

BARBARA MICHALAK-PIKULSKA
Uniwersytet Jagielloński w Krakowie
e-mail: barbara.michalak-pikulska@uj.edu.pl

SEBASTIAN GADOMSKI
Uniwersytet Jagielloński w Krakowie
e-mail: sebastian.gadomski@uj.edu.pl

Arabic Literature through the Polish Eyes

Abstract

Translation of literature is not only a linguistic challenge, but it means also the ability to find readable equivalents describing an existential experience in foreign culture code. The article raises issues of translation in relation to Arabic literature, which in the cultural perspective is relatively distant to a Polish reader. In the first part, the authors mention the most important examples of translations of Arabic literary works into Polish ranging from baroque to modernity. They draw attention to the main trends that Polish translators followed and point to the basic problems, which they had to face. The second part of the article refers to the authors' own experience in translation. It presents the short analysis of the phenomena, which are, in their opinion the biggest challenges in translational work on the Arabic literary texts.

Keywords: Arabic literature, poetry, short story, novel, translation.

Translation is one of the most important questions in the comparison of other cultures as equal in their enrichment. The greater the number of translations the greater the awareness amongst readers the world over in the experiencing and understanding of Arab culture.

Polish as a language uses the alternant words tłumaczenie [translation] and przekład [rendition] as if assuming that these are synonymous, yet the very etymology of these two words points to the difference between them. There exists an analogical opposition within the Latin. The form 'Tłumaczę' [I translate] would be the equivalent of 'interpretor' (which in its foremost sense means to 'explain', though equally 'to understand' and 'to determine'); 'przekładam' [I render] is a linguistic calque of 'transfero' (in the participial form 'translatum', therein giving us translation and translator). The difference is, as one can see, significant. For within it lurks the correct conviction that the mechanical 'transfer' of an ut-

terance from one language to another is treated as the act of its ‘explanation’, an explanation based on ‘understanding’ and ‘determining’.¹

In translating literature from one language into another we bring people closer together. This has been the subject of much research, both theoretical and practical. Robert Frost is of the view that it is the “poetry which disappears in translation” while Paul Valery considers that there exist poetical works which lose little when rendered in translation into prose, or even nothing at all. If the loss is minimal then it questions the poetical value. In this sense the words of Robert Frost as quoted above would mean that the poetry is that which disappears in a translation into prose.²

If the matter concerns Arabic literature then in many cases – one may boldly state – that it constituted the inspiration for Polish writers and poets.

One of the most important factors that brought about a migration of Arabic motifs, genres and literary forms onto a European soil, including the Polish scene, was the territorial expansion of the Arabs, cultural and political contacts as well as the wanderings of travellers.

The early territorial Arabic expansion, wider political and cultural relationships and Arab travellers’ expeditions were the most important factors causing migration of Arabic motives and different literature forms onto European soils. In those times, directly after the death of the Prophet Mohammad in 632, when the expansion started, Arabs already had an extremely rich literary output – mostly in an oral form – consisting of Bedouin poetry, fairy tales, legends, stories and proverbs. As a result of that expansion new intellectual trends spread to Europe mainly by Spain (8th–15th century), Sicily (9th–11th century) and Syria (7th–13th century).

Infiltration of Oriental motifs continued in the literary period of the Baroque, which developed in the 16th century in Spain and Italy, and lasted until the 18th century. The finest exponent of the Polish Baroque was Jan Andrzej Morsztyn (1621–1693), who traveled widely through Europe, and his main poetry volumes *Dog Days or Dog’s Star* and *The Lute* were inspired by the works of the famous Italian poet Marin (1569–1629), and Spaniard Gondor of Cordoba (1561–1627). Gondor’s lyrical works were certainly influenced by the Arab poetry of Andalusia – where Ibn Zaydun (died in 1070) and also Ibn Hazm (died in 1061 – the Author of the volume *Tawq al-Hamama – The Necklace of the Dove*) lived and wrote.

