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ARABIC LITERATURE UNVEILED:  
CHALLENGES OF TRANSLATION

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*by*

*Peter Clark*

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### *About the author*

Peter Clark has degrees in History from the Universities of Keele and Leicester. He worked for the British Council from 1967 to 1999, mostly in the Arab world. During this time, he had developed a secondary career as writer and translator.

He wrote *Marmaduke Pickthall British Muslim*, and has translated five books and many stories from Arabic. His translation of a book on pearl-fishing in the Gulf by the Kuwaiti historian, Saif Marzuq Shamlan, will appear in 2000. He is working on the *Babel Guide to Contemporary Arabic Prose Literature since 1945*, and a collection of short stories from the Gulf.

He is Consultant Editor of *Banipal, the Magazine of Modern Arabic Literature*, and is on the Advisory Board of the British Centre for Literary Translation.

I am grateful for their comments to Mona Baker, Peter Bush, Ray Keenoy, Margaret Obank, and Samuel Shimon. Remaining idiocies and absurdities are my own responsibility.

Peter Clark, January 2000

## THE ISSUE

A century ago the west European and English-reading world was captivated by modern Russian literature.<sup>1</sup> The qualities of Pushkin, Turgenev, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and Chekhov have endured. The first translators included writers, like Constance Garnett, who were well-connected in the literary world of the day. The works of the great Russians reflected individual and collective responses to issues of class, modernisation, revolution, conscience, and identity. Fixed in time and place, their work has, nonetheless, been universal. Yet, the first and second generations of readers of the great Russians in Germany, France, Britain, and the United States were not at all familiar with the reality of Russia or with individual Russians.

By contrast the personal links today between the Anglophone world and the Arab world are manifold. Tens, perhaps hundreds, of thousands of Arabs have studied in Britain and the United States. Thousands of Arabs are married to people of European and Anglophone families. There is an emerging generation of young people with multiple ethnic and cultural identities. Billions of dollars from the Arab world are invested in Britain: deposits, property, and commercial activity from Harrod's to the Welcome Break chain of service centres of the motorways. A million or more Americans are of Arab descent. Arabs take holidays in London. Queensway and Edgware Road in west central London, with its *shawarma* stalls, its Arabic signs, and late night life, make the area resemble an updated Hamra and Ras Beirut. The Arabian Peninsula has become a major target for British exports. Many Arabs work in Britain as professionals, in business and in the universities. London has become the major Arab media centre of the world with television stations and four daily newspapers, respected throughout the Arab world. Tens of thousands of British and Americans have lived and worked in the Arab world.

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the first part of this paper is based on an article I have written, "Contemporary Arabic Literature in English", *The Linguist*, 1997, vol. XXXVI, pp. 108-110.

Hundreds of thousands take holidays every year in Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco.

Why then has a vast *contemporary* Arabic literature had such a small impact on the Anglophone reading public?

I emphasise 'contemporary' Arabic literature, for the *Arabian Nights* has had a deep and enduring influence on Western and Anglophone culture. Eighty English editions of the *Arabian Nights* were published in the eighteenth century alone.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the growing British Muslim community has ensured that the Holy Koran is read as literature by interested non-Muslims, and as the word of God by the growing community of British Muslims.

Like nineteenth century Russia, the Arab world has been going through massive social and cultural changes since 1950. These changes have influenced Arabic literature in content and form. Writing has been as exciting, as innovative, and as challenging as any other literature. The political turmoil of the region has been reflected in poetry, the novel, drama, the short story, and in non-fictional literature.

Some have attributed this failure of appreciation to something of a conspiracy against Arab culture. 'Of all the major world literatures,' Edward Said wrote in 1990, 'Arabic remains relatively unknown and unread in the West, for reasons that are unique, even remarkable, at a time when tastes here [he is writing of the United States] for the non-European are more developed than ever before and, even more compelling, contemporary Arabic literature is at a particularly interesting juncture.' He writes of an 'embargoed Literature.'<sup>3</sup>

Another objection has been put forward by literary agents, editors and publishers, the people who determine much that reaches the reader. There is an idea that there is no interest in Arabic literature. The publishing world is competitive and risks must be kept to a minimum. Britain is insular in its

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<sup>2</sup> H. Haddawy, "Introduction" to his translation of *The Arabian Nights*, W (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1990), pp. xvi.

<sup>3</sup> E. Said, "Embargoed Literature", *The Nation*, 17 September 1990, pp. 278. The article has been reprinted in: E. Said, *The Politics of Dispossession*, (London: Vintage, 1994), pp. 372-378.

cultural tastes. Only 3% of books published in the United Kingdom are translations. This contrasts with 20-30% and even more in other European countries. A generation ago, the editor of the very successful Penguin Classics series, Betty Radice, classed the literature of the Middle East with that of India, China, and Japan: probably of merit, but unlikely in English versions to be commercially viable.<sup>4</sup> Mainstream publishers would probably endorse this view. Smaller publishers who know their niche markets can calculate the smaller risk with greater accuracy. And so Arabic literature remains largely known only to Middle East specialists. It has not yet become part of world literature.

