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Orientalism and Literary Translation

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Abstract

Nothing can illustrate the case against Edward Said's arguments in his deservedly renowned *Orientalism* than the work of the western orientalists in the field of literary translation. The great works of western translation of oriental literature are clear indications of an act of sympathy with the East, as well as being positive steps towards a better understanding of the East.

This paper singles out two key works of orientalist, literary translation as a *part* of the great movement of literary orientalism in western literature – the *Arabian Nights* and Ibn Tufail's *Hayy Bin Yagdhan*, in order to examine the complex of relationships between the role and significance of the choice of (translated) text, the peculiar status of the text in translation and the influence exerted by the text on the whole stream of literary orientalism affecting literary attitudes, as well as literary genres, and even the history of ideas.

Nothing can illustrate the case against Edward Said's arguments in his deservedly renowned *Orientalism*[1] than the work of the western orientalists in the field of literary translation. Literary translation can only be a labour of love. The great works of western translation of oriental literature, such as, enumerating only some of the most prominent examples, Hammer-Purgstall's translation of the *Divan of Hafiz,* Sale's translation of the *Koran,* William

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Jones's Latin translation of the classical odes of Arabic poetry, Antoine Galland's translation of the *Arabian Nights*, Rückert's translation of the *Maqamat of al-Hariri* and Simon Ockley's translation of Ibn Tufail's *Hayy Bin Yaqdhan*, are clear indications of this act of sympathy with the East as well as being positive steps towards a better understanding of the East. These works of scholarship go hand in hannd, in my opinion, with the great works of literary orientalism that cover English literature, and western literatures as a whole, all the way from Shakespear's *Othello* to the novels of twentieth century writers like Forster, Hesse and Malraux.

Edward Said's case against the whole of orientalism as a distorting enterprise in an inevitable, indeed almost genetic, manner simply falls down against the great efforts of the orientalist literary translators. At the same time, one of the positive aspects of Said's book is his interest in literary orientalism and his treatment of those writers who portrayed the East in their work as a part of the orientalist movement, together with the philologists, the archaeologists and the students of social and religious structures–even though he submits these works to the same logic, thus largely dismissing them as manifestations of western misunderstanding and distortion of the East.

This paper singles out two key works of orientalist, literary translation as a *part* of the great movement of literary orientalism in western literature– the *Arabian Nights* and Ibn Tufail's *Hayy Bin Yaqdhan,* in order to exmaine the complex of relationships between the role and significance of the choice of (translated) text, the peculiar status of the text in translation and the influence exerted by the text on the whole stream of literary orientalism, affecting literary attitudes as well as literary geners and even the history of ideas. Finally, this study may also be regarded as a continuation of a previous paper of mine[(2)]which aimed to cast light on the transmission, largely through translation, of an oriental, literary genre, the *maqamat*, particularly those of al-Hamadhani and al-Hariri, and the impact of that genre on the rise of the western, picaresque novel.

Many studies[(3)] of the impact of the *Arabian Nights* on literautre, literary criticism and literary thinking in England have been done. Martha Conant, in fact, has even gone to the extent of regarding it as a part of *native* English literature. In the very opening paragraph of her pioneering work[(4)], she states: "In a study of the oriental tale in England in the eighteenth century, the high lights fall upon the *Arabian Nights*, Dr. Johnson's *Rasselas*, Goldsmith's *Citizen of the World*, and Beckford's *Vathek*". Seemingly innocent, this, in fact, is an unusual and paradoxical assertion that regards a *translated* work as indistinguishable from a native, literary tradition. Surely there can be no greater testimony to the enormous impact of this work and its equally strong

absorption into English literature and culture.

But whether done by Galland, or by Lane, or by Burton, or indeed anonymously (in the very first English version, the so-called "Grub Street version" of 1706-8), the *Nights* remains a work of translation of the oriental book entitled. *One Thousand and One Nights*, and what we want to look at here is precisely the multi-facted nature of its immense impact on British culture. As I said earlier, many specialised and limited studies of the influence of the *Nights* on various aspects of the literary realm in England, since its first appearance in the eighteenth century, have been done. What we want to draw attention to here is something different. It is to do with the general nature of the literary and cultural impact of this work which, by the way, serves to underline the importance of studying all works of translation, particularly literary translation, from the vantage point of culture. I totally agree here with Susan Bassnett(5) that the cultural field is the most natural place for translation studies, especially literary translation. The latter is more fruitfully studied in a cultural context than as a part of a strictly "scientific" linguistics or as a part of some indefinable, "creative" literary process.