In the period of the Enlightenment in Europe – lasting from the end of 17th century to the end of 18th century – Oriental Themes infiltrated into Polish literature mainly through France. All credit for the popularization of Oriental literature in Poland of that period goes to Ignacy Krasicki (1735–1801), Franciszek Karpiński (1741–1825) and Jan Potocki (1761–1815).

Through applying the literary trends of those times Krasicki introduced a number of Oriental literary elements into his tales and fiction, which capture masterfully an atmosphere of Arabic Origin. They were revealed in his prose works

¹ S. Barańczak, *Mały, lecz maksymalistyczny manifest translologiczny*, “Teksty Drugie” 1990, no. 3, p. 15.

² *Ibid.*, p. 16.

in the form of a tale and in rhyming fairy tales. Krasicki's short fairy tales are discreetly instructive, presenting in allegoric form the real and actual problems of everyday life. In 1779 he published his *Fairy Tales and Parables*, and then *New Fairy Tales* inspired mainly by La Fontaine's collection of fables, who had himself been inspired earlier by the tales of Pilpay, Ezop and Lukman.

Franciszek Karpiński, known also as "the poet of the heart", enriched Polish literature with his very Oriental poem *Wazir Giafar to Harun ar-Rasheed* based on the story of the unhappy marriage of Abbasa – the sister of Caliph Harun ar-Rasheed and Ja'far Barmakid. This love story appears frequently in historical chronicles, e.g., By at-Tabari (died 923), al-Mas'udi (died 956) or Ibn Chaldun (died 1406).

Jan Potocki – the scholar and writer – besides his literary descriptions of his journeys to the Middle East wrote his world renowned novel *A Manuscript found in Saragossa*. His novel was constructed in a very similar way to *The Tales of 1001 Nights* as a case romance and very probably it was also inspired by *Don Quijote de la Mancha* by Cervantes.

Oriental Motifs became particularly abundant in literature during the period of Romanticism, which developed in Europe from the 1790s to the 1840s. Romanticism inherited from the period of the Enlightenment an avocation for exoticism and transformed it in its specific way. Writers and poets sought escape from reality in a fabulous world. The works of Byron, Moore, Lamartine or Voltaire excited the imagination of Polish poets and writers.

The Polish poets Adam Mickiewicz and Juliusz Slowacki especially worshipped Byron, whose gloomy and lonely heroes, at variance with themselves and the whole world, were to find expression in their poems.

Orientalism in literature favoured the development of the humanities focusing on Oriental art and culture. In Poland of that time, the dominant academic centre for the Oriental Arts was Vilnius, where famous Orientalists like Michal Bobrowski (1784–1848), Jozef Sekowski (1800–1859) or Aleksander Chocko (1804–1891) worked.

A special role in the popularization of Arab Culture was played by Count Wacław Rzewuski. Even the hero of the poem *The Faris* by Mickiewicz was based on Rzewuski. The Romantics used to see in *faris* – a free son of the desert – the embodiment of the idea of freedom.

Wacław Rzewuski became interested in Oriental Culture as a result of the influence of his uncle, Jan Potocki. He was to be the first author of literary works to know Arabic and was to become acquainted with Arabic Literature in the original and Bedouin customs. He spent much of his time in Vienna, where he founded and financed the first oriental magazine "Fundgruben des Orientes (1809–1818)". Rzewuski travelled to Syria and the Arabian Peninsula twice in search of Arabian horses, something that was to give rise to his book *Sur les chevaux orientaux*. The manuscript of this work, in two volumes, is held at the National Library in Warsaw. Beside the parts related to Arabian horses, there is excellent information on nature and the history of the countries visited, as well as of the local customs

to be found there. Rzewuski is also the author of a collection of poems *Arabic Melodies*.

