

Travel and translation

The case of Karin Johnsson

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Abstract

This chapter presents a critical reading from a translation studies perspective of five travel books about the Middle East written in the 1930s by the Swedish writer, translator and photographer Karin Johnsson (1889-1968). Her writing represents an example of the link between travel and translation. In her “Oriental adventures” she featured a number of famous love stories and love poems from classical Arabic literature as free translations. Raised in a long Swedish tradition of orientalizing literature, which constitutes the implicit context for her and her readers, she made these translations conform to the established clichés of Arab-Oriental passion and manipulated the texts on many levels. But despite a pervasive colonial perspective and examples of racist discourse, Johnsson’s travel books also show a development in attitude from an initial ridicule of the Arabs as a people to a more empathic approach at the end.

“Love in the Orient”

Karin Johnsson wrote five books about the Middle East in less than ten years. During the period from 1928, when she went on her first journey, until 1939 and the eve of the Second World War she made annual trips to the region and produced new written “adventures” in quick succession. *Bland haremsdamer och schejker* [Among Harem Ladies and Sheiks] was her first travel book. It became an instant success and had a good reception when it was published in 1930.¹ In an easy, humorous and personal style Johnsson reported on her travels as a European lady and journalist in Syria, Iraq, Palestine and Egypt, about people, places and politics. In a portrait on the front page she appears in “Arab costume”, as the caption puts it, donning a male head scarf with a cord. She dedicated this first book to the Palestinian nationalist Munif al-Husayni (1899-1983) whom

¹ In *Göteborgs Handels och Sjöfartstidning* (GHT), a major Swedish daily, professor Carl Skottsberg wrote: “Her book is one of the best written travel books that the present reviewer has got to know in recent years. We come into direct contact with real life and breathe in an undistorted Eastern atmosphere” (Back-cover of Johnsson 1933).

she presented to the reader as a royal prince. He had become her friend in Jerusalem and introduced her to the Arab notables of the city. His uncle, the later notorious Mufti of Jerusalem, al-hajj Amin al-Husayni (1895-1974), is another central Arab personality whom she portrays in words and photos in her first account and also returns to for interviews in later books.²

She had a certain reputation in Swedish feminist circles at the time. Thus her books were announced in *Hertha*, a magazine for the Swedish women's movement, and she also contributed herself to this magazine, writing critically about the position of women in the Orient.³

Inspired by her literary success with *Among Harem Ladies and Sheiks* she soon went back to the Middle East again. Her next work is a fantastic story about a pilgrimage in disguise to Mecca: *Som pilgrim till Mecca* (1931) [As a Pilgrim to Mecca]. In this book she manages to interview Emir Abdullah of Transjordan and meet the "King of Hedjas", 'Abd al-'Aziz ibn Sa'ud, in Gaza. Proudly she describes how she and the king recited poetry to each other in his *majlis*. The episode is illustrated with a dedicated photo from the king and a love poem in Arabic that was "sung in his tent" featuring a Swedish translation thereof (Johnsson 1931: 116-117).

A characteristic feature of Karin Johnsson's travel writing is the inclusion of translations of Arabic poetry and prose in several of her works. References to Arabic literature and language also appear regularly in her books. She first began her literary career as a creative writer with a number of fictional works: a novel, a children's book, and two historical romances.⁴ Before that she was an active literary translator, mainly translating Norwegian detective stories into Swedish.⁵ This professional background explains her strong interest in Arabic literature and the attempts to translate some of it into Swedish.

Arabic love stories and love poetry are the focus of *Kärlek i Österland* (1933) [Love in the Orient], her third book from the Middle East. In this work that includes a visit to Iraq the author mixes the position of tourist and traveller with the role of literary scholar, devoting a large part of the text to translations. On the frontispiece she is posed on a horse, dressed in male Bedouin garb, a kind of crossdressing which was not uncommon among Western women travellers in the Middle East (Hopwood 1999: 168-169). Her fourth report from the region carried the title *Öknarnas folk* (1935) [The People of the Deserts], and the fifth and last work was *Utan guide: resor och äventyr i Palestina och Syrien* (1938) [Without Guide: Travels and Adventures in Palestine and Syria], a book which ends ominously with the writer standing in blood-stained clothes after having

² On the history and importance of the Husayni clan, see Pappé 2000 and 2001.

³ E.g. Karin Johnsson. "Orientens döttrar av idag" [The Daughters of the Orient Today] *Hertha*, Vol. 20, November 1933, pp. 222-224.

⁴ The children's book, published in 1925, had the title: *Från faraonernas land* [From the land of the Pharaohs]. Johnsson had studied history and Egyptology in Paris and Copenhagen when she was in her early twenties. The historical romances were about two famous Swedish royalties.

⁵ I have managed to find seven titles translated by her, published between 1913 and 1917 and subsequently often reprinted. These were all detective stories by the Norwegian writer Sven Elvestad (1884-1934) who published his books under the pseudonym Stein Riverton.

harrowingly escaped a terrorist attack in Haifa.⁶ The Arabs in Palestine were in revolt and the world was on the brink of war.