Homer (when translated by Chapman, or by Pope, or by a modern translator) and the Bible (in the Authorised Version, or in a modern version) have, it seems to me, transcended their particular translations and been absorbed into British literature and British culture simply as Homer and the Bible. It is true that Keats, for one, preferred Chapman's Homer and I suspect most people with a literary background cannot see a substitute for the King James version of the Bible; still it is certainly arguable that many in the eighteenth century would have preferred Pope's Homer, and certainly true that most people nowadays read him in a modern translation. Similarly, one can imagine a layman, without using the term in any derogatory sense, prefering a modern translation of the Bible.

Very much the same conclusion would have to be reached regarding the position of the *Arabian Nights* in western culture. The *Nights*, in fact, seems to have acquired this status fairly quickly. Witness Gibbon:(6) "Before I left Kingston school I was well acquainted with Pop's Homer and the Arabian Nights entertainments, two books which will always please by the moving picture of human manners and specious miracles". Nowadays, it has become a fact that is taken for granted, as stated succinctly here, for example: "In the course of the past two centuries the *Nights* has attained, mainly through the medium of translation, the status of a universal classic and has come to be recognized as such".(7) The well-known stories of Aladdin or Sindbad or Ali Baba have similarly gone beyond the various translations of Galland, Burton, Lane, Payne or any twentieth century translator.

For any text, then, to reach such a status, a multiplicity of translated versions seems to be a principal prerequisite. Now, of course, there will always be a preferred version for different people and at different ages or epoches, and there will always be one main version in which the text is most widely read at any one time. Yet, to reach this "classic" status, it seems that the text must acquire the capacity, across the ages, of going through a number of translations and of going beyond any one particular version, and to develop, as a side effect, the ability to reflect the changing characteristics of the target language, across time, in ways that, paradoxically, the indigenous classics of the target language themselves do not share.

Now for such a patently oriental text to reach such a status is in itself a refutation of a great deal of Said's thesis about the genetic and structural antipathy of the West toward the East. The Bible (and Homer, too, on geographic grounds at least) of course, are, in their own way, no less oriental than the *Arabian Nights*. Such texts, particularly, of course, the Bible, point, in fact, to the question of the whole oriental dimension that is inherent to the structure not only of English literature and culture, but of the whole of European literature and culture, thus raising the corollary of the underlying unity of Eastern and Western culture.

It is obvious, too, that any translated text must have its own intrinsic significance in order to acquire the classic status reflected in its multiplicity of translated versions. In the case of the *Arabian Nights*, this clearly lies in its status as a unique product of fictional narrative in world literature. As the well-known orientalist and modern translator of the tales A.J. Arberry says, "Aladdin indeed would be thought to require no introduction ; it has been called the most famous story in the world, and certainly there can be few others that have exercised a comparable fascination on minds of old and young.(8) And Martha Conant is surely right to call the *Nights* " the fairy godmother of the English novel" and to explain this by linking it correctly with the precise historical moment of the rise of the English novel:(9)

> The *Arabian Nights*, as a whole, is a treasure-house of story perhaps unsurpassed in literature. Nothing so rich in adventurous incident appeared in England until *Robinson Crusoe* (1719); and in plot nothing so well-constructed as some of these tales until Fielding's masterpieces. Historians of English fiction have insufficiently recognized the fact that the oriental tale was one of the forms of literature that gave to the reading public in Augustan England the element of plot which, to a certain extent, supplemented that of character, afforded by sketches like the *De Coverley* papers.

