical poetry is often further characterised by a playful underlying aesthetic "dance" of corresponding masculine and feminine *grammatical* pronominal forms⁸¹ which is clearly intended to musically, aurally mirror and evoke the universal cosmic interplay of (relative) "active" and "receptive" factors and divine Names – profoundly comparable to the Taoist notions of Yin and Yang⁸² – which is so reflective of his larger vision of reality. Such richly ambiguous poetry repeatedly poses terrible dilemmas for any translator, since some of its original key aesthetic dimensions are always utterly untranslatable, whereas

81. See the works of M. Sells cited at n. 79. (These grammatical pronominal forms in Arabic should not be confused with actually gendered "male" and "female" referents, although in certain cases the actual gender of possible referents does impact the grammatical possibilities.) The dynamic cosmological inter-relations mirrored here, so typical of Ibn 'Arabī's worldview, are profusely illustrated by many translated cosmological passages from the *Futūhāt* included in W. Chittick's vast *SDG*.

82. See also S. Murata, *The Tao of Islam...* (Albany, NY, SUNY Press, 1992), which richly develops this theme, using texts drawn primarily from a wide range of subsequent generations of Muslim interpreters of Ibn 'Arabī's ideas and writings. That book is now supplemented in her study and translation of two later key Chinese Muslim texts deeply rooted in the tradition of Ibn 'Arabī (and *jāmī*): *Chinese Gleams of Sufi Light...* (Albany, NY, SUNY Press, 2000).

the translator's efforts at providing the necessary clarification and explanation of each line tend to require inordinate amounts of extensive commentary,⁸³ while at the same time robbing the reader of the originally intended considerable personal efforts needed to decipher and comprehend these intentionally mystifying passages, in their deeper inter-relations with the internal subjects of the chapter.

ACCESSING THE QUR'AN AND HADITH

For Ibn 'Arabī, there is no question that the Qur'an⁸⁴ itself is the "Translator" *par excellence*, the essential tool for beginning to see, and eventually to decipher, all the other "Books", of the world and the soul, as actual, ever-renewed divine "Speaking". In other words, his own usage of and reference to the Qur'an is totally different from what we normally encounter in most other Islamic religious literatures. In most of those traditional disciplines – and this observation applies equally to all of the religious sciences (including much later Sufī writing) as well as to the ways Qur'anic references are also normally brought to bear in the rational sciences, such as Islamic philosophy – by far the most common usage of Qur'anic verses (or of hadith) is actually to argue in convincing support of a point or conclusion *already believed*, much as debaters (or the duelling partners in a medieval disputation) refer to their card-files or memories to pull up rhetorically useful pieces of information for impressing their particular audiences. This standard rhetorical procedure,

83. It should be stressed (for non-Arabists) that this problem is essentially present in the actual Arabic, and is therefore not primarily a function of translation into another particular language. Thus the classical Arabic commentaries on the *Fusūs al-Hikam*, as well as famous commentaries on the very first opening lines of chapter 1 of the *Futūhāt*, have sometimes taken many pages attempting to resolve and explain alternative readings of these typical pronominal "puzzles" in Ibn 'Arabī's *prose* - not to mention his poetry.

84. Always including, for Ibn 'Arabī, its equally inspired and revelatory reflection in the very "character" (*khuluq*: according to a famous hadith) and teachings of the Prophet himself.

whose actual aim is effectively convincing "belief" rather than genuine awareness and actual spiritual knowing, is what Ibn 'Arabī consistently refers to disparagingly, using the technical language of theology and jurisprudence, as *istidlāl*. Such common usages, in every Islamic intellectual discipline, quickly became standard, constantly repeated stock features of the particular traditions in question, to such a degree that anyone versed in each discipline will immediately recognise and can often complete by heart, or even anticipate, the particular Qur'anic references in question. In such cases, the translator can usually be satisfied with simply identifying the scriptural citation or allusion in question (as being from this or that place in the Qur'an or standard hadith collections), or at most with indicating its standard role in the particular intellectual tradition involved, especially so that neophyte readers won't imagine that such recurrent stock usages are actually a product of a particular author's own independent thinking.

In contrast, Ibn 'Arabī's own use of allusions to the Qur'an and hadith is radically, fundamentally different – so much so that it usually takes students of his work a number of years, and intensive study of several different books of his, to begin to fully appreciate what he is actually doing with his scriptural allusions.⁸⁵ To begin with, Ibn 'Arabī almost always refers to something from the Qur'an or hadith in order to suggest to his reader a new, different way of seeing, of perceiving and "reading" the world. Often this intended "opening" requires that he first somehow shatter or break through fossilised, habitual ways of reading and interpreting the divine words. And many of

85. As a memorable illustration of this, I will never forget my first day's "initiatric" experience as a young graduate student in the intensive seminar Toshihiko Izutsu had devoted for years (in Tehran) to the close study of the *Fusūs al-Hikam* and its classic commentaries, frequented by many leading Iranian and foreign scholars of Ibn 'Arabī. Having spent several days assiduously preparing the assigned texts, I was asked to begin the session by translating the opening verses of one chapter – and suddenly discovered that nothing at all, in Professor Izutsu's well-practised understanding of Ibn 'Arabī, seemed to match any of the standard meanings of the same words that could be found in any of the usual Arabic dictionaries.

his characteristic, sometimes intentionally shocking ways of piercing those habitual forms of unconscious "belief" are already familiar to the readers (and the polemical opponents!) of his *Fusūs al-Hikam*. But this initial radical use of particular verses and hadith to evoke decisive "flashes" or intuitive openings to deeper, primordial levels of meaning and insight – an approach which continued, by the way, to inspire many generations of later well-known Persian-language Sufi poets ('Irāqī, Maghrebī, Jāmī, Shabistārī, etc.) – is only the most visible, and very partial, beginning of Ibn 'Arabī's teaching.

For it slowly becomes clear, precisely through the gradual accumulation and deepening of many such preliminary, pointillistic insights, that Ibn 'Arabī is actually gradually "unveiling" the deeper "Reality" – *his* key words – of the Qur'an (i.e., the divine "universal Book") as a kind of invisible force-field or creative web underlying, shaping, manifesting and giving form to all of creation and experience.⁸⁶ Stated or conceived as theology or belief, or as a purely intellectual construct, as we have already noted, such words and concepts remain literally a "dead letter". Instead, Ibn 'Arabī's purpose is to bring about or help initiate that *actual perception*, to teach his readers how to "read" and even to begin to "hear" that ever-renewed divine "New-Speaking" – and then to go on to manifest and respond appropriately to that inspired spiritual perception in every area of their lives. Thus, over time, such devoted readers eventually do begin to see that virtually everything in his writings implicitly involves key allusions to the Qur'an and specific hadith, even – indeed

86. As already mentioned (n.79), M. Chodkiewicz's *An Ocean Without Shore...* has provided by far the most elaborate discussion and illustration of this characteristic feature of Ibn Arabī's writing, extending to all of Ibn 'Arabī's most influential longer works. One finds a remarkably similar evocative approach to mirroring the entire Qur'an in the poetic works of both Rumi and Hafez (to mention only two of the most influential creators of the Islamic humanities) – a factor which no doubt helps account for the peculiarly lasting and universal cultural impact of both those authors. With both poets, of course, the guiding underlying Qur'anic references are initially more veiled, for modern audiences, by their expanded Persian symbolic vocabulary for alluding to the essential spiritual themes of the Qur'an and hadith.

one might say *especially* – in those passages where nothing is visibly quoted.

