

# Translating contemporary Arabic literature: a pleasure with many obstacles

*Traducir literatura árabe contemporánea:  
un placer con muchos obstáculos*

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**Abstract:** The following observations and considerations about the state of translation and publication of contemporary Arabic literature in German draw heavily on the material collected for numerous presentations delivered at very different occasions in Arabic, English, French or German on aspects of this topic given during the last twenty-five years<sup>1</sup>.

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1 *Only a very few of these papers were published, sometimes in rather remote places. They are the following:*

- «Viewing “the Orient” and Translating Its Literature in the Shadow of The Arabian Nights», in: YCGL 48 (2000), 95-106;
- «Nachwort: François Pétis de la Croix, Tausendundein Tag. Persische Märchen» (transl. Marie-Henriette Müller; Zürich, 1993), 621-631;

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**Key words:** Arabic; book publishing; German; intertextuality; literature; translation.

**Resumen:** Las siguientes observaciones y consideraciones sobre el estado de la traducción y de la publicación de literatura árabe contemporánea en alemán se basan en gran medida en el material recopilado para numerosas presentaciones sobre aspectos relacionados con este tema, realizadas en árabe, inglés, francés o alemán, en ocasiones muy diferentes, durante los últimos veinticinco años.

**Palabras clave:** árabe; publicación de libros; alemán; intertextualidad; literatura; traducción.

Myths, clichés and reproaches readily surface when translation from Arabic into Western languages is discussed or when party small-talk centers on this topic. Arabic is impossible to translate, we hear, as the «flowery diction», of which this language is supposed to consist, cannot be adequately rendered in another idiom. No Arabic text, being thoroughly steeped as it is in popular life and lore and in historical traditions, will be understood properly by a non-Arab. The Arab mind being different from other people's minds will not lend itself to presentation in any language but Arabic. The Western project of translating contemporary Arabic literature is in fact, so the frequently heard reproach, directed by a «hidden agenda», as is clearly visible from the works selected for translation. German interest in Arabic and other oriental literatures has been tremendously impressive, as is frequently recalled with references to Goethe, Herder, Rückert and many others and their love and admiration for the Orient. And then, after all, the Arab world has done so much for the development of the modern West, translating innumerable and invaluable works first during the 8<sup>th</sup> to the 10<sup>th</sup> cent. in Bagdad, then during the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> cent. in Toledo and elsewhere in al-Andalus. So, why would translation activity in the West where Arabic is concerned be as sparse as it still is?

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- «A Movement against a Structure. The Situation of Contemporary Arabic Literature in German Speaking Countries – Inside and Outside the Universities», in: *Awraq. Estudios sobre el mundo árabe e islámico contemporáneo* 21 (2000), 167-180;
  - «Translating Against the Clash of Civilizations», in: *La traducción de literatura árabe contemporánea, antes y después de Naguib Mahfuz* (ed. Miguel Hernando de Larramendi and Luis Miguel Pérez Cañada; Cuenca [Ediciones de la Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha], 2000), 71-77;
  - «al-Muʿallafāt al-ʿarabīyaf ʿālamjadīd», in *al-Karmal* 27 (2004), 208-211;
  - «Between Hammer and Anvil or About the Intricate Pleasure of Being a Translator from Arabic to German», in: *European Cultural Foundation Newsletter* 20/iii (October 1997), 10f.; «Zwischen Hammer und Amboss». [www.goethe.de/ges/phi/prj/ffs/the/ube/de373986.htm](http://www.goethe.de/ges/phi/prj/ffs/the/ube/de373986.htm).

This potpourri of fact and fiction, of praise and blame, shows easily the different battlefields on which translators of contemporary Arabic literature, in addition to the actual translating they are supposed to do, have to prove their worth. And it also shows to what extent the seemingly innocuous activity of the transfer of words and meaning can get stuck in historical and political squabbles or serious ideological confrontations.

## 1. THE BURDEN OF HISTORY

In the Arab world, the cliché is widespread that in order for a work of contemporary Arabic literature to have a chance of being translated into a Western language, it must either deal with tyranny or political repression in the Arab world, describe the situation of women in Arab or Islamic societies as imprisoned creatures, or else present conflicts between Muslims and Non-Muslims.