Indeed, the prescriptive idea of what meets popular taste can be illustrated from personal experience. Some years ago, I went to work in Syria and wanted to translate a work of contemporary Syria. I became interested in the work of 'Abd al-Salam al-'Ujaili, a doctor then in his seventies. He has written novels, short stories, poetry, and criticism. In particular his short stories are superb. Many are located in the Euphrates valley and depict the tensions of individuals coping with politicisation and the omniscient state. Volumes of his work have been translated into French, Russian, and other languages. Two or three short stories have appeared in anthologies and magazines in English.<sup>5</sup> I proposed to my British publisher a volume of translation of 'Ujaili's short stories. The editor replied, 'There are three things wrong with the idea. He's male. He's old. And he writes short stories. Can you find a young female novelist?'

It is worth pausing to ponder the implications of my editor's remark, which was presumably a reflection of the policy of the publishing house. In the Anglo-Saxon world 'Ujaili is unknown and therefore a risk, regardless of his reputation in Arab countries. He is thus like a first-time English-language novelist, requiring the costs and effort of promotion. Available excellence in

<sup>4</sup> Her exact words were: 'I know much is offered by the literature of China and Japan, India and the Middle East. . . . Translations of this kind are not easy to sell.' Quoted in: M. Wynn, "Betty Radice: A Memoir", in W. Radice, and B. Reynolds (eds.), *The Translator's Art: Essays in Honour of Betty Radice*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1987), pp. 41.

<sup>5</sup> For example, A. al-Ujayli, "Sultan Euphrates", translated by P. Clark, *Cimarron Review*, 1994, vol. CVIII, pp. 20-28.



contemporary Arabic literature is of lesser significance than the tastes of the Anglophone reading public as perceived by the publisher. Women's literature has a built-in advantage. Is this because of lingering orientalist fantasies of the *harem*, or due to a liberal wish to offset prevailing gender imbalances and inequities? Commercial calculation gets in the way of the dissemination in English of the best Arabic literature. A disproportionate effort is required to promote what is perceived as marginal. Risk becomes self-perpetuating.

These interconnected misgivings about the appeal of contemporary Arabic literature are reinforced by an idea that, somehow, it is intrinsically incapable of being adequately translated. 'Quotations from the Koran or from classical literature,' suggested Hans Wehr in the introduction to his famous dictionary of modern literary Arabic, 'whose origins and connotations may well elude the Western reader are readily recognised by Arabs who have a traditional education and who have memorised a wealth of ancient sources.'<sup>6</sup> Since these words were written over forty years ago, Arab readers with a traditional education are no longer an elite minority. Massive expansion in education has made the illiterate a dwindling and ageing minority. There are greater numbers of innovative Arab writers who mix ancient allusion with contemporary references.

A much younger contemporary has also written words that are likely to discourage translators, as well as agents, publishers, and editors. The Syrian writer based in Britain, Rana Kabbani, has suggested that there is some inherent problem in translating Arabic. Though she has herself translated most competently poetry of her first husband, Mahmud Darwish,<sup>7</sup> 'translating contemporary Arabic writing into English – without butchering it,' she has written, 'requires a translator of genius'.<sup>8</sup>

None of these arguments stand up to scrutiny.

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<sup>6</sup> H. Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Literary Arabic*, (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1961), pp. IX. Incidentally one of the writers whose work had been studied for an updating of the dictionary in the 1950s was 'Abd al-Salam al-'Ujaili.

<sup>7</sup> M. Darweesh, *Sand*, translated by R. Kabbani, (London: KPI, 1986).

<sup>8</sup> R. Kabbani, "Arabia in Wonderland", *The Independent*, September 1990.

The popularity of the work of Edward Said himself shows that if there is an embargo on contemporary Arab literature it is not very successful, at least when it is expressed in English. His own writings have such authority that the publication of a new book of his is an international cultural event. He is one of the few non-British to have given the highly prestigious BBC Reith lectures. As the major theorist of post-colonialist literature, his books are set texts in universities throughout the world. Moreover, the novel, *The Map of Love* by the Egyptian Ahdaf Soueif, was placed on the shortlist for the Booker Prize in 1999.

Market perception is a more serious difficulty. Perceptions become self-perpetuating; and perception is real. As a translator I have no right to complain. It is the publishers and editors who are taking the risk. The translator has to fit into the world as he or she finds it. He or she is providing a means of communication from one part of the world to another. But the observations of Betty Radice appear archaic insofar as Indian literature is concerned. Although they are not translations, the writings of Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth and Arundhati Roy are not only of merit, but they have also been commercially viable. There is no reason why there should not be a change in the perception of Arabic literature.

The negative inference of 'allusiveness' is true but only up to a point. The Western reader has never had a problem with the *Arabian Nights*. And apart from the literature of other cultures, remote in time or geography (including the nineteenth century Russian novel), there has been no problem in the allusiveness of the unfamiliar in the literature of fantasy or science fiction. Latin American literature which may be comparable to contemporary Arabic literature has had no difficulty in entering the mainstream. Moreover, English literature before the twentieth century was steeped in allusions to the Bible and to the classics of Greece and Rome, cultural reference points that can no longer be taken for granted. But the works of Tennyson or George Eliot are never out of print or favour.

The case for a greater awareness of Arabic literature is that it is the product of a group of people who total one quarter of a billion. They have been on the move in the last generation as never before. Arabic is one of the languages of the United Nations and the liturgical language of a billion Muslims, who are represented in every country of the world. The geographical position of Arab countries has made them of strategic and economic importance to the world.