Obviously this constant guiding intention and extraordinarily ambitious rhetorical procedure presents a daunting range of problems to any would-be translator (and reader), especially when one begins to tackle complete and extensive chapters of the *Futūhāt*. But before returning to those challenges, it may be helpful – since what Ibn 'Arabī is claiming and attempting is so immense in its intended scope – to make it entirely clear that this guiding perception, and the fundamental role within it of the universal "Realities" of the Qur'an and the Prophet, all emerge directly from perhaps the single most transformative illumination in his long and always singular spiritual autobiography. The following highly compressed lines are quoted from the autobiographical description he recorded as the summit of his own spiritual ascension or "Nocturnal Journey" (*mi'rāj/isrā'*) in chapter 367 of the *Futūhāt*, although we understandably find other versions and echoes of this transforming moment throughout all of his works, beginning with his youthful *Kitāb al-Isrā'*:⁸⁷

Then I was enveloped by the (divine) lights until all of me became Light, and a robe of honour was bestowed upon me the likes of which I had never seen. So I said: "O my God, the Signs/verses (*āyāt*) are scattered!" But then *He sent down upon me*⁸⁸ at this moment (His) Saying: *Say: "We have faith in God and in what He sent down upon Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and the tribes (of Israel), and in what was brought to Moses and Jesus and the prophets from their Lord; we do not separate any one among them, and we are surrendered to Him!"* (3:84). Thus He gave me *all* the Signs/verses in this Sign/verse,⁸⁹ clarified the matter (i.e., of the

87. See n.53 in Part I for full references to the translation volume (*The Meccan Revelations*) and the JAOS article containing our translations and related explanations of this key autobiographical experience, which is also discussed in the recent biographical studies by S. Hirtenstein and C. Addas (details at n.53).

88. This is a recurrent Qur'anic expression (*anzala 'alā*) normally referring specifically to the "sending down" of divine Revelation to the prophetic Messengers (*rusul*).

universal Reality of the Qur'an) for me, and made this Sign/verse for me the key to *all* knowledge. Henceforth I knew that I *am* the totality of those (prophets) who were mentioned/recalled to me (in this verse).

Through this I received the good tidings that I was in the "Muhammadan station",⁹⁰ that I was among the heirs of Muhammad's comprehensiveness. For he was the last to be sent as a divine messenger, the last to have (the direct Revelation) *descend upon him* (97:4). God "gave him the all-comprehensive Words",⁹¹ and he was specially favoured by six things with which the messenger of no (other) community was specially favoured. Therefore (the Prophet's) Mission is universal.... From whatever direction you come, you will find only the Light of Muhammad⁹² overflowing upon you: no one takes (spiritual knowing) except from It/Him, and no messenger has informed (humanity) except for (what is) from It/Him.

... Thus I attained in this nocturnal journey (*isrā'*) the inner meanings of all the divine Names, and I saw them all returning to One Subject⁹³ and One Entity.⁹⁴ That Subject was what I wit-

89. *Āya*. Since what was revealed to Ibn 'Arabī in this experience was no less than the inner meaning of the eternal *Qur'an* – which is also the "Reality of Muhammad" – encompassing all knowledge (including the spiritual sources/realities of all the prophetically revealed "Books"), this phrase can also be read simply as "all the verses in that one verse".

90. Literally, that I was "Muhammad-like in spiritual station" (*Muhammadī al-maqām*): i.e., marked by the Prophet's primordial spiritual condition of "all-comprehensiveness" (*Jam'iyya*), encompassing the eternal Realities of all the prophets (the *majmū'* or "totality") mentioned in the preceding sentence. For details on Ibn 'Arabī's conception of this unique *maqām muhammadī*, see the discussions throughout M. Chodkiewicz, *The Seal of the Saints*.

91. *Jawāmi' al-kilām*: the famous hadith paraphrased in this sentence (see Bukhārī, *ta'bīr*, 11; Muslim, *masājid*, 5–8; Tirmidhī, *siyar*, 5; etc.) is cited repeatedly by Ibn 'Arabī, in many of his works, to emphasise the all-encompassing totality of spiritual knowledge or divine "forms-of-wisdom" (*hikam*) making up the "Muhammadan Reality".

92. *Nūr Muhammad*: for the historical background of this term (including early references in hadith and the *Sīra* literature), see Chodkiewicz, *Seal*, index s.v.

93. Or "One Object": *musammā wāhid*, literally "One Named" Reality.

nessed,⁹⁵ and that Entity was my Being. For my voyage was only in myself and only pointed to myself, and through this I came to know that I was a pure "servant",⁹⁶ without a trace of lordship in me at all.

Since the universal dimensions of the Qur'an and the Prophetic teachings that Ibn 'Arabī is attempting to awaken and deepen in each of his readers, in the *Futūhāt* and all of his works, are precisely the all-encompassing illuminative awareness, the sort of spiritually transforming "opening" so powerfully and succinctly described in this key autobiographical passage, what can the translator do to facilitate the reader's absolutely indispensable awareness of all the relevant allusions to those foundational scriptural sources?⁹⁷ The most obvious points we

94. Or "One Eye", "One Source", "One Essential Entity": *'ayn wāhida*. Ibn 'Arabī clearly means to evoke here all these key symbolic dimensions of this single multivalent Arabic term.

95. *Mashhūdi*: together, this phrase and the following words carefully sum up the ineffable paradox of this experiential realisation of divine Unicity - the very core of Ibn 'Arabī's work - which led to so much subsequent theological and philosophical controversy in the Islamic world and wherever attempts have been made to treat this realisation conceptually as a metaphysical or theological "system". The first phrase, taken in separation, states the thesis discussed by some later Sufis as *wahdat al-shuhūd* ("unity of witnessing") and the second the ontological position of *wahdat al-wujūd* ("unity of being/finding") - while the simultaneous combination of those two perspectives expresses the experience and fundamental reality the Shaykh attempts to convey here and throughout his writings. The corresponding autobiographical account in his earlier *K. al-Isrā'* (in the Hyderabad edition of his *Rasā'il*, pp. 65-66), already includes an extremely important caution in this regard: "So beware and don't imagine that my 'conjunction' (*ittisāl*) with (the highest divine Presence) was one of identity of Essence (*inniya*)..."