There is some truth and some absurdity in this statement. The truth is that Western publics do regard «the East» or «the Orient» with a focus on what they consider scandalous, be it politically, socially or morally. This at least is one side of the coin. But there is also an absurdity in the reproach that lies behind the statement, for Arabic literature does, after all, deal (in different forms and various styles) with these questions. Many of the most important works of contemporary Arabic writing present, discuss, or reflect upon repression in different fields of human existence, and this, of course, in the Arab world. So translating these works of prose and poetry cannot avoid these problems or escape them, a statement not invalidated by the fact that works that are from a literary point of view of a rather modest quality treat this kind of problems often more blatantly aggressively and receive, for this reason, more attention (in the Arabic original as well as in translation).

Yet, the question of the expectations of Europeans reading literature from the Arab world is much more intricate than a simple reproach of the kind mentioned above would suggest.

One may wonder why even well-educated Europeans hearing of «Arabic literature» will first think of works from bygone ages, why they have to ask whether there is actually at present any literary creation in the Arab world, and one may, as a result, be no longer surprised to find that a new translation of a manuscript of the *Arabian Nights* receives a warm welcome in Germany by the press as well as by the reading public, whereas the sale of any well-written and highly interesting novel of contemporary Arabic literature may not be sufficient to even cover the costs of production. One may also wonder why this kind of European readers are still searching for what they consider the «atmosphere of the *Arabian Nights*» in contemporary novels—and being, sure enough, disappointed when they do not find anything of the sort.

My claim would be that such a phenomenon can only be explained by looking back into history, into the relationship between Europe and the Arab world, and I would like to present a few points that may help to support this claim and to explain this attitude that seems to be an obstacle for the publication and the spread of modern Arabic literature in translation.

## 2. A TURNING POINT OF PERSPECTIVES

1683 was the year when the Ottoman-Turkish troops tried a second time, and again in vain, to conquer the Hapsburg capital of Vienna. At the last minute, they were beaten by military force and withdrew or, rather, took to flight, a turn of events that was to initiate the gradual and continuous retreat that only ended with the almost complete loss of Ottoman territories in the Balkans and, after the First World War, with the dismemberment of the Empire and the creation of the Turkish republic.

Surely, there was a first, also unsuccessful, siege of Vienna in 1529, but this was not followed by a large scale retreat but, rather, by the further expansion and consolidation of the great Middle Eastern empire, reaching its widest extension during the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. This development was, in fact, at the root of what became known as «Türkenfurcht» in German, meaning fear of the Turks, a sentiment that was to determine the Central European attitude towards the Turks and Muslims for quite some time. It was a deeply felt anxiety and insecurity formulated in many songs and spread in numerous pamphlets telling about the horrors of the Muslim (= Turkish) world, frequently reports written by travelers (some of them former prisoners of war) to the Ottoman empire. All this contributed to the construction of a horrifying image of «the Turk» in Central Europe. And in those days of religious dissension (only a few years after the Reformation) this horrifying image was even made use of in theological disputes, for instance by Martin Luther calling the Pope the brain of the Antichrist and the Turk his sword.

The situation had completely changed at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century (even though fragments of this image kept clinging to European minds), and the long-term European reaction to the second, and final, siege of Vienna in 1683 was to become quite different: it was a sentiment of relief and, later on, an exoticizing curiosity often encouraging a rather casual dealing with Middle Eastern reality.

Before, as already indicated, «the Turk» or, for that matter, «the Muslim», had almost always been a monstrous figure lacking human or even pleasant qualities. Now, however, a basic change occurred. The former world of monsters became a region inhabited by wondrous and wonderful beings. The monsters of yore turned into strangely clad creatures, partly pleasant, yet partly unpredictable or even cunning and deceitful, if not murderous, as Maxime Rodinson observed decades ago (1974). In

any case, during the 18<sup>th</sup> century this world of the Turks and the Muslims developed, in the mind of the Europeans who felt no longer threatened by it, into a world full of magic. And this world, many Europeans liked to «visit» more and more frequently, not in the actual, physical sense of the word, but in a metaphorical sense, meaning that the Orient of the European vision became a refuge, both intellectual and emotional, for European writers and intellectuals of the Romantic period, in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> and the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

This was a time of accelerated changes on the political, technical, scientific, economic and social levels, entailing a loss of orientation and a disillusionment with one's own environment. There arose, therefore, a tendency to take refuge not so much in a better future but rather in a past considered preferable to the present. The widespread idea that the past was being lost and that traditional certitudes were slipping away led to an increased, almost frantic interest in the history and the literature of the Middle Ages and also in popular culture and folklore.