The issue of Palestine/Israel, through the respective diasporas, has made the Arab world of global political and cultural significance.

Works of imagination, inspiration and reflection emanating from the Arab world are, therefore, of intrinsic importance to the rest of the world. But it is not as if the Arab world is without its own rich cultural heritage. Few languages have an unbroken literary tradition that goes back a millennium and a half. Poetry has in every century been an outstanding art form, both in written and oral forms. The novel and drama have been grafted on to indigenous heritages of story telling. The economic, social and cultural transformations of the last two generations have produced, as Edward Said has said, a dynamic modern literature.

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## THE SITUATION

**H**owever, there are many features of the literary scene in the Arab world that inhibit creativity and its promotion.

Most Arab countries secured their independence only in the last sixty years, having liberated themselves from European imperialism or from the Ottoman Empire. Each country has had to establish its own legitimacy. To achieve this, the growth areas have been education and information. This has had the effect of controlling minds, prescribing schooling and culture. Intellectual and cultural control in all Arab countries has been reinforced by strong systems of internal security. Censorship has been rigorous. State sponsorship of the arts has been conservative and unadventurous. The rise of Islamism has further inhibited freedom of expression. In the 1990s, one writer in Egypt, Faraj Fawda, was murdered; another, Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid, was forced into exile, and the octogenarian Naguib Mahfouz was beaten up in the street. In the last months of 1999, the film-directors, Michel Khleifeh in Lebanon, and Leila al-'Uthman in Kuwait have faced legal harassment initiated by Islamists. All were deemed to have been anti-Islamic.

Writers are nervous and apprehensive. It is safer not to publish. The number of books produced and published in the Arab world is shamefully small. Belgium produces more titles a year than the whole of the Arab world. Israel with a tenth of the population publishes more than Egypt.

There have been ways round the double stranglehold of official culture and censorship. Beirut and to a lesser extent Cairo have been centres of publication for the whole of the Arab world. In the last twenty years, publishing houses, like Al-Mada in Cyprus, Al-Kamel in Germany, and Riad El-Rayyes in the United Kingdom have been able to guarantee the unthreatened publication of first rate Arabic writing. The smuggling of individual books into the more repressive countries has not been impossible, though the risk of arbitrary seizure is always present. Paradoxically, when Naguib Mahfouz was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, in 1988, his works were officially banned in

many Arab countries because he had supported the Camp David Agreements between Egypt and Israel. Yet, bookshops were stocked with his books, and Arabs throughout the region were familiar with his work.

There has also been a vigorous literature of exile, not least in the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and the United States. Apart from the Arab newspapers published in London with lively cultural sections, there have been magazines, such as *al-Ighdirab al-Adabi* and the discontinued *al-Katiba* and *al-Naqid*, published from London, that have had a wide circulation and a high reputation.

Censorship, moreover, has been capricious. Radical writers who have been ideologically challenging to their domestic regimes – such as the Syrians Sa'dallah Wannus and Nizar Qabbani – have been, as it were, licensed dissidents. President Hafiz al-Asad's son attended a public reading by Nizar Qabbani. Sa'dallah Wannus' medical bills were paid for by the Syrian authorities. The reputation of each was pan-Arab and international, more than the authoritarian regimes were ready or willing to challenge. All Palestinian writers have suffered imprisonment or exile. The Palestinian novelist and literary critic, Ghasan Kanafani, was killed in Beirut in a car bomb planted by Israeli agents.

A high proportion of Arab writers have experienced exile, either in another Arab country, in Europe or the United States. The only contemporary Sa'udi writer to appear in the 1998 Routledge *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature*,<sup>9</sup> 'Abd al-Rahman Munif, was stripped of his Sa'udi nationality and has lived in Iraq and Syria. Lebanon has been a second home to writers from all over the Arab world. Paris has been a Maghribi literary centre and London is today a permanent home to dozens of Arab writers.

In addition to the physical exile there has also been a linguistic exile. French had been, for most of the twentieth century, the language of creativity in Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia. Tahar ben Jelloun and Driss Chraïbi wrote in French and won French literary prizes. Despite their Arab consciousness their work has become part of the French literary canon. Writers such as Rachid

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<sup>9</sup> J. Meisami, and R. Starkey, *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature*, (London: Routledge, 1998), vol. 2, pp. 550-551.

Boujedra feel freer in expressing themselves in French. The Syrian exile, Rashid al-Shami, writes in German. The Palestinian Anton Shammas has chosen to defy the Judaic literary monopoly of the modern Hebrew language by writing his prize-winning novel, *Arabesques*, in that language.

Artists of lesser fame or of local reputation have been in danger of imprisonment or harassment for being far less outspoken.

When a book does get published the overall quality of production is often poor. Editing and proof-reading are undeveloped skills. A first-time writer may have to pay or bankroll a publisher to ensure the publication of his or her book. There are exceptions to the poor quality of book production. Dar al-Hilal in Egypt, Dar al-Ahali in Syria, and Dar al-Adab in Lebanon have publications that are of good quality in both content and production.