And the *Arabian Nights* has continued, since then, to exert a powerful impact on the works of the English novelists, particularly in the nineteenth century, as evidenced by the novels of Dickens, Thackery, Elizabeth Gaskell, Charlotte Bronte, Meredith and others.(10)

The other oriental text that we want to look at, *Hayy Bin Yaqdhan* by the Andalusian philosopher, Ibn Tufail (d. 1185), also went through a multiplicity of translations, though not as numerous as those of the *Nights.* Shortly after the aquisition of the manuscript in Syria by Edward Pococke, it was edited and translated by his son, also named Edward Pococke, into Latin in 1671. George Keith, the Quaker, impressed by what he regarded as support in the text for his doctrine of "inner light", set upon turning Pococke's Latin into English. In 1708, the well-known Cambridge orientalist Simon Ockley translated it again under the title of *The Improvement of Human Reason,* and other versions have continued to appear well into the twentieth century.(11)

Ostensibly the story of a boy brought up on a desert island by a deer and growing up to become a model for the development of human moral and mental faculties, the tale actually makes a philosophical statement about the natural growth of man in a perfect state when totally unaffected by traditional beliefs and social restraints.

Although not nearly as well-known now as the *Arabian Nights*, this philosophic fable has played an important role in the development of the history of western ideas. The significance of the work is both literary and philosophic. Here we see the birth of the idea of the "Noble Savage" taken up by western philosophy from Rousseau on as well as the whole plot pattern of a desert island serving as a setting for a literary/philosophical depiction of human development all the way from *Robinson Crusoe* to *Lord of the Flies.* Here, indeed, is the case of a translated work being immediately absorbed into the mainstream of native literary and philosophic tradition, and leaving its imprint, after its introduction at such a congenial time, on the history of ideas as well as the development of literary genres.(12)

Now when we step away from these two particular oriental works to obtain a more general overview of the field, it becomes immediately noticeable that the great works of orientalist literary translation nearly all date from the eighteenth century, which also witnesses the first great scholarly works in the field, as well as the early accounts of the travellers to the region. The epoch of the Enlightenment is undoubtedly the first great European epoch that moved towards a comprehensive understanding of the East. Reared on the new, historicist vision of Vico and Herder, the great eighteenth century figures, like Lessing, Geothe, Voltaire and Gibbon, became pioneers of the new approach to the East. Said is surely corrected to come up with the apt phrase of

"sympathetic identification" to describe this eighteenth century attitude towards the East.(13)

In this (what might be called) positive orientalism, the Enlightenment is a clear precusor of Romanticism (sometimes in fact, linked together as in figures like Goethe and, to a lesser extent, Scott).(14) And Said is surely wrong to dismiss this continuity and to regard romantic orientalism as the start of the project of exoticising and mystifying the East (always with implied latent, hostility). The two texts that we have examined, particularly the *Arabian Nights*, which reached the height of its impact on western literature and culture in the nineteenth century, are evidence of this continuous advance of acceptance and understanding. Nor would it do to reduce such a classic of world fiction to Burton's unexpurgated translation together with burton's commentaries that openly relish the more frankly sexual episodes, so that it becomes no more than a document to prove Victorian anti-oriental and anti-feminine prejudices.(15)

Both works have had such a great impact on the origin of narrative fiction in England that they may be described in terms of a dimension that is inherent to the whole question of the rise of the English novel (a dimension that is usually neglected in the standard histories). This, of course, is more true of the *Arabian Nights*, though the impact of the castaway parable of the human condition as an underlying literary/philosophical pattern in the English novelist's subconsciousness must not be underestimated. In fact, if we add the undisputed role of the oriental *maqamat* (through Andalusian translations) in the creation of the Spanish picaresque novel (the prototype of the European picaresque novel) to the impact of the two texts discussed here, the case for an oriental dimension inherent in the creation and development of the European novel as a whole begins to rest on even firmer ground.

Now if we try to go beyond the more specific definition of each of these works, i.e. the *maqamat* as rudimentary picaresque, *Hayy Bin Yaqdhan* as a philosophic fable and the *Arabian Nights* as broad social realism, then a general term that covers all three works, each in its own peculiar way, no doubt, would be magic realism. This is the marvellously successful combination of the strong sense of reality with the magical and the supernatural that is key to all three works, though more obviously so in the case of the *Arabian Nights*, so aptly described so early on by Gibbon as one of the two books which (together with Pope's Homer) "will always please by the moving picture of human manners and specious miracles". In fact, isn't this combination of the realistic and the romantic, or the natural and the supernatural, one of the permanent hallmarks of the great classics of world literature, with Homer, the Bible, Shakespeare, *Water Margin* and the *Arabian*