The Middle Ages at that time were no longer considered simply as the «Dark Ages», a view inherited from the era of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. Rather, they had become a kind of a paradise lost, never to be regained, only to be remembered. At the same time, many of the most important and enlightened intellectuals of that period went in search of popular wisdom doomed to perish. Proverbs, popular songs, fairy tales were all collected and published in bulky volumes. The famous collection of folktales compiled by the Grimm Brothers, Jacob and Wilhelm, dates from that time (beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century) as do editions and compilations of medieval epics.

It was this period of dwindling fear of Ottoman-Turkish assault, of the forceful expansion of European power worldwide, and of the gradual transition from Enlightenment to Romanticism, that brought forth the beginning of the modern Western image of «the Orient» that takes a long time to disappear, as can hardly be denied.

### 3. THE ARABIAN NIGHTS AND THEIR LIKES

Did it start with the publication in twelve slender volumes of the first French translation of the *Thousand and One Nights* outside the Middle East, and this between the years 1704 and 1717? The translator and editor was the French Orientalist Antoine Galland (1646-1715), who from 1709 onwards was professor at the Collège de France. His knowledge of «the Orient» not only stemmed from the then available texts; he also knew the region through his own experience. Several travels had taken him to the Turkish and Levantine lands of the Ottoman Empire.

When translating *Les Mille et Une Nuits. Contes Arabes*, Galland took into consideration the literary taste and the moral conventions of his time. He was, thus, the first to mould the stories of the *Arabian Nights* into a form acceptable to the prospective

readers. To do this, he had at his disposal a lengthy manuscript of Syrian origin, and also several shorter and fragmented ones containing individual stories that he himself added to the other ones, e.g. *Sindbad the Sailor* and *Aladdin and the Magic Lamp*. Finally, he also included in his version of the *Thousand and One Nights* some additional stories that were transmitted to him by a Maronite informant from Aleppo. The result is, thus, honestly speaking, a concoction of stories from different sources, meaning that the creation or at least the composition of the «most oriental» literary work was undertaken by a European, the work that was to be regarded as the literary work of the Arab world and behind which all other literary production seemed to fade away.

All this has been amply studied by scholars of Arabic or French literature, so there is no need to delve into it. Neither will the further developments of both the Arabic text and European translations of the *Thousand and One Nights* be traced in detail here, as there are numerous books available on this topic. What this essay will trace is the growth of a European image of «the Orient» and its literature(s), a vision that has slowly degenerated into a cliché making difficult today the distribution of contemporary Arabic literature in translation, because this literature by and large does not correspond to that cliché.

When Antoine Galland published his translation of the *Arabian Nights*, he could not, of course, be aware of the consequences. For him it was a scholarly and/or literary endeavor through which he tried to satisfy the curiosity of his educated contemporaries. He would increase their knowledge if not of «the Orient», then at least of oriental literature. Thus, he contributed to, or helped to create, the image of a magical, an enigmatic, a fairy-tale Orient.

There was, however, a much less well-known contemporary of Antoine Galland who went one step further in withdrawing from, or bluntly disregarding, scholarly principles than Galland. This was François Pétis de La Croix (1653-1713), who, by and large forging or inventing an «Oriental» work, illuminated the requirements of the literary taste of his period and, at the same time, contributed considerably to the increase in the fascination of the Orient.

François Pétis de La Croix was born in 1653. His father, a royal interpreter for Turkish and Arabic as well as the author of an Arabic-Turkish/Turkish-Arabic dictionary, imbued him with an interest in the Muslim Middle Eastern world. Not yet seventeen years old, de La Croix left for the Orient where—in Syria, Persia and the Turkish parts of the Ottoman Empire—he spent altogether ten years. After his return to France he worked at the court of Louis XIV and later took over his father's post. In the following years he traveled on several occasions to North Africa as ambassador of his Majesty the Sun King. And when embassies came to Paris from Algeria, Tunisia and Tripolitania, François Pétis de La Croix fulfilled important functions in making the two sides understand each other, linguistically at least. In 1692 he took on another task—a professorship for Oriental languages at the Collège Royal. For this purpose, he added

Ethiopian and Armenian to the list of Oriental languages he was familiar with. In all these functions his son, born in 1698, succeeded him.