The decade of the 1990s has seen a critical mass of writers who have expressed their Arab consciousness in English. There have been, throughout the twentieth century, Arabs who have written in English – Khalil Gibran, Ameen Rihani, Edward Atiyeh, Waguih Ghali, Jabra Ibrahim Jabra – and there are scores of academic writings by Arabs in English. The new phenomenon has paralleled the emergence of English as an international language, the working language of most economic sectors of Sa'udi Arabia and the Gulf. The globalisation of the English language has also accompanied the contemporary phenomenon of Arab exile through political or economic pressure, family or choice. The Jordanian Fadia Faqir, the Sudanese Jamal Mahjoub, the Syrian Samar Attar, the Palestinian Tony Hanania, the Libyan Khalid Mattawa, and the Egyptian Ahdaf Soueif are achieving critical appreciation for their writings in English. They are all unquestionably Arab writers dealing with Arab themes, and are parallel to some extent to the North African writers who have written in French. 'My work,' said Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, who wrote novels in both Arabic and English, 'could only be, in the final analysis, Arabic in the profoundest sense. Cultures have always interacted, but never to the detriment of a nation conscious of its own vital sources, of the complexity of its own identity.'<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> J. Jabra, "Influences: Why Write in English?", in *A Celebration of Life: Essays on Literature and Art*, (Baghdad: Dar al-Ma'mun, 1988), pp. 15.

It is possible to observe the emerging of an Arab English literature that may stand alongside Indian English literature or Caribbean English literature.

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## TRANSLATION

### *General*

The pioneer of translating contemporary Arabic literature into English is Denys Johnson-Davies. His first volume of translation was a collection of stories by Mahmud Taimur and was published in Cairo in 1949, with an introduction by the then Secretary General of the Arab League, 'Abd al-Rahman 'Azzam Pasha. Denys Johnson-Davies had already written a novel or two. He was a precocious student and studied Arabic at Cambridge under R. A. Nicholson. He has lived in different parts of the Arab world for most of his life. He has worked for the British Council, been a broadcaster, a businessman, a lawyer, with a high level of competence in both contemporary Arabic and in the Arabic of the *hadith*, the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, of which he has co-translated two volumes.<sup>11</sup> He is a Muslim convert, and has known Cairo since the 1940s and lives there for most of the year. But his promotion of Arabic literature in English has always been an uphill struggle. After years of negotiation, Oxford University Press published a volume of his translations of contemporary Arabic stories in 1967.

In the 1970s, following their successful African Authors series, the publishers, Heinemann, introduced an Arab Authors series. Denys Johnson-Davies was the General Editor and indeed, produced most of the translations. But the series did not match the commercial success of the African series. Many African authors write in English, so the problems and costs of translation were minimal. And the African Authors series had huge English-reading markets in West and East Africa. Who by contrast was going to read Arabic literature? Arabs read their own literature in the original Arabic.

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<sup>11</sup> *An-Nawawi's Forty Hadith*, translated by E. Ibrahim, and D. Johnson-Davies, (Beirut: The Holy Koran Publishing House, 1976), and *Forty Hadith Qudsi*, translated by E. Ibrahim, and D. Johnson-Davies, (Beirut: The Holy Koran Publishing House, 1980).



Denys Johnson-Davies has since brought out about thirty volumes of translation. He has helped to introduce the Egyptians Tawfiq al-Hakim and Naguib Mahfouz, the Syrian Zakaria Tamir, the Sudanese Tayeb Salih, and the Palestinian Mahmud Darwish to the world. He has also edited collections of short stories and of drama. Most recently, he has published his own collection of short stories.<sup>12</sup>

The Heinemann Arab Authors series did help to raise some awareness of modern Arab writing. Other small publishers have concentrated on the translation of contemporary Arabic literature. In Britain, Quartet Books have produced a small library of excellent translations of literature from most parts of the Arab world, translations both from Arabic and from French. Al-Saqi Books have produced a smaller number, though the quality has been high. And more recently Garnet Press brought out a series of Arab women's writing. All three publishing houses are owned by people from the Arab world.

In the United States, the Three Continents Press took the lead in publishing translations, from both Arabic and French. They have pioneered the work of the Moroccans Leila Abouzeid and Driss Chraïbi, and the Syrian Hanna Mina. But other small presses – Interlink Books, the University of Texas at Austin, and the University of Arkansas – brought Arab writers with a high reputation in their home countries to international attention.

Outside the English-speaking world the American University in Cairo has in the last twenty-five years brought out a stream of translations of contemporary, albeit mostly Egyptian, literature.

The award of the Nobel Prize for Literature to Naguib Mahfouz, in 1988, gave a great boost to Arab literature. Mahfouz, it was realised, was not the only Arab who could write. Most of his fiction is now available in English. His Cairo trilogy is published, not by one of the smaller specialist publishing houses but by the mainstream Doubleday of New York; and one of his editors was the late Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis.

Very few works of other contemporary Arab writers are automatically published by mainstream publishing houses. The first novel of the Lebanese,

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<sup>12</sup> D. Johnson-Davies, *Fate of a Prisoner*, (London: Quartet Books, 1999).

Hanan al-Shaykh, *The Story of Zohra*, was published by the niche publisher, Quartet Books. Chatto and Windus then took her over and her subsequent novels and stories have had the support of the marketing muscle of a major publishing house, as well as the sensitive translations of Catherine Cobham. HarperCollins have published the *Cities of Salt* trilogy of the (ex-) Sa'udi 'Abd al-Rahman Munif. KPI have ventured to translate single volumes of writers' work – Tayeb Salih, Ghazi Algosaibi, and Mahmud Darwish.