Sometime soon afterwards, in 1938-1939, Karin Johnsson, then fifty years old, became engaged to, and maybe also married, the archaeologist Salim al-Husayni, another member of the prominent Palestinian family.⁷ After that her career as a travel writer seems to have come to an end. However, she kept up her activity as a freelance journalist and writer for many years, often using (or recycling) material from her journeys in the 1930s.⁸

Learning Arabic

In a European literary context the artistic status of the travel book has sometimes been debated. Does travel writing really belong to the domain of creative art or is it just plain literature of fact? A modern pragmatic and expanded definition of literature has no problem accommodating travel books among its artistic genres, however. In fact, the narrative techniques in modern travel books are very similar to those used in novels (Melberg 2005: 15-18). The writing of Karin Johnsson shows many examples of this. Besides the use of rhetorical figures, as an author-narrator she often resorts to present-tense narration, direct speech, indirect free speech, emplotment and other fictionalizing devices. Here is a characteristic example of her literary style:

I am just about to leave Cairo in order to continue my journey to the north of Syria, when Albert Gattas looks me up in my hotel. He carries a folded paper in his hand, and in his heart he seems to be carrying a thousand worries, since his dark face this day is even darker than usual.

– “Would you like to do me a favour, madam?” he begins and looks at me with anxious, black-and-white eyes. “A big favour?”

⁶ The first three of these books were published by the number one publishing house in Sweden for high prestige literature, Albert Bonniers Förlag. The last two in the series had a different publisher, Nordisk Rotogravyr, which was specialized in high quality illustrations. Whether this change had commercial, technical or political reasons remains to be studied.

⁷ Her engagement to Salim al-Husayni probably took place in 1938; in her remaining papers there is a card from one of her friends, Folke Lars Hökerberg, dated 17 November 1938, who congratulates her on her engagement to “the Oriental sage” and “pascha” (Karin and Harald Johnsson’s remaining papers, L73: 1). According to relatives of Salim (oral communication), his family was against his relationship with the Swedish lady and the couple never married as other sources say they did (cf. http://sv.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karin_Johnsson). Previously Karin had been married to the Swedish writer Harald Johnsson (1886 – 1936). Except for a dedication the latter seems strangely absent from her texts, where she always appears as travelling as a single person. Romance is constantly present in between the lines in her stories, but she carefully avoids revealing any personal details about possible intimate relationships.

⁸ Karin Johnsson continued to visit the Middle East right up to the outbreak of the war. According to one of her articles in the Swedish press, where she also published many travel accounts, sometimes identical or near identical with chapters from her books, she made one journey in the spring of 1939 through Palestine, Syria, Trans-Jordan and Arabia: “Spring and fresh winds in Arabia” [Vår och friska vindar i Arabien], *Borås Tidning*, 23 March, 1940, pp. 1-2. But she also visited Palestine and the surrounding countries later, in 1948, during the first Arab – Israeli war, and in the mid-1950s. However, these journeys did not result in any published books, just in feature articles and lectures.

- “Certainly, if I can.”
 – “You can, madam. You are now travelling to Syria. Could you please make a stop in Homs and look up my run-away wife and take a photo of her. I need it for the divorce, and there is no decent photographer in Homs. And by the way, it’s cheaper too if you do it.”
 (Johnsson 1933:71)⁹

But the literariness of her narrative is also an effect produced by the translations featured. How well did the author know Arabic? In her first three travel books there are many episodes that show that initially she did not know the language. Either she communicated with the Arabs she met in English or French or she had to depend on an interpreter. As a matter of fact, she often makes a point about the unintelligible nature of the local language being a kind of gibberish. But in her fourth book, *The People of the Deserts*, the author explains how she gradually developed an interest in learning the Arabic language. After having struggled on her own for a long time, “learning ten new words a day”, she eventually decided to go to school in order to progress further. For a while she joined a class in Rawdat El-Maaref College in Jerusalem where teaching was conducted both in Arabic and in English. She was admitted to this all-male school by its founder, Sheikh Muhammed El-Sahle, who also exempted her from the fee as a good-will gesture. Asked what subjects she would like to study, she chose history, geography and the Koran (Johnsson 1935: 146-148). In this context she also reports on some visits that she made to the Moslem Girls School, which with a typical twist she finds excellent and first-class in all respects “except for learning” (ibid: 156).

Eventually Karin Johnsson began to speak Arabic. In her last book she claims to know the language (Johnsson 1938: 218). In her hotel she overhears a telephone conversation in Arabic and makes use of the information to escape the spies of the British police in Palestine. This was the time of the Arab revolt, 1936 – 1939, and the author’s close friendship with leading Palestinian nationalists appears to have made her a suspicious person. The episode figures in a story about how she secretly tries to go to Lebanon to interview the Mufti, Amin al-Husayni, who had been expelled from Palestine by the British and was kept in house-arrest by the French (ibid: 200-224).

That she ever knew how to read and write Arabic well is more doubtful. The translations that appear in her works are not faithful to the letter in any sense, but are paraphrases. As already mentioned, it is especially in her third book that Arabic literature emerges as a major topic. The last part of *Love in the Orient* (Johnsson 1933: 179-244) is in fact presented to the reader as a collection of translations. It is divided into five chapters each of which contains an old Arabic romance with a great poet as its protagonist. In the preface, the author states that the purpose of the journey she is about to narrate, undertaken in 1932, was to collect and record the “rich treasures of songs and ballads of the desert peoples” (Johnsson 1933: 7) - a task which then develops into a leitmotif in the text. Later in the book she describes her translation method. Elaborating on how rich in nuances – thus essentially impossible to transfer – the Arabic language is, she calls

⁹ My translation. All translations from Swedish or Arabic appearing in this chapter are by the author if not otherwise stated.

her own attempts “free renderings”.¹⁰ Fidelity is almost impossible to achieve, she explains. In practice she relied on the aid of the Husayni cousins, Munif and Salim. Especially the former, “who himself is one of the leading figures of contemporary Arabic literature”, she acknowledges for his invaluable assistance. Usually her Palestinian informants would produce a French or English interpretation first that the author then used as support for her own struggle with the “Urtext”, as she puts it, when trying to “capture its soul in a poem in Swedish” (Johnsson 1933: 182). Normally the trio worked together this way five or six hours every day (ibid: 164). It is worth noting that these translation sessions are chronologically prior to Karin Johnsson’s above-mentioned language study at the Arab college in Jerusalem.