Adam Mickiewicz (1798–1855), mentioned above – the Polish poet and bard – was deeply interested in Oriental literature. The poems of Goethe, Schiller, Scott and Byron, contacts with scholars such as Sekowski and Chocko, and friendship with Mirza Jafar inspired him to imbibe his works with Oriental themes. He especially valued the famous Arab poets ash-Shanfara and al-Mutanabbi, whose poems he was able to learn from the French translations of de Sacy and de Lagrange. The most popular poem by Mickiewicz was *The Faris* composed in honour of Waclaw Rzewuski. The lyrical hero is a man of superhuman courage, who can overcome every obstacle on his way and became the model of a poet, patriot and rebel – fighting for freedom.

During the epoch of the Young Poland Movement (Młoda Polska) (a neo-Romanticism of the turn of the 20th century) there was reawakened an interest in the Orient, which was to manifest itself both in a popularisation of various works of Arabic literature through their translation, as equally independent creation based on Oriental currents, themes and motifs. Antoni Lange (1861–1929), the poet, critic and translator, in his *Eastern Divan*, published in Warsaw in 1921, included a selection of masterpieces from the literature of the Orient, including pieces from Arabic literature. He made use of an anthology of extremely popular Arabic poetry entitled *Hamasa* (Courage) by Abu Tammam and Al-Buchturi, the Latin translations of which had been provided by Freytag in 1828; as well as the work of Abu Faraj al-Isfahani *Kitab al-Aghani* (The Book of Songs), translated by Brunnow and Guidi. Antoni Lange selected from the above anthologies the verse by Old Arabic poets: Imru'l-Qays, Antara ibn Shaddad, an-Nabigha az-Zubyani, Ka'b ibn Zuhayr. Lange himself, drawing his model from Arabic *wine* poetry, wrote a poem to honour black coffee entitled *Drunken Ballads* (published in the collection *Poezje*, pt. II, 1898).

The 20th century represents a gradual increase in the number of translations from contemporary Arabic literature. The Polish reader is exposed to numerous translations of Arabic classical and contemporary writers and poets. There have appeared, among others, the short stories and novels of Taufiq al-Hakim, Nagib Mahfuz, Taha Husayn, Yusuf Idris, Ghada as-Samman, Gibran Khalil, Ghassan Kanafani, Layla al-Uthman, Raja as-Sani, Raja Alem, Ali al-Aswani, at-Tayyib Salih, Abd ar-Rahman Munif. Old Arabic *mu'allaqat* are available in Polish translation and an extensive anthology of Arabic poetry from the 6th to the 8th century as well as an anthology of contemporary Arabic poetry 'Songs of Wrath and Love.'

Despite this the image of contemporary Arabic literature that emerges from a reading of works translated into Polish up until the end of the 1970s leads one to the conclusion that they are chiefly realistic short stories, primarily on the subject of society and its relations. Only within the new millennium does something start to happen. New publishing houses come into being, promoting Oriental literature and in particular Arabic: *Biuro Literackie*, *Lambook* and first and foremost *Smak słowa*.

We would like to share some remarks and experiences on the problems encountered by the Arabic-Polish translator of literary texts. For many misunderstandings and much discussion occur with translators of, say, English or European literature into Polish. In this case these difficulties may be overcome as was often stated and written about by one of the most important Polish translators Stanisław Barańczak, who translated many works from English into Polish. In his *Small yet Maximalist Translational Manifesto*³ he speculates over theoretical conclusions drawn from translational experiences, subsequently developing them on the example of particular works translated from foreign languages. In the case of translation from European languages the translator does not have to translate culture into culture.