If Denys Johnson-Davies has been the pioneer, only Salma Khadra Jayyusi can compare with him in the contribution to introducing Arab literature to the West. Salma Khadra Jayyusi is of Palestinian origin and has been herself a leading poet and critic since the 1950s. Her *Trends and Movements in Modern Arabic Poetry*<sup>13</sup> is a key work of modern criticism. She had taught Arabic literature for many years; and some twenty years ago founded the Project for Translating Arabic, PROTA.<sup>14</sup> With support from people of the calibre of Roger Allen she has directed a small army of translators and editors, and a wide range of volumes have been published by various publishers in Britain and the United States – including works by the Tunisian Abu'l Qasim al-Shabbī, the Palestinians Liyana Badr and Yahya Yakhliif, the Yemeni Zayd Mutee' Dammaj and the Sa'udi Hamza Bogary. Salma Khadra Jayyusi has also edited huge anthologies. The first was of contemporary Arab poetry. This was followed by one of the literature of the Arabian Peninsula and another on modern Palestinian literature. More recently, there has been a volume of modern Arab drama. In 2000, there will be a huge anthology of Arab short stories. She has also written extensively on the literature and culture of Arab Andalusia.

There are now up to thirty publications of Arabic literature in English each year. This is a great improvement on the situation over the last generation. But with few exceptions (such as Naguib Mahfouz, Hanan al-Shaykh and now Ahdaf Soueif) the printruns are small, and the publishers are still niche publishers who know their market and have restricted capacities for promoting

<sup>13</sup> R. Allen, "PROTA: The Project for the Translation of Arabic", *Middle Eastern Studies Association Bulletin*, December 1994, vol. XXVIII, pp. 165-168.

<sup>14</sup> S. Jayyusi, *Trends and Movements in Modern Arabic Poetry*, 2 vols., (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1977).

their wares. Arab literature is still largely the preserve of Middle Eastern specialists.' It has not come out of the ghetto.

Other straws in the wind suggest the possibilities of improvement. In 1998, the magazine *Banipal* was founded. Subtitled, '*Magazine of Modern Arab Literature*', it comes out three times a year, and is edited by Margaret Obank, who has a background in teaching and publishing, but not in Arab studies. The magazine aims to bring contemporary Arab literature into the mainstream. It has an attractive layout and has photographs and drawings, translations of short stories, extracts from novels, news items, and interviews. Each issue aims to focus on a theme or a country. Its marketing strategy is to get across to the British (and international) literary public, and the indications are that it is achieving some degree of success.

In the last ten years, there has been a growth of translation studies in British universities. The objectives have been practical and to some extent vocational but literary translation has become a focus of attention. Cultural studies has also been an academic growth area. The British Centre of Literary Translation, based at the University of East Anglia, has endeavoured to get away from too heavy a European bias, and has extended its interests to Indian, African and Arabic translation. The British Council, too, is itself interested in literary translation. Literature is no longer cantonised into linguistic blocks. English literature is part of world literature. And the rendering of the literature of other languages is part of that world literature.

### *Personal*

Each translator has his or her own way of dealing with a text, his or her idea of what is the objective of the endeavour.

My own professional life has been concerned with cultural relations. I was lucky enough to spend twenty-six years living and working in Arab countries, and to have lived in Lebanon studying Arabic full-time for one year. Immediately after that year, I was in Sudan for six years. I was later Director of the British Council successively in Yemen, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, and Syria. In each of the countries where I had worked, I soaked myself in the modern history of that country, and particularly about the relations of that country with my own. And so in Sudan I became interested in

the development of that country since the Egyptian occupation of 1821. The Battle of Omdurman in September 1898 was fought a few miles from my place of work. Indeed, the office landlord was a son of the Khalifa 'Abdullahi whose forces had been crushed by Kitchener and his Anglo-Egyptian army at that battle. Shortly after my arrival, Khartoum University Press published, in 1972, a military analysis of the battle by a young historian, an army officer, 'Ismat Hasan Zulfo. In this book – 600 pages – Zulfo had written at length on the background to the events leading up to the battle.<sup>15</sup> He had gone through all the available sources, in English and Arabic, and had interviewed a number of survivors of the battle, the youngest of whom were in their mid to late eighties. Zulfo had also absorbed a lot of the oral traditions of the Mahdist movement. I read the book with fascination, but as I read it, I thought the book should be available to an Anglophone readership. Most non-Sudanese, who were interested in Sudan and the events of the Mahdiyya, of Gordon and Kitchener and the battle of Omdurman, read about them either in the books of Winston Churchill, in the popular work of Alan Moorehead, or the more academic works of A. B. Theobald, Richard Hill or P. M. Holt. There was no *Sudanese* voice. My work was with many of the Sudanese descendants of those who played a role in that battle. The work seemed to have a contemporary relevance, and I resolved to translate it.