Nights being some of those which most immediately come to mind? Something of the element of wonder and freshness seems to lie at the heart of the effect of these works, the sheer joy and excitement that they contain in their use of language to describe a new world in all its magic. Leigh Hunt's description of the *Arabian Nights* is perhaps the first comprehensive summing-up of the toral effect of the work, this rare combination of magic and realism, that has been echoed in the descriptions of innumerable other commentators ever since:(16)

> To us, the Arabian Nights are one of the most beautiful books in the world: not because there is nothing but pleasure in it, but because the pain has infinite chances of vicissitue, and because the pleasure is within the reach of all who have body and soul, and imagination. The poor man there sleeps in a door-way with his love, and is richer than a king. The Sultan is dethroned tomorrow, and has a finer throne the next day. The pauper touches a ring, and spirits wait upon him. You ride in the air; you are rich in solitude; you long for somebody to return your love, and an Eden encloses you in its arms. You have this world, and you have another. Fairies are in your moon-light. Hope and imagination have their fair play, as well as the rest of us. There is action heroical, and passion too: people can suffer as well as enjoy, for love; you have bravery, luxury, fortitude, self-devotion, comedy as good as Moliere's, tragedy, Eastern manners, the wonderful that is in a common-place, and the very similitude that is in the wonderful calenders, cadis, robbers, enchanted palaces, paintings full of colour and drapery, warmth for the senses, desert in arms and exercises to keep it manly, cautions to the rich, humanity for the more happy, and hope for the miserable.

It is a sign of the positive receptivity of the West to the Orient (again in direct contradiction to Said's thesis) that the translations of the great works of oriental literature, including the Bible, and, begining with the Bible, develop their impact after the seventeenth century and by way of Enlightenment scholarship to be fully absorbed into western culture in the nineteenth century. Here the very nature of the task of the translator, perhaps best described as temporarily living in two radically different worlds for the duration of the process of translation, in order to come up with a result, the translated work, that somehow, quite paradoxically, and in fact magically too, unites these two worlds, reinforces this definite, and definitely positive turning to the East, often described as the oriental renaissance, that we see in this epoch.

These two worlds, indeed, are not just linguistic worlds. Language here is

merely the key to open up all the other aspects (Cultural, psychological, political, etc.) of what the term "world" fully signifies. One can, in fact, say that the task of the translator is to use language in order to go beyond the merely linguistic. Classics of tanslation, as we described above, seem to go beyond translation, through the continuing multiplicity of versions, to become a part of the target culture's, and indeed universal culture's, indispensible works. As George Steiner puts it, "the translator enriches his tongue by allowing the source language to penetrate and modify it. But he does far more: he extends his native idiom towards the hiden absolute of meaning".(17)

Here Steiner goes back to Goethe's tripartite description of the process of translation (stated significantly in the afterward to his orientalist poems, *West-Ostlicher Divan*) whereby the translated text is naturalised into the target culture through an almost perfect identity between the original and the translated text, and then goes on to define what he calls "the third move in the hermeneutic of appropriation, the portage home of the foreing "sense" and its domestication in the new linguistic-cultural matrix" (p. 333).

Significantly, the example Steiner uses for the process is another oriental text: the Bible. "In the history of the art," he says, "very probably the most successful demonstration is the King James Bible" (p. 347). And he describes the history of Bible translation in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century–a total of 50 translations averaging almost one per year–that culminated in "the remarkably rapid acceptance of the 1611 translation as not only canonic, but as somehow native to the spirit of the language and as a document uniquely inwoven with the past of English feeling" (p. 348). And he concludes:

> By choosing or achieving almost fortuitously a dating some two or three generations earlier than their own, the translators of the Authorized Verion made of a foreign, many-layered original a life-form so utterly appropriated, so vividly out of an English rather than out of a Hebraic, Hellenic or Ciceronian past, that the Bible became a new pivot of English self-consciousness. (p. 348).