96. *'abd mahd*: this formulation (or the related one of *'abd khālīs*), used fairly frequently by Ibn 'Arabī, refers to those rare "knowers" who have become purely devoted (*mukhlisūn*) to the divine "I" - i.e., who are therefore among those rare beings God calls "My servants" (*'ibādī*: alluding especially to the Qur'an at 5:42 and 17:65) - and not to the totality of creatures, who of course are all "servants of God" in a metaphysical, but still spiritually unrealised, sense.

97. This is an area where readers of Arabic not intimately familiar

can mention – reserving the closely related problems of translation for the following sections – clearly highlight the unavoidable necessity for very active, involved and demanding participation by each reader, no matter how much; helpful background any translator may provide. To begin with, if modern readers are to have any sense of the underlying importance of Ibn 'Arabī's allusions to – and not just literal quotations of – key passages of the Qur'an and hadith, all translators need, at the very least, to indicate the *full relevant contexts* of the scriptural passages in question, in ways that facilitate readers' actually looking up those larger contexts.⁹⁸ Like many Islamic authors, Ibn 'Arabī

with the Qur'an and hadith are in just as much difficulty as those reading translations – or perhaps even more difficulty – if their habitual forms of understanding of those scriptural sources are embedded in unconscious belief-systems that block any real perception of Ibn 'Arabī's aims and understanding. Particularly relevant in this context is Ibn 'Arabī's own very direct practical advice on the proper way one should approach reading and contemplating the Qur'an, contained in his particularly influential short treatise *The Book of the Quintessence (Kitāb al-Kunh) Concerning What is Indispensable for the Spiritual Seeker*. Our more accurate, complete, and annotated translation of that work, as well as several other equally important short treatises, and related practical chapters from the *Futūhāt*, should appear soon in our planned volume, *Spiritual Practice and the Spiritual Path: Ibn 'Arabī's Advice for the Murīd*:

Ask and inquire (of God), with regard to each Sura, what it is you ought to ask about regarding that. Try to figure out for every verse its special relevance and lesson for you. Meditate and put into practice, for each verse, what is its relevance and connection (to your actual situation), and what those qualities and attributes are indicating (that you should now learn or do). Reflect on those qualities and attributes you have, and on those which you are missing. Then give Him thanks for those which you have and those which you have not (yet) attained! And when you read a description of (the contrasting negative attributes of) the hypocrites and those who ungratefully reject (God), then reflect as to whether there is not also something of those same attributes in you.

98. In addition, adequately contextualising Ibn 'Arabī's usual flood of Qur'anic quotations and allusions – as students of the *Fusūs al-Hikam* are already well aware – also often requires first explaining to modern readers the particular sorts of traditional, habitual, often unconsciously taken-for-

often quotes literally only relatively small portions of the larger contexts he is actually referring to, whether those are found in the Qur'an or hadith. So frequently his few quoted words or allusions could possibly come from or relate to several different Qur'anic passages, while in fact it actually turns out – when one goes back to examine all those potentially relevant verses – that in reality he often has only one particularly revealing scriptural context in mind at that point. In particular, since accurate and even remotely reliable English translations of any of the major Sunni hadith collections do not exist at all," it is incumbent on conscientious translators, if at all possible, to provide the full relevant texts in footnotes or an appendix – *as well as any* needed explanation of their traditionally associated historical contexts, which are usually unfamiliar to modern readers. For quite often, it turns out, the essential spiritual lesson Ibn 'Arabī means to highlight requires one to explain first of all the significance of the traditionally assumed *context* of this or that familiar hadith

granted "frameworks of (mis-)understanding" that Ibn 'Arabī is frequently seeking to "deconstruct", undermine or reveal in order to help his readers penetrate to a deeper level of genuine understanding. This can be a complex and demanding task for any translator. The practical relevance of this approach, especially in certain types of formally devout and (outwardly) pietistic contexts, is vigorously explained and illustrated by E. Winkel in his two studies – both relating primarily to chapter 68 of the *Futūhāt* – already cited at notes 39 and 74 in Part I.

99. All translators should be aware, as we have learned from the repeated experience of years of teaching foundational courses on Islam, that the extant English versions of a few major Sunni hadith collections - in most cases apparently not created by native English speakers - are painfully, abysmally inaccurate and misleading throughout, often in profoundly dangerous ways that cannot possibly be corrected by unsuspecting students unable to read the original Arabic. (The fortunate exception to this rule is J. Robson's unannotated translation of the later devotional chrestomathy, the *Mishkāt al-Anwār*.) It is therefore essential, when preparing translations of Ibn 'Arabī that will eventually be read by non-scholarly audiences without ready access to Arabic and to the actual hadith, to provide full and adequately contextualised translations of each of the relevant hadith. And often the task of providing such translations and explaining their traditional context is in itself a highly educational experience.

(or particular Qur'anic verse) within the life of the Prophet and the early Muslim community.¹⁰⁰ In the same way, providing the full text of the hadith alluded to is especially helpful with that recurrent set of certain longer hadith and "divine sayings" (*hadīth qudsī*), such as the eschatological ones included in Ibn 'Arabī's own *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, which are truly foundational for approaching all of his teaching and spiritual understanding.

However, since the actual application of all of these desiderata would, in the case of the *Futūhāt*, inevitably lead to translations encumbered by a vast apparatus of parenthetical explanations, footnotes and appendices (items which are seldom favoured by cost-conscious publishers and less actively participatory readers), and since these essential considerations have in any case often not been taken seriously by translators in the past, in most cases it is Ibn 'Arabī's readers themselves who are obliged to develop the habits of reading the "translated" Ibn 'Arabī with at least a helpful Qur'an (for the moment, Arberry's is still probably the least misleading in English) at hand, carefully reading and thinking through the *contextual* meaning and relevance of each of Ibn 'Arabī's key Qur'anic allusions as they arise – even if we may think we already "know" the verses in question. A close familiarity with all the hadith included in the *Mishkāt al-Anwār* and (albeit often in highly shortened form) in the appendices to other recent volumes of translations from the *Futūhāt* (especially the extensive selections by W. Chittick) will also prove invaluable, especially as such familiarity eventually will help readers to begin to detect many highly significant allusions and implications of those key Prophetic teachings which may not even have been highlighted by other translators.

100. This is another distinguishing feature of Ibn 'Arabī's characteristic usage of Qur'an and hadith that is radically opposed to their common usage as stock proof-texts in the context of other Islamic religious sciences. In many cases (involving both hadith and the Qur'an) the essential – but implicit and unstated – point of his lessons often lies in the concretely particular, intensely human situation of trials and tests which are exemplified in this or that particular moment of the Prophet's life and the related trials of the nascent Muslim community.