I managed to obtain the interest of Leo Cooper, publisher of work on military history, and I worked on Zulfo's book, with the help of the author, and Ishaq al-Khalifa Sharif, a grandson of the Mahdi who had studied at Oxford and the Sorbonne, a man of acute literary sensibility and a fund of anecdotes. I also toured the battlefield with the author, and paced the ground of other battlefields of the Mahdiya. But I encountered not a few difficulties and challenges in translation. The book was too long. After all, the battle was all over in five hours. I had to persuade the author to agree to severe pruning. Non-Sudanese would not be interested in the campaigns in the 1870s of Zubair Pasha in Darfur. It was important, I argued with Zulfo, to concentrate on the drama and significance of the battle itself, and to include only the material that had a direct bearing on those five hours of fighting.

<sup>15</sup> 'I. Zulfo, *Karari: tahlil 'askari li ma'rakat Umm Durman*, (Khartoum: Khartoum University Press, 1972).

Another challenge was to get to grips with the background of the subject. I read extensively in Arabic and English and became familiar with the Turcisms of Egyptian military Arabic. One of the key factors of the battle was the gap between the effectiveness of the weaponry of the two sides, a gap that had widened in the 1880s and 1890s. This explained the effectiveness of the Mahdists in the 1880s. By 1898, they had been cut off from the developments of, for example, the Lee-Metford MK II rifle and the Maxim gun. Moreover, the Sudanese Mahdists had been subject to a boycott in the arms trade, and were unable to get spare parts or replacements for their own weaponry. I learned that translation was far more than a matter of translating words.

As a trained historian, I was also unhappy about some of the loose arguments used. It was as if the assertion of conclusions was sufficient. In general, I accepted the conclusions but had to argue with the author that an international readership could be hostile to the whole book if the structure of argument was weak or sloppy.

There was a stylistic difficulty. The author knew English and had read a lot of the contemporary journalism relating to the battle. His style in Arabic was florid, romantic, heroic, with long sentences. It was a literary work, but I was concerned to transfer the message of the work in translating the words of the book. My sentences were shorter reflecting an English journalistic style of the 1970s rather than of the 1890s. Zulfo objected and thought I was undermining the gravity of his book. At times, our differences became so serious that the project of translation was almost abandoned, and we had to bring in an arbiter.

Indeed, as I completed the book I made a quiet resolution never again to translate something by somebody who was still alive, a foolish resolution which I have cheerfully disregarded. In 1980, the book was published by Frederick Warne as a Leo Cooper book.<sup>16</sup> It was less than half the length of the original but was satisfyingly reviewed and has since been respectfully quoted by historians of modern Sudan.

In the late eighties, I became involved in translating fiction. I was asked by Salma Khadra Jayyusi to translate three novellas by the Liyana Badr. I was

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<sup>16</sup> 'I. Zulfo, *Karari: The Sudanese Account of the Battle of Omdurman*, translated by P. Clark, (London: Frederick Warne, 1980).

working in Tunisia at the time, and Liyana Badr, as the wife of a senior official of the Palestine Liberation Organisation, was one of those forced to flee Beirut and take up residence in Tunis. The novellas are about the pain and humiliations suffered by Palestinians in Beirut in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>17</sup> Although I had lived in Lebanon before the troubles and knew and empathised with Palestinians, I was not able to translate Liyana Badr's work with intimacy. The author herself was helpful and I was able to consult other Palestinian friends. As I translated, I had a map of Beirut on my desk to revive my own knowledge of the city and its southern suburbs, but this was not the same as walking the territory, which were still battlefields as I worked on the book.

In 1988, I moved to the United Arab Emirates and read some of the stories of Muhammad al-Murr, the Dubai based writer. Born in 1955, he published eleven volumes of short stories during the 1980s and I found them enchanting. They explained so much of the values of the people of the Emirates, and how they had preserved these values through the years of sudden wealth and immense social changes. As with Zulfo's work, I felt impelled to share my enchantment with others. Forest Books, a dynamic small publishing house that specialised in producing translated work, agreed to publish a selection.<sup>18</sup> I chose twenty-one out of the 144 published stories. Characters in Muhammad al-Murr's stories drink alcohol and commit adultery. As I read them I felt I was eavesdropping on the private conversations of the people of the Emirates. The author had no objection to his work being translated and helped me a great deal. It was an advantage to be living in the Emirates. Indeed, I visited every place, district, beach or shopping centre that was mentioned in the stories.

Muhammad al-Murr has studied in the United States and has read widely in Western and Arab literature. There was no great technical difficulty in translating them. I was aiming to reproduce the impact the Arab stories had on an Arab reader for the Anglophone reader. This produced a challenge in

<sup>17</sup> L. Badr, *A Balcony over the Fakihani*, translated by P. Clark, and C. Tingley, (New York: Interlink Books, 1993). The original was *Shurafa 'ala 'l-fakihani*, (Damascus: Palestine Liberation Organisation, 1983).