François Pétis de La Croix's father had already translated several works from Arabic into French. He himself had published, for instance, a translation of *Sindbad* in 1701, three years before the publication of Galland's version. Due to these translation activities, for a long time no one had any doubts about the veracity of the statements made by François Pétis de La Croix in the introduction to his *Mille et un jour. Contes persans*. There he claimed to have received a copy of this work during his stay in Isfahan from a derwish called Mokles (*mukhlis*). This Mokles was to have translated this work «from the Indian language» or to have composed it on the basis of an Indian work.

The story of this origin of the *Mille et un jour* was to be the accepted version until very recently. Even the doubts pronounced by Joseph von Hammer, the Austrian Orientalist, and Richard Burton, another translator of the *Arabian Nights*, passed unheeded. They both pointed out that the alleged Persian original had never been found. Also, there is no indication of such a work, which ought to have been rather voluminous, in the travel-notes left by de La Croix. So, in fact, according to the state of present research, *Les Mille et un jour* has to be considered the product of the presumed translator's fantasy and imagination, derived from, and developed on the basis of, his vast knowledge of then existing Oriental folk literature, its themes, motifs, and style. He took stories from here and there, inventing others and dividing them to fit into the pattern of the 1001 days (even though, in the end, he does not arrive at the required number), and he put a narrative frame around them, exactly in the way he knew from the *Thousand and One Nights* and probably also from similar narrative collections like *The Hundred and One Nights*. The difference between the *Thousand and One Nights* and the *Thousand and One Days* seems to be mainly that in the former no one particular intention or educational purpose is apparent, whereas in François Pétis de La Croix's collection such a purpose can easily be found: men are not as unfaithful and perfidious as they are often thought to be.

The two literary points of departure of the fascination with the Orient in Europe show a twofold approach to the Orient. There is the more scholarly path followed by Antoine Galland who, even though influenced by the taste of his cultural environment, after all translated from available and identifiable manuscripts. And there is the more— shall we call it «creative»?— approach or path followed by François Pétis de La Croix, who took elements of Oriental origin and moulded them according to his educational purpose and what he rightly presumed to be the expectations about the Orient shared by his French readers. And these expectations originating from the visions of the Orient were also shared by readers beyond the French borders.

What is astonishing here is the convergence of the availability of works stemming from, or associated with, the Middle East on the one hand, and on the other a cultural climate ready to push authors to draw on these works in many different ways. There are probably no German authors, important or unimportant, who would not at that

time, in one work or another, refer to the *Thousand and One Nights*, using motifs and themes, alluding to events, reviving characters or objects, or imitating literary forms found in the *Arabian Nights*. It is an immensely rich literary production that can be related to the work done by Antoine Galland and François Pétis de La Croix and the European vision of the Orient they nourished.

The «Orientomania» embodied in this attitude, and further developed in the European mind during the 18th and 19th centuries, cannot here be presented, since it is an extremely rich and vast field. Like it or not, it is part of the European cultural heritage. A stroll through the halls of painting from the 18th and 19th centuries in any of the big museums will prove this. The initial trends have, of course, been varied, changed and diversified, yet much of them is still discernible and has a strong influence on the perception of the present Middle East, including its literatures.

To sum up, one could argue that the long history of the reception of the *Arabian Nights* and similar writing has built an insurmountable obstacle to progressive translation and publication of Middle Eastern literature. Misapprehensions are pervasive here. There is hardly a travel agent advertisement for vacation in the Middle East that does not project images of the region with allusions to the *Arabian Nights*. Frequently, in reports about any part of the Middle East or in the few reviews found in newspapers about modern Arabic literature, one comes across at least a brief hint that the place presented or the book under description either does or does not resemble the *Arabian Nights*. How often do we read about the «end of the *Thousand and One Nights*» as a comment on changing social realities in the Middle East! All these obstacles have been changing in character within a changing framework of national habits and international relations, and there may be hope that eventually Arabic literary works will be read and then treated like literature from any other region of the world, as works appreciated for their individual qualities or criticized for the individual deficiencies—that they will no longer be works fulfilling expectations and fantasies about the Arab world, but will instead help us to listen to it and understand it.