Equally important as essential background, for any serious student of an immense work like the *Futūḥāt*, is to have read carefully through one of the accessible translations of the *Sīra* (the life of the Prophet and history of the earliest Muslim community), such as Martin Lings' readily accessible study, which is particularly useful in that it often focuses on those archetypal events, hadith and Qur'anic passages that were taken up by most later traditions of Sufism and Islamic spirituality.¹⁰¹ Fortunately, over time many of Ibn 'Arabī's most fundamental hadith and Qur'anic references do gradually become familiar to attentive readers of his translated works – although such an ideally wide-ranging background should certainly never be taken for granted by any conscientious translator.

All of these desiderata highlight the tremendous practical and spiritual usefulness, already highlighted in Part I, of teaching and studying the *Futūḥāt* within a small informal group setting, where each participant can contribute – and help catch and discern – different aspects of this key scriptural dimension of all of Ibn 'Arabī's work.

PROBLEMS OF QUR'ANIC TRANSLATION

While we have devoted two other short sections below to broader recurrent problems in translating Ibn 'Arabī, and especially in serious readers' necessary process of actively "re-translating" from the available translations, there is no question that the most fundamental problems encountered in translating the *Futūḥāt*, in particular, are often virtually inseparable from the challenges facing all attempted translations of the Qur'an into Indo-European languages. Some of the most important difficulties that task involves – both for translators and, above all, for students attempting to approach some degree of serious understanding of the Qur'an – have already been discussed in more detail in other studies, so that they need not be repeated here.¹⁰²

101. Martin Lings, *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources* (London, Inner Traditions International, 1987).

102. See, for example, our summary article on "Qur'an Translation and

Instead of focusing on the litany of particular problems facing translators of Ibn 'Arabī in this regard,¹⁰³ we shall move on immediately to some of the various quite practical steps that concerned readers *without* any Arabic can take, to "translate back" to something closer to the intended and possible meanings of the Arabic Qur'an, those less than fully adequate Qur'anic versions that they may encounter in versions of the Shaykh's works. Some of these suggested steps are relatively easy to apply, while others are far more demanding, but in each case the important point is to practise each step sufficiently so that it gradually becomes an automatic "habit of mind" that one naturally applies to *any* translated Qur'anic passage. Again, carefully and slowly studying chapters of the *Futūhāt* in a small group, where some of these preparatory tasks can be shared, can also help in putting these basic cautions into practice.

the Challenge of Communication: Toward a 'Literal' (Study) Version of the Qur'an", pp. 53-68 in the *Journal of Qur'anic Studies*, vol.2:2 (2000), and the closely related study (including an experimental literal translation of Sura 12 of the Qur'an) "Dramatizing the Sura of Joseph: An Introduction to the Islamic Humanities", pp. 201-224 in the *Annemarie Schimmel Festschrift*, a special issue of the *Journal of Turkish Studies* (Harvard), vol.18 (1994) – as well as M. Sells' range of related observations included in his recent *Approaching the Qur'an* (Ashland, OR, White Cloud, 1999). The vast range of fundamental problems involved in Qur'anic translation are of such obvious importance to growing Muslim communities in the West – and to educators more generally – that we should see a much wider range of thoughtful and creative practical responses in the near future. Certainly no other classical Muslim author, compared with Ibn 'Arabī, provides more useful hints and suggestions about the directions which must be taken in order to begin to more adequately communicate the multiple dimensions of Qur'anic discourse and meaning in various Western languages and new cultural settings.

103. Although this may be restating the obvious, it is still worth pointing out that any translator of Ibn 'Arabī who has not done their own carefully appropriate contextual translating of the Shaykh's complex Qur'anic allusions and hadith, while constantly reflecting on all the issues and challenges this task necessarily involves – but who has instead relied upon one or another of the commercially available versions in English – is unavoidably misleading their readers.

To begin with, simply by way of avoiding the compounded misunderstanding that comes from working with Qur'anic commentaries masked as translations, we may cite William Chittick's repeated observation that the readily available translation of the Qur'an by A. J. Arberry is still probably the least misleading version of the entire scripture available as a companion for reading Ibn 'Arabī.¹⁰⁴ (More recent Qur'an versions that provide a romanised transliteration or transcription of the sounds of the recited Qur'an may also offer the particular limited help of enabling their readers in English to isolate and identify the key underlying Arabic roots.) Arberry's usefulness is greatly magnified by combining it with the use of H. Kassis's marvelously helpful English *Concordance*,¹⁰⁵ which is keyed primarily to Arberry's translation: together, this remarkable tool allows readers of the Qur'an in English to move back directly to those semantic families of underlying Arabic roots – usually translated by a host of entirely different English nouns, verbs and adjectives – which are the essential building-blocks of meaning throughout the Qur'an.

Since the key to understanding and deciphering the Qur'an lies in its basic tri-literal Arabic roots, the associative web of their central (and usually multiple) core meanings is inevitably lost when words of a common Arabic root are broken down into the many different English parts of speech. Access to the Kassis *Concordance* enables English readers of the *Futūhāt* to begin to restore

104. As one can readily verify in any religious studies classroom, the primary communication problem with Arberry's translation (and one still shared by most of the other alternative English translations, unfortunately) for native English speakers has to do with the students' usually highly complex and far-reaching taken-for-granted fields of association with the apparently familiar language of the King James version of the Bible – associations which in most cases have nothing at all to do with any formal religious education (that actually might even help remove such unconscious notions!), but rather with more deeply embedded cultural stereotypes, implicit moral frameworks, and the like. (See our recent study at n. 102 for further details.)

105. Hannah E. Kassis, *A Concordance of the Qur'an* (Berkeley, Univ. of California Press, 1998).

that underlying web of essential meanings by moving back and forth between the key Qur'anic terms found in their translations, including many actually related terms usually rendered by entirely different English equivalents. Thus readers without Arabic can gradually rediscover the much wider, characteristic semantic resonances of those unifying Arabic root-meanings in many previously unsuspected passages of their English translation.

One of Ibn 'Arabī's most common and distinctive methods for "unveiling" and deepening his readers' spiritual awareness of the more wide-ranging meanings and intentions of otherwise familiar expressions from the Qur'an and hadith – an approach already well illustrated in the widely available English versions and translated commentaries on his *Fusūs al-Hikam* – lies in his characteristic "etymological" deepening of key Qur'anic roots. Usually this works by taking his readers away from a later, fossilised abstract (theological, philosophical, legal, etc.) or semi-technical usage, and by returning them instead to a far more concrete, poetically evocative "literal" awareness of the various earlier, original Arabic meanings of those same key terms.¹⁰⁶ For appreciating that absolutely fundamental dimension of the Shaykh's rhetoric and interpretive methods, E. W. Lane's now readily available, multi-volume (but unfortunately incomplete) *Arabic-English Lexicon*, based on the standard classical Arabic dictionaries (*Lisān al-Arab*, *Tāj al-Arūs*, etc.), allows even English-speaking readers – and indeed many neophytes in Arabic – a chance to follow and complete Ibn 'Arabī's characteristic process of returning to the roots of crucial Qur'anic expressions. Referring back to Lane's dictionary can be especially helpful in those many cases where translators may not have fully conveyed the full intended impact of Ibn 'Arabī's typically quite distinctive intentions and semantic usages in that regard.