<sup>18</sup> M. al-Murr, *Dubai Tales*, translated by P. Clark, (London: Forest Books, 1991).

translating imagery that had significance for an Arab reader but may be blunter or misleadingly exotic for the Anglophone reader. Without realising it at the time, I was ruminating on the dilemma, classically expressed in 1813 by Friedrich Schleiermacher: 'Either the translator leaves the writer alone as much as possible and moves the reader toward the writer, or he leaves the reader alone as much as possible and moves the writer toward the reader.'<sup>19</sup> For example, in one story the wife of a football fan takes an interest in her husband's enthusiasm and talks about a hopeless footballer who, as the Arabic had it, 'had the feet of donkeys.' I turned this into the hapless man 'having two left feet', an expression which I thought was a particularly appropriate English equivalent. I have been criticised for removing a vivid term that had the flavour of old Dubai. Moreover, it was pointed out that I had weakened the Arabic. The use of the word 'donkey' in Arabic, *himar*, is strong, almost explosive and certainly very insulting. On reflection, I think my critics were right, though I do not go anywhere near as far as Vladimir Nabokov who wrote that 'we must dismiss, once and for all the conventional notion that a translation "should read smoothly", and "should not sound like a translation" (to quote the would-be compliments, addressed to vague versions, by genteel reviewers who never have and never will read the original texts).'<sup>20</sup> The whole point is that the potential reader of Arabic literature in translation is not likely to read the original. That is why he or she is reading it in translation. It is simply good manners to present the literature in an acceptable, a reader-friendly manner.

My anxiety that I was eavesdropping on my hosts was confirmed when some people in the Emirates complained that 'Westerners' who read about the goings-on of Muhammad al-Murr's characters would 'believe we were all like that'. I tried to reassure the critics that readers of Agatha Christie would be similarly misled if they inferred that the whole of the British middle classes were conspiring to murder each other.

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<sup>19</sup> F. Schleiermacher, "From the Different Methods of Translation", translated by W. Barteck, in R. Schulte and J. Biguenet (eds.), *Theories of Translation*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 42.

<sup>20</sup> V. Nabokov, in "Foreword" to M. Lermontov, *A Hero of Our Time*, translated by V. Nabokov, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. xiii.

Complaints such as these do raise the issue of the selection of work to be translated. Selection cannot be neutral. I explained the grounds for my selection of the stories to be translated in an introduction to the book. 'The selection has been based on a number of criteria. The most significant has been that I liked them. I have also tried to present the range and development of Muhammad al-Murr as a writer. I have chosen some stories that he has particularly liked. I have also been guided by the preferences of others.'

A second collection of Muhammad al-Murr's stories, *The Wink of the Mona Lisa*, has been published, translated by Jack Briggs. He too was living in the Emirates when he worked on the translations. He too is a friend of the writer. But Jack Briggs has known the Gulf for fifty years and was the head of the police in Dubai in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>21</sup> His selection had far more stories that were based in the past. His selection reflected his approach to Muhammad al-Murr's work as mine had reflected mine. *Dubai Tales* had a print-run of 2,000, of which 1,000 were sold in the Emirates and 1,000 in the rest of the world. *The Wink of the Mona Lisa* has been published by Motivate Publications, a Dubai-based publisher, with an excellent marketing strategy. Within five years of publication, over 6,000 (4,000 in hardback) have been sold, the vast bulk in the United Arab Emirates, the number of whose Anglophone readers may not exceed the population of a large British provincial city. The translations have drawn attention to the existence of a literary creativity in the Gulf that can give an extra dimension to the general outside perception of the people of the area as lacking culture, concerned only with materialism and technical modernity.

For five years in the 1990s, I lived and worked in Syria. During this time, I translated a novel by the doyenne of Syrian writers, Ulfat Idilbi, who was born in Ottoman Damascus in 1912. There is a great deal of interesting work being written by Syrians both in Syria and outside. Poets like Adonis and Nizar Qabbani have chosen exile. But the playwright, Sa'dallah Wannus, and the novelist, Hani al-Rahib, have been innovative craftsmen with deservedly wide reputations. But I chose a work of Ulfat Idilbi for a number of reasons. First, there is a bias (to which I have already alluded) towards an interest in women's literature. It would be easier to get her work published. Secondly,

<sup>21</sup> M. al-Murr, *The Wink of the Mona Lisa*, translated by J. Briggs, (Dubai: Motivate Publishing, 1994).



she is a marvellous story-teller. Thirdly the novel I translated reveals much of recent Syrian history and the formation of the outlook of a generation.<sup>22</sup> As with the work of Zulfo and of al-Murr, an obsessive desire developed to share the pleasures and insights I had derived from her work. But there are also other excellent Syrian works that should be translated.

I tried and failed to interest publishers in the plays of Sa'dallah Wannus. He is an Arab Brecht, who has broken down the barrier between performers and audience. All his work has a strong political message. Publishers would only consider bringing out his work if there was an English language production. Only one of his plays has been published in English translation – in the anthology of Arab drama, edited by Salma Khadra Jayyusi – though more is available in French.

In 1997, just three weeks before his death, students of English at the British Council Damascus put on my translation of Sa'dallah Wannus' play, *Al-fil ya malik al-zaman* [The elephant, Oh Lord of ages]. I became aware that translating drama for performance called for skills different from those required for translating drama for publication. In drama for production, it is essential to carry the audience with you at every point. In a book it is possible to check something a few pages back. At the theatre the audience cannot roll time back. The language is transmitted from voice to ear, rather than from page to eye, and must have immediate impact. I worked to some extent with the director and the actors, and I realised that a successful translation of drama for production requires a partnership between actors, director, and translator.

Even greater challenges and pitfalls await the translator of poetry. Apart from Rana Kabbani's English renderings of some of the poems of Mahmud Darwish I know of no successful translation of contemporary Arabic poetry into English. Generally the best has been a statement of what the words in Arabic say. These can be helpful to the reader who knows Arabic, but they become little more than a commentary or a crib. If the reader has read the poem in Arabic, the words in English can act as a reminder, an echo, of the original.