The most recent developments in the Arab world, the demonstrations, «revolutions» and civil wars beginning in early 2011 have once more underscored this fact. For loud echoes of unrest, revolt and opposition to repressive rulers, of injustice and oppression can be found in modern Arabic literature through the last fifty years. But since this literature is not widely read and is hardly available in translation, the uprising of people no longer willing to put up with their situation caused enormous surprise.

#### 4. THE GREAT TRADITION AND THE DIFFERENT SITUATION TODAY

Very often, in conversations about translation in the context of the Arab world, enthusiasm grows visibly and voices become vibrant. Translation today, so we, the



translators, are told, can be considered just the continuation of an age-old tradition of cultural exchange across the Mediterranean or between the Muslim and Christian worlds (as some people still like to call the two regions). Allusion is, of course, being made here to several particular periods in the history of the Mediterranean region.

There was «Bagdad» between the end of the 8th and the beginning of the 10th centuries, when the Muslim conquests had made a new «immigrant» group dominant in a region of old civilizations. This new group was obliged to encourage or enforce translation so they would obtain the means—technical, philosophical or religious and intellectual—to comprehend the existing civilization and be able to secure their power. The necessity to obtain arguments to elaborate and prop up their own religion; the belief that the Quran encourages the acquisition of knowledge from any source; and the conviction that sciences like astrology, astronomy, medicine and alchemy bring practical benefit—all this urged them to initiate wide-spread translation activities that are connected with famous names like: Ḥunayn ibn Iṣḥāq, Qusṭā ibn Lūqā, Thābit ibn Qurra and many others. They made the texts of Classical learning available to their new rulers.

There was also «Toledo» during the 12th and 13th centuries where, again, politico-military developments made possible and encouraged translation: the «Internationalization» of internal Hispanic conflicts and the favorable «demographic» conditions: a society with three religions (not cultures, as one would call them immediately these days): Christian, Muslim, and Jewish; also a society in which several languages were spoken and/or read: Arabic (in written and spoken versions), several Romance colloquial varieties, Latin as the language of the Church, and finally Hebrew. To this environment, people came from the rest of Europe to widen and enrich their education with the knowledge available on the Iberian Peninsula, and with the help of «Hispanics», they translated works into Latin that then contributed to the intellectual and scientific development in the West.

And there is, finally, the Arab *nahḍa*, beginning in the middle of the 19th century, and in the context of which an important translation project chiefly from French, English and later Russian, into Arabic was realized, including literary, philosophical and scientific texts.

All these were beautiful, exciting and certainly useful translation activities, fruitful for cultural exchange, but they have little to do with the context in which today literary texts are translated from Arabic into German. The purpose here is no longer an immediately utilitarian one of translating texts that are intellectually, scientifically or technically useful for the development of one's society. Translating *belles lettres* today means making texts available that tell of people from elsewhere in the world: their joys and sufferings, their happiness and distress, their doings and dealings, their grand thoughts and their daily life. Literature speaks of all that, but in order to read it one has to want to know more about these people and their experiences.

## 5. THE STEPS TO VISIBILITY OF CONTEMPORARY ARABIC LITERATURE

The history of the presence of contemporary Arabic literature in the book market in Germany, German-speaking Switzerland and Austria is connected with the history of the presence of Third World literature in general. But due to the particular relationship between Germany and the Arab world, additional difficulties are involved.

The word «presence» is being used deliberately in this context rather than the more common «reception», for the latter would be an exaggeration considering the so far rather limited response among the German reading public in general, and intellectuals with specialized knowledge in particular. Obviously, this reaction lacks the breadth and depth which should be dignified by the term «reception». There are, today, maybe five or six authors from the Arab world that are less unknown than their colleagues. They are Tahar Ben Jelloun, Assia Djebar, Mohamed Choukri, Naguib Mahfouz, Amin Maaluf and Yasmina Khadra. Four of them live or lived in France, writing in French; one is a Nobel laureate and two have become famous through writing a particular brand of literature eagerly devoured by European readers: description of psychological and material misery and political thrillers.

The development of the presence of this Arabic literature in German-speaking lands, may conveniently be divided into three steps.