What material from the treasure house of the Arabs did she discover or choose? In her remaining papers kept at the Royal Library in Stockholm one finds about 70 pages of hand-written Arabic material. The content is well-known pre-Islamic and old Arabic poetry, supplemented with biographical notes on the poets: Imru’ al-Qays, Zuhayr ibn Abi Sulma, al-Nabigha, al-Harith ibn Hilliza, Hassan ibn Thabit, ‘Antara ibn Shaddad, al-Murraqish al-Akbar, al-Murraqish al-Asghar, ‘Umar ibn Abi Rabi’a, Qays ibn Dharih, and Qays ibn al-Mulawwah (i.e. Majnun Layla). These are the legendary heroes of the Golden Odes or *mu‘allaqat* and of Arabic romance, a literature about idealized, impossible and maddening love. These names, their alleged verses and the stories about them cannot be considered new discoveries at the time, however, not even from a local Swedish perspective. Six years prior to the publication of *Love in the Orient* the professor of Arabic at Lund University, Axel Moberg had, for example, published his *Arabiska myter och sagor* (1927) [Arabic Myths and Tales] aimed at the educated public. His book contained similar material, some of it even identical, to Johnsson’s selection.

Indeed, this poetic heritage constitutes the canon of classical Arabic literature according to both Arab and Western scholars. But Karin Johnsson does not operate within the academic paradigm; she appears unaware of its production and has another reader in mind. For her it is all brand new, very exciting and absolutely exotic: an image of the “real” Orient, romantic and passionate. She wants to translate Arabic poems and legends, firstly, because “no people in the world loves and values poetic art more than the Arab” (Johnsson 1933: 181), and secondly, because “just as the Arab people’s soul is reflected in the Arabic poetry, the people itself reveals its psyche in the living monuments that it has erected in memory of its beloved singers” (ibid: 182). She believes that the literature she translates mirrors the true soul of the Arab people. Even if more than a thousand years have elapsed since the texts were originally recorded, their representation of Arab nature and culture is still a valid one.

An analysis of Karin Johnsson’s translations reveals that her probable source text is the “Book of Songs”, *Kitab al-Ahḡani* by Abu al-Faraj al-Isfahani (d. 967). This monumental and famous anthology of Arab poets and poetry belongs to the medieval high culture of the cities. But the author never mentions any title for her “Urtext” and prefers to present the anecdotes and poems as part of an oral

¹⁰ Sv. “fria omdiktningar” (Johnsson 1933: 182).

literature that she herself collected during her adventurous journeys “in the deserts of Syria and Persia”, a tradition that “still lives on the lips of the people, is sung around the camp fires and discussed at the feasts” (ibid: 181).

Domestication

Karin Johnsson’s free renderings are characterized by a consistent domestication of the foreignness of the Arabic originals. The scale of this domestication is illustrated by the ease with which the author subsequently manages to efface the difference between her own original writing and that of her translations. Only a few years after *Love in the Orient* had been published, one of the chapters was republished under the title “Al Muragesch’s Love Story” in a Swedish daily, not as a translation from Arabic this time but independently as a piece of original Swedish fiction, a short story by Karin Johnsson herself.¹¹ Also another chapter, “Kaïs ibn al-Mulawwah” (225-235), was republished in the Swedish press as late as 1968 without any mention of the fact that the story was a free-hand translation of an Arabic original.¹²

This adaptation strategy entails a simultaneous trivializing and exotification of the literary content. A comparison between the Swedish rendering of the love story between al-Murraqish al-Akbar and his beloved Asma’ and the Arabic version in al-Aghani (vol. VI: 127-135) provides an example. Firstly, the translation is decontextualized; it only tells the love story and nothing about the poet’s lineage or tribal history, information which frames the episode or khabar about his unhappy love in the original; most of the poetry attributed to him is also deleted from the translation along with the context. Secondly, the translation does not retain any of the stylistic features of the original. The basic content of the story remains, but the order of the events is sometimes slightly changed. In the Arabic original, for example, the hero returns to the tribe to claim his promised bride, whereupon her father who has married her off to a man from another tribe becomes afraid; to cover up he and some of his brothers bury the bones of a ram and pretend that this is Asma’s grave. But in the Swedish translation the father fears the hero’s return and comes up with the trick of the false grave before Muraqqish actually appears on the scene.

More disturbing perhaps is the translator’s subversion of facts. In the *Aghani*-text, ‘Awf, the father, is stricken by difficult times.¹³ This is why he accepts the

¹¹ *Falkenbergs Tidning*, 1937, 13 March, nr 41, Saturday supplement, pp. 81-82. A front-page article over four columns presented as “Al Muragesch’s Love Story. Short Story by Karin Johnsson” [Al Muragesch Kärlekssaga. Novell av Karin Johnsson]. This text is near identical with chapter 12, “The two Muragesch”, of her book (Johnsson 1933: 183 – 188).