We shall begin therefore from classical Arabic texts, that is classical Arabic poetry in its translation into Polish, which, as a result of the construction of the classical *qasida* is not possible to completely render in translation. An element of classical Arabic poetry is its rhyme and meter. For those who know the Arabic system of rhymes which appears within the classical *qasida* it is an obvious fact that the task is an impossible one. This consequently results in an impoverishment of the text, and even an impoverishment of the meaning. The already mentioned Stanisław Barańczak accused Judith Hemschemeyer that her translation of Akhmatova's poetry was devoid of the melodious aspect. He wrote: "Rhyme and regular meter were for her a matter of life and death: the life and death of a poem, the life and death of a culture".⁴ In the case of Old Arabic literature we are forced to pass over this entire aspect of Arabic verse. Another problem is the moment in which Old Arabic poetry came into being, this being the 6th–7th century. In Poland and in Europe we do not have any literary forms from this particular period while Arabic poetry was already formed, possessing principles that related as equally to form as to content. Hence, it is difficult to accommodate it within any literary epoch whatsoever in Europe for such an epoch simply did not exist. Present-day translators attempt to convey the content and not the form.⁵ An exception in Polish being the poem *Szanfary* in the Polish translation of the Romantic poet Adam Mickiewicz, who made use of the French translation by Sylwester de Sacy as well as the literal Polish translation of the Orientalist Józef Sękowski with its extensive commentary. A second poem translated by Mickiewicz was *Al-Motenabby* written on the basis of the French translation by Lagrange. The French translation was close to the Arabic original. The only departure was one typical for French Orientalists of this period namely the introduction into the translation of a commentary from the translator himself. This commentary was derived from the numerous Arabic studies of Mutanabbi's text. This was presumably to help a European acceptance of what is, at times, not always a clear text to understand.⁶

Language barriers are more or less exaggerated. It seems that translation may occur in a dual way: philologically – in our understanding literally. Here what is chiefly conveyed is the grammar and lexis, which in a broader perspective

³ Ibid., p. 13–62.

⁴ Ibid., p. 27.

⁵ Cf. M. Dziekan, *O tłumaczeniu literatury arabskiej uwag kilka*, "Ogród" 1994, no. 3(19).

⁶ Cf. J. Danecki, *Poezja arabska VI–XIII w.*, Wrocław 1997, p. 437.

may turn out to be, however, incorrect. The second way is a literary translation attempting to capture the atmosphere and content in such a way that a reader from a different culture most accurately understands what the author of the original was driving at and wanted to say. The problem lies in the fact that around a 1/6th of Arabic constructions do not have, on the level of syntax, direct equivalents in Polish. The Arabic used by a translator is one full of linguistic pitfalls as a result of its different syntactical and morphological structure. And although the majority of syntactical categories existing within the Polish language equally function in Arabic, a common problem is confronted over lexis. This is connected with the absence of a vocalisation of vowels which results in a situation whereby words in Arabic are written identically yet they have different meanings, for example: *matar* with elongation of the vowel 'a' means 'airport', and without elongation 'rain'; or *firash* (bed) yet *farash* (butterfly). Of course the translator should recognise the meaning from the context though this is not always so obvious.⁷

Another problem resulting from the language situation of the Arab world is the existence of diglossia, that is the functioning alongside each other of the Arabic literary language (*fusha*) and its dialects (*lahjat*). They complement each other in areas of social life and although the literary language as the written language appears in literature it is also true to say that increasingly often an array of writers employ dialectical words and phrases in their books. This obviously makes the translator's job more difficult, as it is difficult to master all the dialects.

Another difficulty lies in the area of technical and medical terminology. These are given either in dialectical form or are quoted from English or French, yet written in the Arabic alphabet. Finally the inclusion by many authors within the text of a song or saying in dialect, for example in Edward al-Charrat and his novel *Hajarat Bubillu* (*Apollo's Tree*, transl. by Jolanta Kozłowska).

Besides, in order to give local colour and to emphasise the nature of the country from which the author comes, he uses the names of local dishes, costumes and forms of attire, holidays and feast days etc., for example *hijab*, *abaya*, *basmala*, *hajji*, *suq*, *shisha*. Therefore the translator also, after consulting sources, decides to include footnotes to enable the differences in culture to be explained. It was just such a solution that I decided upon when translating a book by the Kuwaiti female writer Layla al-Uthman. The problem began with the translation of the titles *Imra'fi ina* (*Trapped woman*) or *Fi al-layl ta'ti al-uyun* (*Seen at Night*). The next problems of a cultural nature needed to be explained on the example of a poem by Ahmad Rashid ath-Thani entitled *Safqa*. This refers to the changes that occurred in the countries of the Persian Gulf following the discovery of crude oil; hence even love is treated as the title transaction (*safqa*) and presented by means of the metaphor *distillation* as is borne out by the verb *karrara* – *ukarriru*:

I love you
I distil your love
I export it to my heart

⁷ E. Górska, *Jak uczyć przekładu tekstów literackich. Doświadczenia i refleksje* [in:] *Dydaktyka języka arabskiego*, eds. B. Michalak-Pikulska, M. Lewicka, Toruń 2013, p. 79.