When this literature, from the Third World in general and the Arab world in particular, made its first shy appearance, it was found on the shelves of small shops specializing in products (clothes, foods etc.) from the «South», which was not the word then used. It was in the neighborhood of coffee from the Tanzanian cooperatives, of llama wool sweaters from the Andes, and of incense of Indian origin, that one could find the first translations of poems by Mahmoud Darwish and stories by Ghassan Kanafani translated in the framework of solidarity with the Third World in Eastern Germany, the then German Democratic Republic. This was in the late 1970s and early 1980s, a period slowly fading away in the mist of oblivion!

During that period, one could also find in each of the two Germanies a series of short stories of the world, called «Erkundungen» (Explorations) in the East and «Erzähler der Welt» (Narrators of the World) in the West. These series, which featured among others collections of stories from Egypt, Iraq, Syria and Algeria, were a first effort to attract the attention of a wider public for writing from non-European countries, the books being produced and presented in a way acceptable even to bourgeois readers who would not dare enter any of the little Third World shops.

During the second period of this development one could observe literary works from the Third World, including, of course, the Arab countries, enter regular bookshops to be finally offered to an educated public beyond the circles of Third World solidarity. Seen from today and from the perspective of the «South», this must seem to have

been a long-drawn-out bizarre battle fought against accepting these literatures in the framework of what was considered world literature but which was in fact European or Western. At that time, a non-Western literary work was always in a sector apart, regarded with special sympathy or, sometimes, disdain. In any case, such a work was rarely subjected to the same criteria as its Western counterparts. And, for that matter, these criteria, being of Western origin, have only been questioned in most recent years.

The situation of Arabic literature in particular was still somewhat more complicated than that of Third World literature in general, given the «special relationship» between the German-speaking region and the Arab world. This special relationship originated from a long history of confrontation, giving rise to numerous misunderstandings and animosities that, as mentioned above, not infrequently persist until this very day. It also originated from the political situation after the Second World War, connected with Germany's particular attitude towards Israel.

This special relationship between the Arab world and Germany, which has nothing to do with literature, led to a certain neglect (to say the very least) of the reading public where Arabic literature was concerned. At the beginning of the 1980s, from time to time, one could get the impression of committing a crime by translating and publishing Palestinian literature, which was sometimes sold «under the counter», so to speak, and certainly not put on display.

But in spite of these obstacles, the transition from the first to the second stage was finally achieved, to be followed by the third stage, which might well be called «the stage of normalization». It was and is, however, also a particularly difficult stage for Arabic and other Third World literatures, for at this stage, non-Western writing no longer had its separate place in bookshops. The shelves for Third World literature were abandoned and the books were moved to shelves for literature in general. Before, works from non-Western literatures were considered something special, something not really in harmony with the requirements of literary creativity, but, at the same time, they were visible because they were set apart. Now they had lost their special protection.

These three stages, of which the third began approximately three decades ago, have not been mutually exclusive but often existed side by side. But what is indeed important is the fact that writing from the Arab world has finally come to be considered «normal» literature.

Now, the preparatory work necessary for a book to become known—i.e. the «scouting»—is usually taken care of by literary agencies for other literatures. For Arabic literature, however, hardly any agency exists, and, at publishing houses, linguistic competences in Arabic are understandably rare. Thus, in the area under discussion, as well as in some other countries, the «scouting» usually remains the translator's responsibility. In the future, an interesting task for literary agents could be to inform editors in the West of books from the Arab world (or other non-Western regions) worth considering for translation. That is, if publishers show an interest in

bringing out literature from the Arab world. However, the number of those eager to publish this literature has been rather limited. In the beginning, that is, during the 70s and 80s, in West Germany it was almost exclusively small publishing houses that were willing to take the risk of publishing Arabic literature in German, usually embarking on it for ideological and political reasons. The motives were the same in East Germany, where, however, such activities were state-supported and carried out at state-owned publishing houses.

Later on, just before the mid-1980s, two Swiss publishing houses began to contribute considerably to the distribution of Arabic literature in the German speaking world: the Unionsverlag in Zürich, concentrating on a few authors and publishing several or even many titles by each of them, and the Lenos Verlag in Basel, preferring to use its series entitled «Arabische Literatur» to introduce as many new writers' names as possible. To these two should be added two German publishing houses, the Verlag Donata Kinzelbach in Mainz, specializing in North African literature, almost exclusively translated from French, and Das Arabische Buch in Berlin, a specialized bookshop with a small publishing house which has published a few volumes of Arabic literature, mainly poetry.