106. The experience involved is roughly comparable to that of moving from the relative abstraction and familiar traditional symbolism of Victorian and many other earlier English poets to the intentionally far more concrete, particular imagery associated with William Carlos Williams and other more recent schools of English-language poetry.

The following additional practical suggestions are somewhat simpler, and usually – if one is using Arberry or another relatively literal Qur'anic translation – can be put into practice simply by reading the Qur'anic passage or citation in question very slowly and attentively, mentally reconstructing a more accurate and discerning version. In each of these cases, the underlying problem has to do not so much with "mistakes" of translation, but with more profound, sometimes radical metaphysical differences in the ways in which the world is perceived, structured and communicated in the Semitic linguistic structures of the Qur'an, as opposed to the corresponding unconscious deep-structures shared by most Indo-European languages (and today, even increasingly by modern standard Arabic). Indeed, in a great many cases Ibn 'Arabī's most essential spiritual "teaching" is quite succinctly conveyed simply by reminding his readers – using the original inimitable and highly compressed language of the Qur'an – of the profoundly illusory nature of their habitual assumptions about "horizontal" progressions of time (as an unproblematic continuum of "past-present-future") and about a strict separation of "subject-action-object". Both of those unconscious metaphysical assumptions are profoundly embedded in most Indo-European grammars – to such a degree that we often unthinkingly take them to describe the actual nature of reality. But they are also quite different from the – to us, radically unfamiliar – essential Qur'anic structures of divine "New-Speaking".

One of the simplest and most far-reaching ways to begin to read and perceive the Qur'an as Ibn 'Arabī does is to read the Arabic "imperfect" verb forms (and many present participles), which appear in almost all common English versions in an apparently "future" tense, back into *the present, ongoing sense* they actually have in the Arabic.¹⁰⁷ Virtually everything one needs to know to begin to grasp Ibn 'Arabī's essential understanding of

107. In doing so, of course, readers in English are unable to separate out the relatively very few actual uses of the explicit Arabic "future" prefix (*sa-/ sawfa-*), which is usually employed in Qur'anic contexts involving the future subjective eschatological "unveiling" of the actually operative inner States of particular individuals.

Qur'anic eschatology, for example, immediately starts to come into clearer perspective as soon as one does so.

The next simple suggestion regards apparently "past" passages describing "events" whose *deeper present significance* typically relates to eschatological realities, divine spiritual laws or archetypal spiritual situations now actually engaging the Prophet or his community – or even each reader. Even more easily than the last step, but requiring a considerably more active imagination, the reader can readily substitute for the apparently temporal conjunctive phrase "when" that introduces so many such memorable Qur'anic passages – with its natural English implications (especially for those unknowingly reading the Qur'an as simply another sort of Bible) of a naturalistic, sequential narration regarding some far-away, "historical" time and place – something existentially much closer to the spiritually appropriate immediate contextualisation indicated by the actual Arabic *idh* (some translators do use a more approximate "Lo!" or "Behold!"). Whatever the initial English word one encounters in translation, the important thing is to imaginatively move the "event" in question into the kind of *immediately present*, visionary imaginal "place" and direct existential connection actually suggested by the Arabic.¹⁰⁸ Ibn 'Arabī himself sometimes calls such frequent, important and often otherwise mystifying Qur'anic passages "*mashāhid barzakhiyya*": "places-of-immediate-witnessing in the intermediate, spiritual world". Such typical Qur'anic passages represent precisely the kind of humanly central, often dramatically foundational inner "immediate witnessing" and "deep memory" (within a highly complex, subjective or even completely unknown time-framework) which today help to form such a familiar and phenomenologically comparable rhetorical feature of effective cinematic art.

It is very helpful to find an English version of the Qur'an which will reliably allow readers to distinguish between all the plural, "generic" second-person *verbal and pronominal* forms.

108. See especially the revealing short selection from Ibn 'Arabī's practical advice on how to approach one's reading of the Qur'an (translated from his *Kitāb al-Kunh*), already quoted in n.97.

There is a dramatic difference in the Arabic between, on the one hand, the plural "you-all" that usually refers vaguely to everybody somehow receiving this divine message, and, on the other hand, the radically different, mysterious, second-person singular – that alternately mystifying, terrifying, or undeservedly comforting "you". As Ibn 'Arabī is constantly reminding his readers, that direct and unavoidably personal address should strike each of us anew, each time, like a kind of shattering hammer-blow or lightning-bolt, as we then struggle to understand the mystery of how this particular divine "Address" (*khitāb*) could possibly encompass both the Prophet and our own soul. (Of course, in many other cases, such as direct imperatives and other verb forms, it is almost impossible to signal this fundamental difference of address in normal English translation.) Readers more acquainted with the often identical ambiguities of perspective and address in the masterpieces of Persian mystical poetry will of course immediately recognise the central role played throughout that lyrical and epic tradition of the Islamic humanities by this same fundamental feature of Qur'anic discourse.

In reality, there are very few unambiguous common "nouns" or simple "objects" – since, as Ibn 'Arabī repeatedly stresses, there is in reality only One true Subject – to be found in the Qur'an. In the original Qur'anic Arabic, the recurrent Arabic *masdar*, participial, and relatively "concretised" adjectival forms¹⁰⁹ all to some degree intrinsically and profoundly retain their underlying *active, verbal root-sense* which are essentially observable facets of a single unifying process, of an essentially active, unitary divine "Verbal Reality". That is, the essentially verbal, active form of those recurrent Qur'anic expressions, inevitably lost in their reduction to static English nouns and adjectives, is in itself the ongoing mirroring of God's immediately present and active "*Speaking*", not of some separate, reified "*Speech*". Again, the quintessential metaphysical teachings of Ibn 'Arabī are themselves simply pointed reminders that reification, in all its infinite

109. For example, in the original Arabic, *Muhammad* already is "the Praised One" while it is the concretised "name"-function of that word which is derivative.

forms, is an all too human, profoundly distorting fabrication, a deeply unconscious source of endless "idolatry": indeed quite literally – beginning with Iblīs's delusive reliance on his own limited "restrictive intellect" – *the* root of all evil. The universal Reality that is momentarily manifest in this particular process-state as being *mushrik*, *kāfir* or *munāfiq*, for example, can – and in reality, constantly does – find itself mysteriously manifest in other situations (previous as well as later) as *mu'min* or *muhsin*.¹¹⁰ All too often, Ibn 'Arabī's key ideas become simply incomprehensible when those powerfully concrete, phenomenologically so accurate "descriptive" expressions of the Qur'an are suddenly transformed by mis-translation – like the petrifying magic wand familiar in so many childhood fairytales – into lifelessly reified, apparently abstract nouns and adjectives.