After this, however, and in spite of some very sharp and illuminating observations, Steiner's argument seems to take a wrong turn. He attributes the success of the Authorised Version to the single fact of choosing what was even for 1611 rather archaic language. Furthermore, he uses this to generalise about what he calls "reversals, dislocations, arbitrary collages of historical chronology" (p. 352) as indispensible for the translation of texts from what he describes as "remote languages and cultures radically alien to our own" (p. 356). and as the key to their success.

Thus after his correct observation that "some of the most admired, influ-

ential Western translations" are, in fact, oriental text (in Steiner's words texts that "relate to remote languages and to cultures radically alien to our own: Fitzgerald's *Rubaiyat*, Goethe's versions of Hafiz, Waley's selections from Chinese, Japanese and Mongolian, the Authorised Version itself" p. 356), he seems to waste the force and significance of that observation in attributing the success of these translations to the fact that the texts belong to "radically alien" cultures that could only breathe in those unique, and perhaps uniquely deviant and unrepeatable, translations, rather than to the combination of the greatness of the texts themselves and their absorption into the target cultures through a process that, in spite of those admittedly unique translations, *transcends* the actual linguistic medium, and stands as testimony, in fact, to the radical unity of human culture.

Thus the kind of archaims that worked for the Bible doesn't work for Homer, and certainly not for the *Arabian Nights*, where modern versions of the latter two texts have virtually supplanted the older ones. At the same time, the question here is not one of translation from the neighbouring and culturally close European languages contrasted with translation from those "radically remote cultures" as Steiner argues. To say that "the more remote the linguistic-cultural source, the easier it is to achieve a summary penetration and a transfer of stylised, codified markers" and to regard this as a device for the "Western translators from Arabic, Urdu, or Ainu" (p. 361) for "getting behind" the language of the original does nothing except to lead Steiner to the patently unacceptable conclusion that "ignorance of the relevant languages" becomes in some cases "a paradoxical advantage".

It seems that the translations mentioned by Steiner, in addition to the great scholarly efforts of the orientalists in the field of translation in the eighteenth and ninteenth centuries, point, on the contrary, to the underlying unity of human culture, to the great capacity of Western culture to absorb and appropriate, through translation, works from other cultures, and to the obstructive uselessness of concepts like "remote languages" and "radically alien cultures". The field of oriental translation should, more than anything else, in fact, reinforce one's belief in the old classical maxim: *Nihil Humani a me alieum puto.*

الاستشراق والترجمة الأدبية

تاريخ استلام البحث ١٩٩٣/١/٢٤ تاريخ قبوله ١٩٩٤/١٢/١١

عبد الله الدباغ*

الجامعة الأردنية

ملخص

لا شيء يدعم موقفاً مغايراً لما يقدمه إدوارد سعيد من طروحات في كتابه الشهير بجدارة (الاستشراق) (١٩٧٨)، مثل أعمال المستشرقين الغربيين في حقل الترجمة الأدبية. إن في الآثار الكبيرة للترجمة الغربية للأدب الشرقي إشارات واضحة إلى تعاطف كبير مع الشرق إضافة إلى كونها خطوات إيجابية نحو فهم أمثل للشرق.

يختار هذا البحث عملين أساسيين من أعمال الترجمة الأدبية الاستشراقية باعتبارها جزءاً من حركة الاستشراق الأدبي في الأدب الغربي، هما (ألف ليلة وليلة) و (حي بن يقظان) لابن طفيل، والموقع الفريد الذي يحتله النص بعد ترجمته، وأخيراً، تأثير النص في مجمل تيار الاستشراق الأدبي على المواقف الأدبية والأجناس الأدبية وحتى على تطور الأفكار.

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3. Two recent books, in particular, should be consulted: Muhsin Jassim Ali, *Scheherazade in England: A Study of Nineteenth-Century English Criticism of the Arabian Nights* (Three Continents Press, (Washington, 1981), which has an excellent forty-page bibliography that lists numerous books, articles and dissertations written in this field; and the more recent collection of articles, *The Arabian Nights in English Literature: Studies in the Reception of the Thousand and One Nights into British Culture* (Macmillan, London, 1988) edited by Peter L. Caracciolo.
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11. In particular by Paul Brönnle as *The Awakening of the Soul,* London, 1904 and A.S. Fulton, London, 1929.
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