The major literary publishing houses in Germany (Suhrkamp, Hanser, Rowohlt, Luchterhand and others), Switzerland (e.g. Diogenes or Ammann) and Austria (e.g. Haymon or Droschl) have so far shown little or no interest in participating in this effort by publishing literature from the Arab world on a wider scale, in particular when it is translated from Arabic.

## 6. THE STONY PATH

For an Arabic literary work (or, for that matter, any work written in a language other than German) to reach the German reader, several requirements have to be fulfilled. The transfer demands taking several steps or, more metaphorically, following a chain of several links; six can easily be identified. If any one of these links proves weak or inefficient the transfer activity will fail. As the proverb says: the chain is as strong as is its weakest link.

The first of these requirements would be that there are works worth translating because they contribute essential «information» about the Arab world or Arab individuals, and «tell stories», which is essentially what novels should do. There definitely are works like this in the Arab world. The yearly output of literature in the Arab world is considerable, even though up till now statistics are extremely hard to come by (see article by Pickford, this volume). Beyond personal experience, it is the growing number of literary prizes that can serve as a source of empirical information about literary publications. Many countries have their national literary awards and some pan-Arab

awards exist, especially the so-called «Arabic Booker», which during its almost ten years of existence has gained an important role in the spread of knowledge about Arabic novels among Western editors, no matter what its decriers in the Arab world may say about it.

Yet, these novels have to be tracked down, and since most of the Arab authors do not have a literary agent or an institution that will take care of the distribution of their books and watch over their rights on the international market, this task remains with the so-called scouts, individuals knowledgeable in the field of Arabic literature and with contacts in the Arab world. After discovering the works worth making known to the non-Arab world, they will have to prepare material that may convince a publishing house of a given work's value. This is an interesting task but it is at the same time a thankless one because it is usually not compensated. But for literatures like Arabic and many others written in «small» languages (as the German expression calls them) scouts are indispensable.

The third necessary step for a work to find its way to a linguistic environment other than its original one is the availability of translators willing to and capable of translating the work. The literary scouts themselves often undertake the task of translation, which may trigger conflicts of interest between their dual roles as cultural promoters and interlingual communicators. This is a difficult conflict to resolve, as both functions need to have the confidence of the publisher.

There will, of course, be no book without a publishing house. In Germany, Switzerland and Austria important publishing houses of international literature exist, and the statistics tell us that German is the «world record holder» in translation. But the part Arabic literature is allowed to play in this record is minimal, particularly since the large and renowned publishing houses are, as already mentioned, more than reluctant to produce Arabic titles. Therefore, many Arabic works in translation certainly receive due attention in the small publishing houses but not the appropriate visibility necessary for the success they deserve in the larger book-market.

For such a success, finally, the media, together with the publishing houses, are responsible. And here again we are in the middle of a crisis—the transformation of the media and the reduction of pages dedicated to cultural affairs. Again, this is a widespread phenomenon that cannot be treated here in detail, but it is a phenomenon that also touches upon the distribution of Arabic literature in Europe.

It is nearly exclusively through the mediation of newspapers, radio or television that information about newly published books (not only works from Arabic literature) will reach the reader. He or she is the final link in this chain of literature transfer. By reading this literature, the public encourages publishing houses to continue publishing, which in turn will encourage translators and scouts to continue their work, which in turn will help works of Arabic literature to reach a worldwide readership, and truly become a world literature!

Arriving at this last link in the chain of the transfer of Arabic literature into other languages, in this case German, we find ourselves back at the initial problem: the widespread belief that literary works from the Arab world need to have unique characteristics, all of which have been discussed above. There is a vicious circle, a «closed circle», as it is called in Arabic, and it is difficult to see at what point it can be opened up and who will be willing and able to break it.