¹² It appeared in the local holiday magazine *Hallands-Jul* 1968, “Kais och Lejla”, pp. 20 – 21.

¹³ *wa-asaba ‘Awf zaman shadid* (Al-Aghani 1986: vol. VI 138). There is another rendition of the same story in the eighth-century anthology *al-Mufaddaliyyat* which is virtually identical with the story in *al-Aghani*. For the argument of this article it does not matter whether Johnsson’s informants and she herself relied on the former or the latter rendition. The textual differences are minor. One difference is this particular passage, where the *Mufaddaliyyat* story specifies that the father faced a year of drought. For a comparison of the two versions of the love story including a brief synopsis, see Khan 1999: 55-57.

bride price of one hundred camels for his daughter from the other man, thereby breaking his promise to Muraqqish that he will get to marry her (1935: vol. IV 129). This information about the difficult times is deleted from the translation, where the father just appears greedy, selling off his daughter for no other reason than money. The Swedish version likewise has the father refuse the poet's first proposal to marry his daughter because Muraqqish cannot pay an exorbitant bride price. But in the Arabic text the cause of the refusal is the hero's lack of experience and fame.

As a translator Johnsson also frequently intervenes by means of addition. She often adds details to the story. She "spices" the text with invented dialogue, expands phrases and adds epithets with a romantic touch. She highlights emotions and sentiment, describes how the characters look or behave in words that have no correspondence in the assumed source text. A typical example would be the phrase "With eyes full of tears they spoke" [Med tårade ögon berättade de] (ibid: 185) instead of the plain "They said" [*qala*] of the original (ibid: 131). Another example is when Johnsson has the hero scratch his verses about his treacherous servants on the back of the camel saddle with his fingernails (ibid: 185), a detail which is not found in the original. The corresponding passage of the Arabic text does not mention with what instrument or how Muraqqish writes on the saddle, but instead explains that he and his brother had learned the art of writing from a Christian monk in al-Hira, since the story is supposed to have happened during pre-Islamic times. Moreover, Johnsson replaces the poem that contains Muraqqish's message on the saddle with a brief paraphrase in prose. Another addition by the translator is that of "predatory hyenas" appearing twice (ibid: 185, 186), animals that are not directly mentioned in the Arabic version. Apparently Johnsson wants to add colour and make the wilderness look wilder in order to thrill the Swedish reader.

This free handling of the Arabic original is not an isolated case. When one compares the tragic love story of Qays ibn Dharih and Lubna in Johnsson's Swedish rendition (Johnsson 1933: 195-209) with the text of *al-Aghani* (1935: vol. IX 180-226), the same translation strategy appears again. Here too the general content in both versions corresponds, but countless details in the Arabic text have been abridged or elided by the Swedish translator. Her version is considerably shorter, even if the core is the same. At the same time, she has elaborated many things and added elements, maybe to avoid the laconic style of classical Arabic and adopt a style more in line with that of the contemporary romantic novel. She highlights, indeed exaggerates, all signs of emotion in the characters and explicates the potential sentimental interpretation of the story. Yet in this story she remains truer to the generic character of the original in that she mixes prose and poetry in the narrative. In this respect her translation is more faithful than that of Moberg, the professor from Lund, who, although closer to the original wording, eliminates all verses of poetry from his version of the same romance, most likely translated from the same source, in order to adjust it to the European norm (Moberg 1927: 62-75 and preface).

How should one interpret this free manner of translating the Arabic classics? Translation is always inscribed in a historical and social context that the translator can hardly escape. This socio-historical dimension dictates the conditions for translation as a practice just as much as the translator's individual

linguistic choices and technique. All translations are “rewritings” governed by ideological and/or poetological preferences (Lefevre 1992). In an unequal world the translation of texts will inevitably be a part of that inequality, reflect it and be influenced by it. As “a cultural political practice”, Venuti argues (1996), translation has potentially violent effects, especially when it is configured in the hierarchies of dominance and marginality of the cultures and languages involved. According to postcolonial theorists, in the colonial situation “translation becomes part of the process of domination, of achieving control, a violence carried out on the language, culture, and people being translated” (Young 2003: 140). Regarded as a kind of meta-language, translation has the power to “(re)constitute and cheapen foreign texts, to trivialize and exclude foreign cultures, and thus potentially to figure in racial discrimination and ethnic violence, international political confrontations, terrorism, war.” (Venuti 1996: 196)

Of course, not everybody would agree with this critical view on translation in the spirit of Edward Said and his Orientalism paradigm. Indeed, Said’s view of a more or less monolithic Othering or Orientalism, a unified discourse unchanged over a long history and without essential variation, has long come under fire from a wide range of critics (cf Hamdi 2012). Moreover, basically positive readers of Said have also pointed to the need of a more nuanced image of Western academic and artistic approaches to the Orient, accepting the basic premises of *Orientalism* but refining some of its arguments. One line of criticism has been that Said ignores women’s writing, not least women’s travel writing, and the fact that many women were actively involved in colonialism (Mills 1991: 57-63). And in the specific field of translation, as Tareq Shamma (2009) has shown, there are also historically significant practices of resistance to the colonial discourse and its violence. Shamma highlights the case of Wilfrid Scawen Blunt (1840-1922), a British anti-imperialist activist, poet and traveller who translated pre-Islamic poetry and Arabic popular epics into English. Blunt also chose a domesticating strategy when he translated pre-Islamic poetry into English. He too blurred the line between his own poetry and his translations when he included them in the complete edition of his *Poetical Works* (1914), without giving notice of the true nature and origin of the texts. But his translations still worked against colonialist agendas, according to Shamma.