Pump out passion from myself
 The air is gas
 And my heart has become an oil stain
 I love you
 Like oil⁸

Or the short story *Min milaff imra'* (*From the diary of a certain woman*). The most important thing in life for the heroine of the story is to get married and have children. The Polish reader understands the desire to have a family but not at any price. In this and other short stories many women writers bring up the subject of women as mothers. This is inseparably connected with the Polish saying "Raj leży u stóp matki" ("Paradise lies at a mother's feet"). In Polish culture the matter is understood completely differently. A girl thinks as a rule about an education, a good job, and only then about setting up a family and eventually having children. Or another of Layla's short stories *al-Awram* (*Turgidity*) connected with not only the physical but also the psychological inability to express one's feelings.

There are often misunderstandings as the titles of the original are changed and here completely needlessly. For example, the novel by Taufiq al-Hakim *Awdat ar-ruh* was translated into Polish as *Dom niespełnionych marzeń* (*The House of Unfulfilled Dreams*). It seems that the original title which literally is *Return of the Spirit* is correct and easy to translate.

I try, in translating and working on the output of a given author, to become acquainted with them personally. We talk about their reality, about their imagination and experiences. I take a look at the places in which the events of their writings take place, visit the cafes in which they take their tea, get to know people, neighbours, their family. This gives me a certain conception and transports me into the reality in which they create. That said even the best possible translation cannot compare to the original. It is not able to convey the experiences felt by the reader of the work in the language in which it was contrived.

A completely different matter is poetry written in dialects, known as *nabati*. From amongst the well-known poets of this genre are Amir Khalid Al Faysal and shaikh Zayd. At present I am working on a translation and study of a poem from Saudi Arabia written by Bdah al-Anqari, entitled *Shima anqariyya*, which has caused both my colleagues and I a number of problems. To date I have several versions of the poem as everyone knows a different version in dialect.

Much has been written on the subject of the art of translation, but of great importance is personal experience and practice. Without doubt a translator has to know two languages in an exemplary way, not only the foreign language but equally important their own native language. Besides, the translator has to have the intuition and knowledge of the realities existing within Arab society. A translator should be able to move effortlessly through the cultural and religious matters of the area that constitutes the subject matter of their translations. Everything, when taken together, should blend to create an excellent rendering, something that is far from easy to achieve for as we know there are no such things as the 'ideal'

⁸ A. R. Ath-Thani, *Safqa* [in:] *Julus as-sabah 'ala al-bahr*, ash-Shariqa 2013, p. 35–36.

or the ‘perfect’. The most important is to try and produce something that is the closest to this possible.

The well-known Polish composer and writer of lyrics Wojciech Młynarski, in the song *C'est si bon* reminds us of the old saying of Voltaire that “a good translation is like a woman: if beautiful then unfaithful, if faithful then unbeautiful”.

Bibliography

Barańczak S., *Mały, lecz maksymalistyczny manifest translatologiczny*, “Teksty Dru-
gie” 1990, no. 3.

Danecki J., *Poezja arabska VI–XIII w.*, Wrocław 1997.

Dziekan M., *O tłumaczeniu literatury arabskiej uwag kilka*, “Ogród” 1994, no. 3(19).

Górska E., *Jak uczyć przekładu tekstów literackich. Doświadczenia i refleksje* [in:]
Dydaktyka języka arabskiego, eds. B. Michalak-Pikulska, M. Lewicka, Toruń
2013.

Ath-Thani A. R., *Safqa* [in:] *Julus as-sabah 'ala al-bahr*, ash-Shariqa 2013.