## 7. THE SITUATION OF TRANSLATORS. A PERSONAL APPENDIX

*Anybody* can talk about translation and contribute more or less profound insights into the process of rendering a literary text from one language (known as the source language) into another (the target language), and these reflections are often channeled through widely-known plays on words. In German, the favorite one focuses on the difference between *übersetzen* and “*übersetzen*, the former verb meaning in fact «to translate», the latter «to ferry over to the other bank of a river», the only distinction between the two verbs being the location of the stress. The other pun, as popular as it is sophisticated, is the Italian play on the words *traduttore* (translator) and *traditore* (traitor), meaning that the translator will, by necessity, betray the sublime original literary work as intended by the master, the author. Such a betrayal is inevitable in the transfer of the work from one language into another, which is, after all, the translator’s task.

Leaving this kind of worn-out punnery and descending, or rising, to the level of a translator’s everyday work, how can one describe his or her situation most suitably? Perhaps the most appropriate metaphor to be found for such a description is that of the hammer and the anvil, between which the translator spends his/her translating career. This career appears to take different shapes between the two tools used for forging hard metal. A closer look at the translator’s role between these two symbolic metalworking implements may help to elucidate his/her precarious existence.

The hammer and anvil could be taken to embody the *author* and *the publisher*, leaving undefined which tool symbolizes whom. For both are intent on forging the translator, glowing with enthusiasm or the need for some income to feed the children, into a useful serviceable device.

All authors want their works to be translated. This desire they divulge with varying degrees of discretion. They dream of renown and/or prosperity. At times, the author’s pleading stare as he or she awaits the translator’s «I will!» can be difficult to endure.

Then there is the publisher, interested in obtaining clean and well-prepared manuscripts of excellent works beautifully and affordably translated. Certain organizational procedures run smoothly as far as translations between Western literatures are concerned. The same is not true when it comes to Arabic literature.

There are, as already mentioned, hardly any literary agencies; thus, personal contacts are obligatory. These personal relationships between author and translator are, to be sure, beautiful and useful, but they can also be costly in terms of time, energy, and even travel expenses. The cultivation of these interpersonal contacts are, from an economic point of view, unpaid extra work, something that has to be «added» to the generally miserable financial remuneration for the translator's art.

The hammer and anvil may symbolize another pair of potentially conflicting elements between which the translator has to maneuver, that of the *source* and the *target language*, sandwiched between which the translator may in fact become a *traditore*. It is here that the actual challenge for the translator is to be located, where he or she has to find his or her way, and often they are narrow roads or even a multitude of difficult paths from which the translator has to choose. It is, therefore, at this point that some people insist that translation is an impossible mission, since the *signifier* may, to be sure, have equivalents in other languages (house-Haus-maison-*bayt* or liberty-Freiheit-liberté-*hurriya*), yet the *signified* never has an exact correspondence; here, however, other people will just roll up their sleeves and set to work pragmatically. However, what is to be done if the source language has six, seven, eight words for «desert», impossible to render adequately into European target languages? A desert is a desert is a desert. Not in Arabic. There, a desert may have sand or stones; it may have vegetation or not; it may or may not have paths to follow. Or a desert may simply be a wide and open space, limitless, endless, reminiscent of a world beyond. The same thing about missing equivalents could easily be said concerning many sorts of nourishment, clothing and furniture. This is not to say that translation is impossible. It is not. But it requires many a trick and a well thought-out concept of what one is doing.

This applies even more when it comes to images, metaphors, symbols or, in particular recourse to medieval Arabic writing, that rich source tapped by not a few contemporary Arabic authors, the literary game of intertextuality. Here, hammers and anvils multiply. What is one to make of the owl, the Middle Eastern herald of misfortune, in German, where this role is attributed to the raven, while the owl is the embodiment of sagacity? And ought one to render a quotation from a 10th century chronicle (comprehensible to an Arab readership) in an early version of modern German, even if the emotional and cultural relationship to the «classical» stages of the language is different in the two linguistic areas?

There is a third hammer and anvil constellation which frames the life of a translator from Arabic—the relationship *West-East*, *North-South*, or *Europe-Muslim World*. The different expressions used indicate the variety of this constellation. It is the realm ruled by dreams, ignorance, prejudice, and misunderstanding, all interfering with or disfiguring the reception of Arabic literature in Europe.

Things are moving, however, not least thanks to some translators' unflagging efforts to «propel» Arabic literature to where it belongs—alongside other strands of

world literature. In many different ways, it is the literary translators who make literature into world literature, if and when the other «players» fulfill their part.

## 8. REFERENCES

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