The literary background

The translations included in Karin Johnsson’s travel books are framed by the literary tradition of Orientalizing literature to which her works belong. In order to understand their function you need to situate them in this tradition. The Middle East as a geo-political concept of today is grafted on to the previously prevalent international term for the same region, the Orient.¹⁴ The precise geographical boundaries of this area were as unclear as its mystery was perceived to be timeless, but the essence of the Oriental as the absolute Other of the European was eminently well known:

¹⁴ Cf. Said 1979: 239, 293-95.

The Oriental never looks on the European as an equal – but calmly and full of contempt, unless he has a use for servile humbleness. The small spark of hatred that glimmers of and on in his beautiful deep-black eyes is carefully tended like a hidden temple lamp. The camel with his expression of contempt and submissive calm is the typical Oriental; he too is said to have a morbid remembrance of things long past and loves to kick back post festum if he has been badly treated (Asplund and Jungstedt 1934: 32).

This equation between a foul animal, the camel, and a malicious human, the Oriental, is taken from a travel book in Swedish from 1934. The almost generic title of the book is *Orient*.¹⁵ The scene here is Egypt but it could typically be anywhere in the East. Othering the locals and rejecting their human value in this way by likening them to animals was not rare. Even though Sweden had possessed few and mostly short-lived overseas colonies¹⁶, this negative attitude characterized many Swedes travelling or working abroad during the first half of the twentieth century (Catomeris 2005: 26-27). One important source of knowledge for the belittling and condescending beliefs was travel literature. According to Said, travel literature played an important part in the shaping of European perceptions and significantly contributed to the building of the discourse that underpinned the Western colonial system. These texts merit our attention for reasons that go beyond their potential value as historical documents or literature, as expressions of ideology and power relations.

The book *Orient* was published by a very prestigious publishing house, Bonniers, that marketed many works of a similar kind during this era - a middle-class travel literature that was strongly marked by colonialist language and views that are hard to reconcile with for a modern reader (Widhe 2008: 121).¹⁷ Among them were the travel books by Karin Johnsson. When she made her debut, the Oriental Journey was already a well-established subgenre in Swedish travel literature. It enjoyed great popularity among audiences, as witnessed by the many titles and editions of different works that appeared. It started to develop in the mid-nineteenth century, saw a peak in popularity in the period 1910-1940, and still flourishes today on a lesser scale.¹⁸

¹⁵ The book tells of a journey made by a Swedish writer and his artist friend by steamer from Southampton in England to India, Ceylon and East Africa and back again via the Suez Canal.

¹⁶ Sweden possessed overseas colonies from 1638 to 1663 and from 1785 to 1878. The former Swedish colonies were: “The Swedish Gold Coast” with different settlements in West Africa (1650-1663), where Sweden was involved in the slave trade, Saint-Barthelémy (1785-1878) and Guadeloupe (1813-1814) in the West Indies, and “New Sweden” along the Hudson River in North America (1638-1655).

¹⁷ At the time Bonniers published travel books from all over the world, often with telling titles like *Bland tuareghövdingar och negersultaner* (1933) [Among Tuareg Chiefs and Negro Sultans] by Gösta Moberg, or *Negerkust* (1933) [Negro Coast] by Arthur Lundkvist (1906-1991), who later became a member of the Swedish Academy. Another Academy member, Sigfrid Siwertz (1882-1970), was also prolific in the genre. For a critical analysis of his travel writing, see Widhe 2008.

¹⁸ A few random examples by established Swedish writers that illustrate the vigor of the genre are Ernst Brunner’s *Vandring under Jorden* (2006) [Walk under the Earth] and Tomas Andersson and Stefan Foconi’s *Café Musa. Egyptiska resor* (2007) [Café Musa. Egyptian Travels]. This history, of course, reminds us of the situation in England, France and Germany where the same literary phenomenon also occurred and the same attitudes against the foreign Other also prevailed.

In Sweden this development depended on a combination of original texts written in Swedish and translations from other European languages. In 1837 an abridged Swedish version of Alphonse de Lamartine's *Souvenirs, impressions, pensées et paysages, pendant un voyage en Orient* (1832-1833) appeared in Stockholm. This was only two years after the book had been first published in Paris and it is an early example of an influential translation. Lamartine's text includes French translations of Arabic oral literature plus bits and pieces of Arabic poetry. The Swedish translator, Anders Lindeberg, did not know any Arabic so these French versions were all rendered in Swedish without any consideration of the Arabic originals.¹⁹

By the end of the nineteenth century the Oriental Journey had become an established genre with characteristic stops and stations that are repeated by traveller after traveller. Stock motifs are the trip along the Nile including visits to the Pharaonic sites, the passage to Palestine and an inspection of the Holy Places, and often an expedition to Damascus and Syria on top of that. One of the most famous of the Swedish travellers during this period was the Orientalist Carlo Landberg (1848-1924).²⁰ In Syria he crossed the desert to Palmyra where the Bedouins ruled outside the control of the Turkish authorities. Both colourful and dramatic is the account of the ride that he gives in his book *I öknar och palmlundar* (1881-1882) [In Deserts and Palm Groves]. Landberg distinguishes himself by knowing Arabic, both spoken and written. After a long stay in Egypt and Syria/Palestine, he is more knowledgeable and insightful than most European travellers. For example, he appreciates Arabic poetry, although many people consider it to be "turgid and bombastic". But in order to be able to judge literature properly you need to know the culture that has produced it, he writes:

He who does not know the life of the East in its innermost parts, who has not studied its way of thinking, cannot and should not judge the value of its literature. I, for my part, find Arabic poetry wonderful, original and very rich (Landberg 1881-1882: 456).