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<sup>22</sup> U. Idilbi, *Sabriya: Damascus Bitter Sweet*, translated by P. Clark, (London: Quartet Books, 1995). The original was *Dimashq, ya basmat al-huzn*, (Damascus: Ministry of Culture, 1980). I have also translated *Grandfather's Tale*, by the same author, (London: Quartet Books, 1998).

The difficulties of translating poetry were succinctly stated by Fadwa Tuqan in her autobiography. 'When put into another language,' she wrote, 'poetry loses much of that fire that is sustained by the use of a particular expression. An expression is not just a vehicle for transmitting ideas. Into one particular expression, quite apart from the dictionary meaning, there may be condensed a great deal of passion, with echoes and shades that elude effective translation. The expression may be loaded with a legacy that includes a catalogue of the trials of a nation, an accumulation of its memories and sentiments.'<sup>23</sup>

There are solutions. Few competent translators are also gifted poets in their own language. Salma Khadra Jayyusi, in her anthologies of poetry, employed two translators. The first was one who knew the language. The second was one who was a poet. The act of translation required a close collaboration between the two. Ten years earlier, the first translations of the poetry of Mahmud Darwish into English had been a similarly joint venture.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, the language specialist needed a profound poetic sensitivity and an awareness of the significance and ambience - for example, Fadwa Tuqan's 'echoes and shades' - of the poem being translated. And the English language poet needs to have a deep sympathy for the Arab poet and his or her background. It can be done, and has been done for other European languages. The work of Adonis has been a commercial success in both Italian and Spanish. But in

<sup>23</sup> F. Tuqan, *Al-rihla al-as'ab* [The more difficult journey], 2nd ed., (Nablus: Shuruq, 1994), pp. 158-159.

<sup>24</sup> M. Darwish, *Selected Poems*, translated by I. Wedde, and F. Tuqan, (London: Carcanet, 1973). Even earlier a small volume was published in Amman: M. Darwish, *The Soldier Who Dreamt of White Lilies*, translated by H. Martens, A. Bushnaq, and A/R. Yaghi, (Amman: publisher unknown, c1969).

English Arabic poetry has had very little impact, in spite of the participation of poets of the quality of John Heath-Stubbs.

*JK CS*

## CONCLUSION

The modern Arab world has often been sensitive to outside interest in its affairs. 'Orientalism' is by definition bad. The Arab world contrasts a glorious mythical past with a frustratingly bitter present. Close involvement with Western Europe and the United States was lacking in the times of glory. American and European interest is, therefore, subject to suspicion.<sup>25</sup> Arabs have not been alone in apprehension of outsiders' curiosity. Plenty of parallels can be found from the Chinese to the Welsh. But there is sometimes combined with this hostility to orientalism a complaint that there is an in-built 'Western' hostility to Arab interests and culture. United States support for the state of Israel is seen as the unanswerable demonstration of this assertion. A readiness to bomb particular Arab regimes, such as those of Iraq or Libya, is seen to support it. But there are issues in the more tranquil world of translation that might give it credibility.

There is, alas, no doubt that some people are anti-Arab. Hostility towards, and prejudice against, individual national or racial groups is a fact of life and nourishes most political, strategic and military confrontations. A reading of the British popular press shows that there is nothing unique in anti-*Arabism*. Globalisation has not vanquished xenophobia. But anti-*Arabism* can be balanced by many instances of interest in, sympathy for, and love of things Arab. Other aspects of Arab or Arab-derived culture are becoming familiar to the Anglophone, and are embraced by Britain and the English-speaking world, from music, Arab cuisine to sufiism. Even such British institutions as Saatchi and Saatchi and Mothercare are the creations of people originally from the Arab world. These connections illuminate the diversity of that world and the hazards of generalisation or stereotyping.

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<sup>25</sup> This has been discussed in a paper, "Like a Bridge over Troubled Waters: Ideological Encounters in Arabic Translation", by Y. Suleiman, delivered at the University of Salford, 21 November 1998.

The translation of valued texts is one way of overcoming any perceived hostility. Publishers in a competitive world are afraid of risk, but the success of Motivate Publications' promotion of Muhammad al-Murr's *Wink of the Mona Lisa* suggests that there may be no risk if the market is adequately researched.

Selection of texts for translation can reinforce prejudices and stereotypes. Translation from Arabic is a highly skilled but poorly rewarded activity. Translators dealing with any pair of languages can rarely support themselves on translation alone. But the momentum for what gets translated still largely comes from outside the Arab world. There are two ways (at least) for Arabs to reclaim the initiative and to determine, or at least influence, the translation agenda.

The first is for Arabs to become skilled in foreign languages and become proficient in literary translation. This has already started. There have been, throughout the century, Arab writers who have expressed Arab consciousness in the English language. There are translators whose first language is Arabic but who have an outstandingly sensitive command of English such as Issa J. Boullata, Ibrahim Muhawi, Bassam Frangieh, and Samira Kavar. There could be more.

The second way is to remove the risk publishers fear. The risk capital for one book, its production and promotion, is little more than £10,000. A programme of subsidised or bankrolled translations might ultimately be no risk at all.

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