It is always useful to stop and notice the particular divine Names that Ibn 'Arabī discusses in each passage of the *Futūhāt*, and to make some effort to decipher their possible meanings and concrete existential "manifestations" in the particular contexts where he (and the Qur'an) actually use those fundamental expressions. Since all of his teaching is most obviously, indissociably centred around these divine Names¹¹¹ – an all-encompassing way of speaking and conceiving of the world, at

110. I.e., "Associator" (commonly mis-translated as "polytheist"), "ingrate" or "rejecter (of God)", and "hypocrite"; then "person of faith" (often translated as "believer", even though the common, and radically different, Arabic word for "belief" does not appear a single time in the Qur'an, in any form: see n.21 in Part I) and "person who does what is truly good-and-beautiful" (a term normally applied to the highest spiritual figures). Of course once readers have associated such central fundamental Qur'anic terms synonymously with particular reified historical or social groups (or individuals, imagined concepts, etc.), it becomes almost impossible to conceive their universal Qur'anic, phenomenological meanings as Ibn 'Arabī typically uses them in the *Futūhāt* and throughout his writings.

111. It is certainly no accident that both of W. Chittick's major studies of the *Meccan Illuminations* (*SDG* and *SPK*), despite their different focuses, essentially begin with lengthy preliminary discussions relating to the divine Names and Attributes. It is simply difficult to get very far in reading and understanding the *Futūhāt*, in practice, without encountering complex discussions of the "Names". This is not the case, to the same extent, with

first glance totally alien to ordinary English and our ambient culture – some attention to their wider Qur'anic contexts can be extremely helpful for all readers seeking to enter more empathetically into Ibn 'Arabī's world-view. Indeed the scattered Qur'anic references to those Names are certainly one central scriptural illustration and source of Ibn 'Arabī's own distinctive rhetorical device of "scattering" and related puzzles which we have already highlighted in several earlier sections.

Finally, it is very helpful to slow down sufficiently, whether one is reading Ibn 'Arabī's own Qur'an citations or returning to examine their wider original Qur'anic contexts, to be able to follow and clearly perceive the unique and fundamental metaphysical and temporal "perspective shifts" marking the entire Qur'an. That is, to discern carefully "Who" or what dimension of the many divine "voices" of the Qur'an ("I", "We", the undefined "narrator", individual "actors" or significant groups, etc.) is actually speaking to "whom" (i.e., the Prophet, his enemies, his followers, the reader, etc.) at any particular moment.¹¹² In doing so – and those distinctive Qur'anic perspective-shifts were

works like the *Fusūs al-Hikam* or many of Ibn 'Arabī's influential shorter treatises on questions of practical spirituality.

112. Interestingly enough, this same question, in a more openly existential form, directly underlies each of Ibn 'Arabī's practical points regarding the proper way to read the Qur'an, in the short passage from his *Kitāb al-Kunh* quoted in n.97. Any answer to this question, of course, relates closely to the fundamental mystery embedded in the different singular and plural forms of "you" already mentioned in an immediately preceding point here, as well as to the wider question of all the intended audiences of any particular Qur'anic "address" (*khitāb*), to use Ibn 'Arabī's language.

These constantly changing metaphysical and temporal perspectives, and the array of distinctive Qur'anic perspective-shifts underlying Ibn 'Arabī's over-arching rhetoric of realisation discussed more broadly in the final section of Part I, are of course largely obscured by most existing English translations. Again, the relatively new art of cinema immediately offers a wider set of corresponding immediate visual equivalents directly conveying many of these key perspective changes: films like *Baraka* or *Wings of Desire* (*Der Himmel über Berlin*) – and many, many others – are entirely constructed around such foundational Qur'anic perspectives, including the shifting appearances of both time and space.

a central rhetorical and literary inspiration not only to Ibn 'Arabī, but also to the world-masterpieces of classical Sufi poetry created around his time in several other Islamic languages – one quickly becomes aware of the extraordinary, usually quite mysterious, shifts in perspective that pervade the Qur'anic discourse, often even within a single verse or short phrase. Gradually, the deeper significance of those shifts – which more closely reflect the unique communicative possibilities of modern cinema than our usual familiar written literary forms – already moves the attentive reader a great distance in the direction of Ibn 'Arabī's deepest teachings.

It is highly unlikely that any currently imaginable advance in Qur'anic translation will ever free readers of Ibn 'Arabī in English from having to make many of these relatively simple, but indispensable, actively ongoing sorts of mental corrections and re-translations suggested here. And any translator of the *Futūhāt* could easily extend this short list of Qur'anic challenges and difficulties almost indefinitely.

OTHER DISCIPLINES AND SCIENCES OF IBN 'ARABĪ'S TIME

One of the distinctive difficulties of Ibn 'Arabī's rhetoric in his *Meccan Illuminations*, when compared with many of his other writings (including especially *The Bezels of Wisdom*, which is most familiar to Western readers), is the way in which he brings into his discussions, throughout the *Futūhāt* – i.e., not just in certain designated chapters – constant technical and fairly elaborate allusions to virtually all the religious and rational "sciences" (or more accurately, "fields of knowledge": *'ulūm*) of his day. Today, just as much as in the past, it still takes fulltime and dedicated students, possessing all the necessary tools of Arabic and other essential historical background and a knowledgeable instructor, several years of solid study to become reasonably at home in any one of such diverse major disciplines as Arabic logic and rhetoric, *'ilm al-kalām* ("dialectical theology"), Arabic calligraphy and numerology, *fiqh* ("jurisprudence") or *usūl al-fiqh*, (Ptolemaic/Aristotelian) astronomy and astrology, optics and theories of vision, (Galenic) physiology, and the like, to mention

only a few of the dozens of traditional disciplines Ibn 'Arabī repeatedly draws upon throughout these *Meccan Illuminations*. So one can readily imagine the extraordinary obstacles this characteristic literary feature of the *Futūhāt* poses both for translators and for their eventual readers dealing with entire longer chapters of that work.