Despite Landberg's declared passion for Arabic poetry his book contains only a tiny sample of verses in his own rhymed translation. In the context of the travel description, they function as lyrical illustrations to the arguments he makes or anecdotes he relates. The exact sources are never given, but mostly it is a question of well-known poetic material with a long history in Arabic literature. Like Lamartine, he selects a verse from 'Antara's poem (p. 456), then some verses from *Alf Layla wa-layla* [The Arabian Nights] (pp. 302, 307) and lastly some lines by *Majnun Layla* (pp. 451-52). He speaks of the high esteem that eloquence has among the Arabs, particularly the Bedouin, and explains what he has heard

¹⁹ The Swedish title is *Minnen från en resa i Orienten*. The book appeared in a series called: *Historic Reading Library II: Travel Accounts*. It is in pocket format and divided into four parts. At the end of the fourth part is an appendix containing "fragments" from Arabic oral literature, three pieces from the romance of 'Antara (pp. 291-331), and a few "fragments from Arabic verse" of anonymous origin (pp. 332-334). Also the tale of 'Antara has verse in it, presented as "thoughts by Antar". Some of these thoughts relate to the story, but others are simply aphorisms of the type "Be a despot to the despots, and wicked to the wicked" or "Better die fighting than live in slavery" (p. 327).

²⁰ For a brief portrait of Landberg, "the most original of Swedish Orientalists", see Kahle 2007: 61.

on this subject and experienced personally. His conclusion is that: “The Arab is a poet to his fingertips; he loves poetry more than anything else; for it he forgets everything else” (Landberg 1881-82: 454).

”The Arab is a poet to his fingertips” is an often used hyperbole and cliché. As we have seen, Karin Johnsson repeats the cliché. Obviously she is trying to meet her readers’ expectations. The exotic image of the desert prince, the noble sheik and poet on his white horse was a powerful stereotype of the Arab for many generations of Swedes. The seeds of this kind of romanticism had been sown already in the 1820s, when C. J. L. Atterbom (1790-1855), inspired by German neo-romanticism, had introduced a dreamy and fanciful Orientalism into Swedish literature, where it became resident from then on (Kahle 1993: vii).

Carlo Landberg’s biggest impact on Swedish constructions of the Arab Other was most likely indirect, however, through the writings of another famous traveller. In 1877-1878 Landberg guided the future Swedish national poet Verner von Heidenstam (1859-1940) through Egypt, Syria and Palestine. The latter lyrically recorded his impressions of the journey in the poetry collection *Valfart och vandringsår* (1888) [Pilgrimage and Wander Years], which was to form the model for Oriental scenery in Swedish literature for a long time.²¹

Moreover, Heidenstam made his debut as a novelist with a story set in Damascus. Built around a fictitious journey to Syria, *Endymion* (1899) portrays a struggle between an Orient fighting on its deathbed and a West destined for world dominion. The hero of the novel is a young man, Emin, who tries to start a revolt against the Serbian Governor General.

Both these works, the poetry collection *Pilgrimage and Wander Years* and the novel *Endymion*, subsequently became required reading for Swedish travellers and standard references in their works. Hence in Asplund and Jungstedt’s above-mentioned book, *Orient*, a stanza from one of Heidenstam’s poems in *Pilgrimage and Wander Years* is quoted already in the Introduction on page 7 and another one in the arrival scene in Egypt on page 31. The theme is typical: the new, “fake” Orient of the twentieth century is compared to the old, “true” Orient of Heidenstam. This is also how we meet the contradiction in the texts of Karin Johnsson. In a newspaper article in *Bergslagens tidning* (23 December 1937) she complains:

To none of the big cities of the East have I come with greater expectations than to Damascus – and none have I left so full of disappointment. (...) Although I knew that more than 45 years had passed since the scald of “Endymion” composed his poem about the dying Orient, I had still expected to find at least a breeze of the East that he depicts. (...) We went by car through winding alleys where the dirt looked to me the most Oriental thing there was.

²¹ The book was launched with 1,500 copies – which was a large print run then. When it sold out it was immediately reprinted in a second edition (Hägg 1996: 296). For a study of *Pilgrimage and Wander Years* as a case of typical Orientalism as theorized by Edward Said, see Styrbjörn Järnegard. “En konstnär’s rätta namn det är hans verk”. *Orientalisten, pilgrimen och den svenska poesin i Valfart och vandringsår* (2009). [‘The True name of an artist is his work’. *The Orientalist, the Pilgrim and the Swedish Poetry in Pilgrimage and Wander Years*]. For a detailed summary and critical review of Järnegard’s study, see *Samlaren, Tidskrift för svensk litteraturvetenskaplig forskning*, vol. 13, 2009, p. 245-253 [Tom Hedlund].

The mismatch between the fantasy of the traveller and the dull Oriental reality can only mean disappointment. This is the typical emotional response of the European explorer according to Edward Said (1979: 100). There is a first disappointment that the modern Orient is not at all like the texts. But rather than questioning his or her own preconceived images and their validity, the failure to conform to expectations becomes a sign of decadence on the part of the Oriental. The “unoriental” Orient is seen as a false appearance and a betrayal of the “true” self (Åhrlin 2005: 41). The “mimicking” of the West and things Western becomes just another token of cultural inferiority and proof of essential difference.