Even when the translator does feel solidly at home in each of these many requisite medieval disciplines, the challenges of attempting to communicate simply the most essential relevant features of the various fields of knowledge in question, which are needed in order to understand this or that particular passage of the *Futūhāt*, can often require the kind of introductory and explanatory apparatus that will understandably intimidate all but the most scholastically inclined readers in English.¹¹³ On the other hand, simply translating such frequent technical passages into an actually incomprehensible set of English technical equivalents, while referring more serious readers to erudite scholarly volumes hopefully explaining the particular intellectual or artistic discipline in question (even where such explanatory resources actually exist in English or another Western language), is neither fair nor conscionable. In light of such deeply challenging situations, which actually abound throughout the *Futūhāt*, it is very easy to see why so many qualified translators have until now preferred to give anthologised or thematic selections, of

113. One excellent illustration – apparently extreme, but unfortunately not atypical of what is often required for explaining the difficult sections and topics of the *Futūhāt* – is provided by Denis Gril's detailed explanatory background for several short translated passages concerning the "science of letters", from chapter 2 of the *Futūhāt*. See *Les Illuminations de la Mecque*, ed. M. Chodkiewicz (Paris, Sindbad, 1989), pp. 383-481 and 608-632: only 48 of the total of 122 pages, corresponding to a few pages of the Arabic, are occupied by the actual translation; an English translation of all the French texts in that volume is in preparation by Pir Publications. Until now, virtually all the translations from the *Futūhāt* mentioned above (n.3 and following) have, for understandable reasons, either avoided such challenging passages or adopted alternative approaches which inherently make the translation in question practically accessible only to a small, already highly specialised audience.

greater or lesser length, in which they can carefully avoid this kind of recurrent obstacle.

Because of this recurrent difficulty, one useful touchstone that both translators and especially readers of the *Futūhāt* need to keep in mind – particularly the latter group, since they can expect to encounter a wide variety of very different translating approaches in any case – is some informed awareness of what is practically and spiritually essential in relation to the larger intentions and themes of Ibn 'Arabī's work. In fact, when one looks more closely, there are often certain particular Islamic disciplines and technical vocabularies – apart from the truly foundational materials of the Qur'an, hadith and preceding Sufi tradition – which are, in given contexts, practically indispensable for understanding and communicating Ibn 'Arabī's central teachings: e.g., some understanding of kalām theology when he is involved in discussions of the divine Names; or of jurisprudence and hadith in the long chapters he devotes to each of the obligatory "acts of worship" (the *'ibādāt*). Especially in the case of many of the traditional, historically created forms of the learned religious sciences, Ibn 'Arabī's distinctive perspectives and outlook would often seem to suggest potentially radical reforms of those traditional disciplines – and even of the much wider, traditionally associated cultural and social institutions in question. His remarks in such controversial contexts are usually correspondingly detailed, nuanced and potentially wide-ranging.¹¹⁴ Readers dependent upon translations always need to be informed when such important issues are actually being raised, no matter how complex the necessary explanations might be in each case.

On the other hand, there are many other instances, particularly when the Shaykh is using the technical language and conceptual schemas of the philosophical and natural sciences of his day, when it is clear – at least to properly informed translators

114. See, for example, chapter 2, "Ibn 'Arabī and the Tasks of Spiritual Creativity and Insight", in our recent *Orientations* (n.7 in Part I); our article on "Ibn 'Arabī's 'Esotericism': The Problem of Spiritual Authority", pp. 37-64 in *Studia Islamica*, LXXI (1990); and the related recent study by E. Winkel also cited at n.39 in Part I.

acquainted with the traditional disciplines in question – that his references are sometimes more in the nature of the sorts of scattered allusions, analogies and evocative references that we are all accustomed to encountering today in the works of poets, novelists, essayists, popular spiritual authors and the like, who are not themselves writing as technical experts in the fields or disciplines from which they are quoting. In such cases Ibn 'Arabī, somewhat like those familiar contemporary types of literary and more popular writers, sometimes seems to be throwing out a variety of diverse illustrations and references intended primarily to motivate, contact or otherwise interest potentially curious students who may be coming to his work and teaching from quite different educational backgrounds and interests.¹¹⁵

Thus, in such cases where it is clear that Ibn 'Arabī (a) does not actually need that particular discipline (or his reader's knowledge of it) in order to make or prove his points, and (b) is not trying to undertake the deeper reform or correction of the particular science in question, it is often more spiritually useful – for all but the most pedantically historical readers – to point out to contemporary audiences something of the possibly cognate forms in our own cultural, social, historical settings today. Concretely, one of the particular pertinent cases in question is Ibn 'Arabī's persistent apparent reliance, in so many of his different presentations, on the established Ptolemaic/Aristotelian

115. In many ways, these sorts of passages frequently correspond to a familiar genre in our contemporary popular culture of journalistic writings intending to show that traditional spiritual or religious teachings are in some way also "proven" by, correlated with, parallel or otherwise foreshadow various features of this or that particular contemporary scientific field. This is obviously a genre which tends to be renewed with each generation, and each changing audience, as the operative "science" of the preceding generations becomes dated or dubious. There are dramatic and historically quite influential Islamic examples of precisely this sort of approach to be found, for example, throughout the famous *Rasā'il* of the Ikhwān al-Safā', a work whose writing style and spiritual use of popular scientific and cosmological themes is often explicitly echoed by Ibn 'Arabī – e.g., in the constantly repeated Arabic catch-phrases with which he begins many of his chapters and sub-sections (e.g., "*May God assist you and me with a spirit from Him...*").

cosmology (of the concentric heavenly spheres) and the Galenic physiology (i.e., of the four humours, elements, their root qualities, etc.) which, in varying forms, were largely accepted by much of the civilised world in his day, and certainly shared by intellectuals within the realms of Islam and Christianity. While most modern scholars would agree that the lasting import of the underlying spiritual symbolism of his cosmology, physiology, optics and the like – especially in its original scriptural sources – is not in fact dependent on the scientific truth of the particular theories of medieval astronomy or biology in question, the translator nonetheless has to translate and contextualise the extensive passages of the *Futūhāt* involving such earlier assumed world-views in such a way that contemporary readers can at least understand all the relevant assumptions of the accepted sciences of Ibn 'Arabī's time, while also eventually being able to arrive at their own accurate reworking of the perennial symbolism involved, in its deeper relations to metaphysics and the phenomenology of spiritual life.¹¹⁶ This is no easy task, whether for the translator or for the serious reader – but it is often practically unavoidable at a great many places throughout the entire *Meccan Illuminations*.

RECOGNISING AND CORRECTING FOR THE SPECTRUM OF ARABIC TRANSLATION POSSIBILITIES

"Last, but not least": if we have left until this point the insoluble, but unavoidable, question of technical terminology and translation, it is certainly not because of the relative practical importance of this subject, which must constantly be a central and ongoing concern for any serious translator (and reader) of the *Futūhāt*. Our essential observation here is again intended not for translators of the Shaykh – who hopefully are already

116. One can imagine something of both the scale of this requirement and the particular detailed tasks it necessarily involves by comparing the immense ongoing specialised and interpretive literature (involving in each decade hundreds of books and thousands of articles in various Western languages) which scholars continue to devote to Dante's *Divine Comedy*, a far shorter work than the *Futūhāt*.

conscientiously aware of the endless difficulties involved – but for every reader of their translations. Much as with our preceding remarks about the closely related problems of Qur'anic translation, what each reader must keep in mind is precisely the vast spectrum of Arabic translation possibilities, so that they can quickly detect each translator's own proclivities and corresponding assumed audiences (whether or not those fundamental issues are actually explicitly highlighted and explained by the translator in question), and then begin the difficult but essential task of consciously correcting for each of those determining factors.¹¹⁷

It is not really that difficult, even without knowing any Arabic at all, to envisage the two possible extremes of this spectrum, as well as the obvious problems and challenges that arise for translator and reader alike, along any point in the continuum between those extremes. One extreme is that in which the teacher finds all the appropriate words and other pedagogical devices – always involving at the very least a lengthy and highly personalised "paraphrase", taking into account the relevant predilections and sensitivities of each particular student – so that the maximum of meaning contained in the Shaykh's writing is communicated in the form that is most effective for each particular student. This is in fact close to the centuries-old traditional Islamic teaching form of the *majlis*, of lengthy, intimate personal discussion and explanations by a living master and a few students that the teacher knows well, in which weeks are often devoted to a single page or even a few lines of Ibn 'Arabī's text. When "translated" into written form – an approach which is sometimes approximated by the famous classical tradition of detailed Arabic commentaries on almost every word of the *Fusūs al-Hikam* – this effective traditional method of oral communication, even in moderation, can easily lead to the kind of work in which Ibn 'Arabī's own text and language are often almost

117. It will continue to be practically essential for readers of Ibn 'Arabī to be aware of this problem and to seek to make the necessary adjustments, since experience has shown that published translations are unfortunately rarely re-done (at least in the same language), no matter how inadequate the first attempt may have been.

completely lost from sight. It is also a kind of translation intrinsically very much tied to the specific language, setting and expectations of its particular audience, and difficult therefore to compare with or complement translations by others (even of the same Arabic work), as this kind of approach is normally impossible to transpose effectively to other, different audiences and cultural settings.

The opposite extreme – which we might imagine in the form of a kind of advanced graduate seminar, in which all the participating readers are actually already completely at home in Ibn 'Arabī's text and all the nuances of his Arabic language, technical vocabulary and wider cultural background – would be to translate each key term (or each Arabic root, in all its grammatical variations and appearances) by a single constant English equivalent,¹¹⁸ or even more helpfully, simply by citing the most familiar form of the transliterated Arabic root. Within that resolutely "literal" approach – which, incidentally, was actually historically adopted in many of the earliest Arabic and Latin translations of classical Greek philosophical texts – the ideal would be that the scholarly reader could always immediately translate back from English into the actual underlying Arabic.¹¹⁹

118. In order to pack more essential dimensions of the relevant Arabic root into a single English equivalent, translators have at their disposal a variety of possible devices, instead of simply a single noun (which in any case often does not have suitably corresponding English verbal or adjectival forms that would parallel the wide variety of Arabic words formed from a single root), including a range of other possible "equivalents" and neologisms: e.g., employing a standard adjective and noun (or adverb and verb) combination; several "component" equivalents all joined by hyphens (to indicate more clearly a *single* underlying Arabic term); capitalisation (to highlight certain technical or clearly theological usages); the use of a slash to separate two or more equally important (but in English quite different) component aspects of the same Arabic root which are impossible to represent by single English word; and so on. Again, see the further discussions of these challenges and related illustrations in our studies cited at n.102.

119. In particular, E. Winkel's translation of much of chapter 68 of the *Futūhāt* (see full references in notes 74, 98 and his related broader legal study at n.39 in Part I) actually applies throughout a particularly radical version of precisely this extreme possibility, retaining the original Arabic (in

While this is probably the approach that most knowledgeable translators of Ibn 'Arabī might personally like to be able to use – if only they lived in a world where all of their readers were indeed other professors and advanced graduate students already familiar with Arabic and Islamic thought! - its multiple insuperable drawbacks, for less elite and committed audiences, are dramatically apparent as soon as one has to teach or present this kind of translation in a more representative classroom or other teaching setting.

As a result of this usually insoluble dilemma, most conscientious translators of the *Futūḥāt*, as they begin to take on whole chapters and larger sections of that work, necessarily find themselves situated somewhere in between these two equally ideal extremes, constantly attempting to discover new means and methods to better communicate as accurately and deeply as possible the infinite meanings and intentions to be found in Ibn 'Arabī's incomparable *Openings*: this task of effective communication is always their own goal and "final cause". This is not the place to enter into our own or others' detailed efforts to respond to those perennial challenges. It is far more important, whatever methods translators may have adopted for particular audiences, for Ibn 'Arabī's readers in translation to recognise their own intensely demanding responsibilities for "translating back" what they do find before them, within the Shaykh's indispensable context of realisation, in such a way that they come away more richly and fully equipped to undertake the real, universal human

transliteration) of almost all of its dozens of complex technical terms, supplemented by translations of extended dictionary entries from the classical Arabic dictionary *Lisān al-'Arab*. There readers can see immediately how problematic such an extremely "literal" approach would be for reaching any wider, non-specialist audiences. However, the translator's introductory remarks there about the absolutely central role of somehow conveying the actual underlying Arabic root-meanings of Ibn 'Arabī's language in order to grasp the highly concrete, exquisitely appropriate spiritual phenomenology that is at the heart of Ibn 'Arabī's essential procedure of realisation in every domain, are valuable and illuminating, as are his detailed illustrations of that particular point throughout this version of chapter 68.

task of "Translation" that he so poignantly evoked in the passage from chapter 366 selected as the epigraph for this essay.

For there can be few other areas of life which more immediately, richly and irrefutably demonstrate one of Ibn 'Arabī's most central spiritual teachings: the unimaginable power and lasting influence of spiritual *intention*. The constantly growing, visibly worldwide interest in Ibn 'Arabī's ideas and teaching, despite the daunting spectrum of challenges and limitations enumerated here – not to mention the fragmentary and very limited extent of all our existing translations of his writings – is already more than just a minor miracle. It is also another lesson. For that expanding interest powerfully corroborates, on an increasingly global scale, what some teachers are fortunate enough to be able to verify in their classrooms each year: that the spiritual impact and intentions of this particular author – and of his Sources – stand behind his translators and readers alike, in mysterious ways that he challenges each of us to pursue and make real through our own necessarily creative response, our own uniquely adapted "translations" of that ever-present divine "new-Speaking".¹²⁰

120. Alluding to the epigraph from chapter 366 of the *Futūḥāt* given at the beginning of Part I of this essay (vol. XXXIII, p. 54): "... Thus there is nothing in the world but Translator, if it is translated from divine new-Speaking. So understand that!"