That Heidenstam’s texts greatly influenced the way the Orient and the Oriental came to be experienced by Karin Johnsson is clear. In a short, typed manuscript among her remaining papers she explicitly tells us of the huge influence the national poet had on her as an icon and a model: “Endymion! I do not know how many times I read this book, the most wonderful description of the Orient that there is, before I myself got the opportunity to visit these magical countries. But as reading matter for travel I have always brought with me, on all my journeys, a copy of both *Endymion* and *Pilgrimage and Wander Years*”.²²

Attraction and rejection

Karin Johnsson’s work exemplifies the under-researched link between travel writing and translation (Bassnett 2008). She is also fascinating as a person. Her travel books from the Middle East are typical examples of the Orientalizing genre discussed above, and in this sense she is representative. Yet, as a woman she is not the most typical traveller. Both in the Swedish and the larger European tradition, travel writing is a genre dominated by male writers (Mills 1991; Fazlhashemi 2001; Widhe 2008: 118).²³ Since Johnsson spent so much time in the same places, met many of the same people over and over again, became a personal friend of influential Arab families and came in close contact with the political elites of her time, it is interesting to look for a development. Politically, she moves from explicit pro-English/pro-French views in the early works to more critical comments on mandatory rule and a pro-Arab stance in the later ones.

²² It is not clear whether this manuscript (five pages) was ever published or, perhaps, read on the radio; Johnsson did participate in the Swedish state radio on several occasions, sometimes commenting on daily news from the Middle East and sometimes giving lectures. This particular manuscript carries the title “Days in Heidenstam’s Damascus” and contains a story about the author’s meeting in 1938 with a sheikh who is supposed to have been a friend of Heidenstam’s during his visit to the city half a century before (Karin and Harald Johnsson’s remaining papers, L73:2).

²³ Travelogues by women are by no means uncommon in Swedish literary history, but they are not the norm. Widhe (2008) estimates the share of women writers in a total of 800 travel books published in the period between the two world wars to one tenth. One of the first women to write about the Middle East in Sweden was Fredrika Bremer (1801-65) who spent five months in Palestine in 1859. She described her impressions in volume four of *Lifvet i Gamla Verlden* [Life in the Old World] published in 1861. Three contemporaries of Karin Johnsson were Alma Braathen, *Som luftfarturist i Orienten* (1929) [As a Vagabond Tourist in the Orient], Märta Linqvist, *Palestinska dagar* (1931) [Palestinian Days], and Dagmar Berg, *Det underbara Egypten* (1938) [Wonderful Egypt]. Together they illustrate the important contribution of women writers to this genre.

After the Second World War she seems to have been critical of the new Jewish State of Israel. Among her remaining papers there is an interesting unfinished manuscript of what appears to be a sixth travel book that narrates a visit she made to the Middle East in the critical year 1948. Chapter 11 of this manuscript describes how she managed to enter Palestine for a week during an armistice between the fighting parties. Here she gives an eyewitness account of the situation in Ramallah and Jerusalem. Images of people on the run, shooting, destruction, suffering and death dominate the story. The wording gives the impression that the Palestinian population is a victim of Jewish aggression and brutality, without, however, saying so explicitly.²⁴ On the other hand, her books also contain portraits of Jewish friends and positive descriptions of Jewish settlements and collective communities (e.g. Karin Johnsson 1935: 14; 1938: 48-50) and I have not been able to detect any anti-Semitic tendency in her writing. She is not afraid to criticize the Palestinian side for anti-Jewishness when she sees it, and describes the struggle between Jews and Arabs as a tug of war between two parties with equal rights – and faults (Johnsson 1933: 143-167).

Overall, Karin Johnsson's travel books from the Middle East are characterized by a tension between an attraction to Arab culture and society and a rejection of the Arabs as Orientals. This rejection is often expressed in a discriminatory and chauvinistic discourse characteristic of her time that she was unable or unwilling to avoid. In her first book she refers to herself as "the white woman" among coloured people and blacks (Johnsson 1930: 107, 144). Similar stereotypes based on racial characteristics abound in this text. She classifies the people of Syria, where she travels around in the company of French officers, into Turks, Armenians, Arabs, Kurds and other "races" that she readily associates with negative characteristics. They are all inferior to Europeans in general and the Nordic and Germanic race in particular, which is her yardstick (Johnsson 1930: 17, 220, 282). The negative traits that she picks out in her books are a mixture of psychological and cultural shortcomings. The Oriental is characterized by his lack of humour, sense of time and emotional control. He is brutal, oppressive, greedy, tasteless, indolent, resigned, fatalistic, egoistic, barbaric, primitive, naive, traditional, patriarchal, silly, impractical, dirty and so on.²⁵ Despite her belief in women's solidarity, Johnsson's attitudes towards Arab women are generally condescending too. She is hardly more positive towards Arab and other Oriental women than towards men; often quite the opposite.²⁶ In this she conforms to a common stereotype in women's travel writing about the Orient, that the Oriental woman is lazy, ugly and uneducated (Fazlhashemi 2001: 189-190).

But she also discovers positive traits and sees things that she likes, such as generosity, religiousness, refined manners and aristocratic lifestyles. These features are mostly interpreted as signs of Oriental extravagance and excessiveness, however, or downplayed in favour of the bad impressions

²⁴ Karin and Harald Johnsson's remaining papers, L73:12, Royal Library, Stockholm.

²⁵ To enumerate all the instances of disparaging comments about Armenians, Kurds, Turks, Arabs and other ethnic groups would make a long catalogue. Typical examples are found in Johnsson 1930: 39, 50, 69, 214-216, 308, 337; Johnsson 1931: 278; Johnsson 1933: 79; Johnsson 1934: 29-30.

²⁶ E.g. Johnsson 1930: 39, 95-96, 124, 142, 199-200; Johnsson 1933: 79; Johnsson 1934: 17.

mentioned above. In *Love in the Orient* she still applauds the British authorities in Palestine and recommends that the Arabs put their political ambitions to one side until they manage to create a new spirit and a new direction in life for themselves, since they are lazy, uneducated and impractical and lack initiative (Johnsson 1933: 154). However, we also find attempts to defend or explain the Arab point of view in Palestine in the conflict with the mandatory powers and the Jewish immigrants, particularly in her last books.

Among the Arabs, during her travels, she must have acted as a good friend and sympathetic to their cause. This is indicated by the many stories of how well she was received. Other evidence is the copies of news clippings from unidentified Arab papers that appear as untranslated illustrations in several of her books. In *Among Harem Ladies and Sheiks*, for example, there is a copy of a short item from a Palestinian paper reporting that Karin Johnsson, “the famous Swedish woman writer”, has arrived in Jerusalem. The text mentions some of her books and tells the Arab reader who she is, “a well-known historian, a great writer and a skilled journalist (...) with a special love for the Arabs and the Bedouin, whose generous and upright moral character she admires” (Johnsson 1930: 285). Similar appreciative formulations appear as well in other documents included.²⁷

Despite this local praise, back at home she often satirized the people she had met on her journeys and ridiculed them as backward and stupid. However, some of them were no more stupid than to be able to find out what she had actually written. One was the Jerusalem lawyer Omar Es-Saleh El-Barghuthy who was her guide during her visit to the city in 1934. Through some Swedish acquaintances he apparently had received a summary translation of Johnsson’s fourth book, *The People of the Deserts*, in which he figures as a main character. What he read or heard made him furious. He did not like the caricature of himself that he found, which portrayed him as a drinker, a notoriously unfaithful husband and a political fool. And he was not pleased with the portrait of his wife: “the indolent, mentally blunt creature of habit, the woman of the kitchen and the parade, melancholic and yearning, but without initiative, without interests” (Johnsson 1935: 18). When the author came back the next time, al-Barghuthy, much to her surprise, wanted to sue her for libel, and she had to make a big effort to explain to all her friends that it was a case of “misunderstanding”.²⁸

²⁷ E.g. Johnsson 1933: 178; Johnsson 1935: 93.

²⁸ The story about the exposure and its repercussions exists in two versions, one published in Karin Johnsson’s last book *Without a Guide*, pp. 65-66, 74-77, and another published in a newspaper article with the telling title “In Disfavor with Orientals” [I onåd hos Orientaler], *Skånska Dagbladet*, 4 July 1937. In addition to the conflict with ‘Umar al-Barghuthy she was also accused by a photographer from Jerusalem of using some of his pictures without permission in her books. That the “West” and the “Orient” were not two separate worlds should have become apparent to her by then. A latter-day parallel is the case of the Norwegian journalist/travel writer Åsne Seierstad, who was sued for libel in a Norwegian court by Suraia Rais, one of the wives in the family where she had stayed in Afghanistan in order to collect material for a book. Although using pseudonyms in *The Bookseller of Kabul* (2002), the actual persons behind the portraits were easy to identify, and in 2010 Seierstad was sentenced for defamation and violation of the sanctity of private life.

I explain that with my description of Omar Saleh I only intended to give an image of a particularly interesting Oriental type of today, brutal primitive force, raw power, cruelty – all coated with a thin European veneer that flaked and fell off at the slightest touch. But the man himself was responsible for it – he had asked me to depict him as I saw him. (Johnsson 1938: 74)

The conventions and expectations of the target audience seem to govern the writer's strategy in big and small matters. White lies are often necessary to make a good story hold. Prejudices and stereotypes are not really a problem but something to exploit. She wants to be entertaining and uses the technique of the caricature to produce a humoristic effect, also when it comes to her translations. Chronologically her translations of Arabic poetry and legends belong to the middle period of her stay in the Middle East. The romanticizing of the Arab culture that they represent fades away in the last of her travel books that tends to focus more on political issues and contemporary society. The events in Palestine and the Arab revolt against the British that engage her Arab friends obviously make her more concerned about the present than with the past. But even if her attitudes as a narrator slowly change, the basic matrix of her story does not.

A final observation may be in place. The role of the translator as an agent in intercultural communication cannot only be measured against the works that he or she has translated nor be reduced to a matter of how this translation was accomplished. Judgement is also very much related to the selection of texts. How is this done? What is not included and for what reasons? Selection is an important factor because "the translator always exercises a choice concerning the degree and direction of the violence at work in his practice" (Venuti 1996: 197). Interestingly, modern Palestinian poetry and Arab nationalist literature were never included in Johnsson's selection of texts to represent "the Arab soul". Also in this respect her case conforms to a pattern. It is a telling fact that not until the period of Arab independence in the 1950s were there any works of modern Arabic fiction translated into Swedish at all, and the first modern Arabic poetry in translation appeared as late as 1970. Nevertheless, Swedish travellers, both men and women, had been "translating" the Orient and discussing its literature since the middle of the nineteenth century. Why was their view always turned toward the past?

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