Abstract: The purpose of this article is to outline Denys Johnson-Davies’s translation career as told in his autobiography, give a general appreciation of his unparalleled role in translating and promoting Arabic literature in the English-speaking world, shed light on his adapting numerous Arabic folktales for children, and touch upon his translations of canonical Islamic texts. However, it would not be possible to fully appreciate his monumental contributions in this intercultural dialogue without examining, albeit briefly, some of the intractable odds against which he strove. In other words, had he been a French- or German-English translator, his would have been a completely different story, and perhaps not worth being voluble about. To achieve this goal, I will highlight certain relevant incidents in his career that illustrate both his tireless efforts and his attachment to Arabic literature, Arab authors, and Arab customs, for it is through this “spiritual affinity” that Johnson-Davies fulfills Schlegel’s condition for a good authentic translation.

Keywords: Denys Johnson-Davies, Arabic literature in translation, intercultural dialogue, East-West literary relations

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I,
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Robert Frost

In his brief literary autobiography, Canadian-born British writer and translator Denys Johnson-Davies, well into his eighties, found nothing worth preserving to posterity save his memories of those six decades he had spent in translating and promoting modern Arabic literature in the English-speaking world. Personal history, curtailed to an extreme in this concise autobiography, is invoked only in association with his career as a translator of Arabic literature. Thus, it is no surprise that he should in
retrospect choose a subtitle that indicates the importance of translation in his life and literary career: Memories in Translation: A Life between the Lines of Arabic Literature, a career that commenced in 1945 and lasted until the spring of 2012 when he officially retired.¹

The purpose of this article is to outline Johnson-Davies’s translation career as told in his autobiography, give a general appreciation of his unparalleled role in translating and promoting Arabic literature in the English-speaking world, shed light on his adapting numerous Arabic folktales for children, and to touch upon his translations of canonical Islamic texts. However, it would not be possible to fully appreciate his monumental contributions in this intercultural dialogue without examining, albeit briefly, some of the intractable odds against which he strove. In other words, had he been a French- or German-English translator, his would have been a completely different story, and perhaps not worth being voluble about. To achieve this goal, I will highlight certain relevant incidents in his career that illustrate both his tireless efforts and his attachment to Arabic literature, Arab authors, and Arab customs. It is through this “spiritual affinity” that Johnson-Davies fulfills Schlegel’s condition for a good authentic translation.

The massive achievement of Johnson-Davies in terms of promoting Arabic letters in the West cannot be fully appreciated without situating it within the general context of Western disenchantment with modern Arabic literature and of the seeming Arab indifference towards their own cultural place on the world stage. His singularity lies in the fact that no other Western translator has dedicated his life to acquainting the English-speaking world with Arabic literature like him; in a sense he was a pioneering “fool” who rushed in where “angels” feared to tread, to paraphrase Alexander Pope. Nor have the Arabs whose literature he had promoted always been appreciative of his undaunted efforts, as we shall see below. And before 2007, when he won the Sheikh Zayed Book Award for Cultural Personality of the Year, there was no equitable financial reward. Unlike his contemporary Orientalists, whose monolithic view of Arab society systematically shunned the study of modern Arabic literature;² he committed the very anathema Orientalists have dutifully and conscientiously avoided: translating it into the most dominant international language, from which translations into other languages have on occasion sprung. He did this out of his deep faith that modern Arabic literature is an expression of a dynamic culture capable of change and renewal. By so doing, he discredited some Orientalist claims that Arabic itself is not good even for communication, let alone for literary, scientific, or intellectual expression,³ and that Arab society is essentially a static, Bedouin society that neither realizes nor admits the march of history, as the Jewish American Orientalist Raphael Patai preposterously claims.⁴

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Caught in the East-West Imbroglio

In *The Past We Share*, E. L. Ranelagh says, “Not news for scholars but startling to the rest of us is the concept of a threefold source of western culture of which one part is Arabian.” But who is to blame for this state of mass ignorance? Ironically, the very educators themselves! “We were taught that our civilization stemmed from classical and Christian roots, Graeco-Roman and Judeo-Christian…”” No wonder then that John Murray, Lord Byron’s publisher in the nineteenth century, “expressed a doubt ‘as to the propriety of putting the name of Cain into the mouth of a Musselman.’”" Though the Arab world, from which came most of Western folk literature thanks to Petrus Alfunsus’s *Disciplina Clericalis* (circa 1106),", should not be completely unknown in the next century, the stereotype expressed by John Murray retained much of its misconception and prejudice against the Arabs and was further aggravated by the various political conflicts between Arabs and Westerners that naturally made matters even worse.

Two similar incidents from the late twentieth century will further illustrate the extent to which modern Arabic literature and culture have been embargoed in the West. In his famous article “Embargoed Literature” (1990), Edward W. Said reports a story whose significance lies in its illustration of the “iron curtain of indifference and prejudice” that “ruled out any attention to texts that did not reiterate the usual clichés about ‘Islam,’ violence, sensuality, and so forth.”’ Eight years before Naguib Mahfouz won the 1988 Nobel Prize for literature, a major commercial New York publisher asked Said to suggest a list of Third World novels for translation and inclusion in a series he was planning. The list prepared by Said was headed by two or three novels by Mahfouz. A few weeks later Said called back to see which of Mahfouz’s works had been chosen, only to be told that none would be undertaken because “Arabic is a controversial language” (372). The fact that the Arab-Israeli conflict plays a role even in Arab-Western literary relations is illustrated by the *New York Times* which had “thoughtfully” sought the opinion of the Israeli consul about Mahfouz’s winning the Nobel Prize—as if the winning of an international prize by an Arab author may provoke an Israeli veto or require the approval of the Zionist custodians of the tower of Babel!

The prejudice felt by Said in New York was likewise experienced in Texas that same year by his compatriot the Palestinian poetess and academic Salma Khadra Jayyusi. In a discussion at the University of Texas about the Arab role in the development of human civilization, one of Jayyusi’s students derisively questioned this role. “At that moment,” says Jayyusi, “I was gripped by an overwhelming sense of defiance…and I was determined to do something.”’ As a result, she left her academic job to launch, single-handedly, the Project of Translation from Arabic (PROTA). The goal of PROTA was to translate literary and intellectual Arabic
works into English with the hope that “perhaps the Arab voice would reach the world.” Among her achievements is *Anthology of Modern Palestinian Literature* (Columbia University Press, 1994). The importance and seriousness of translation can be gauged by the reaction of the Zionist lobby whose interests are the first to be affected by the dissemination of Arabic literature in the West. This lobby did all it could to prevent the publication of this anthology in the United States, but only managed to delay that by one year. What the Zionist attempt shows is how political interests inveigh against any intercultural rapprochement between Arabs and Westerners. It was under such frustrating circumstances that Johnson-Davies dedicated himself to translating as many literary Arabic works as he could, thus deservedly earning Said’s hailing of him in that same famous article as “the leading Arabic-English translator of our time.”

**Taking the Less Travelled Road**

When Johnson-Davies started studying Arabic under the Orientalists of London and Cambridge, including R. A. Nicholson, the guru of Sufi literature and the great translator of Rumi’s *Masnavi*, he had a feeling that Arabic was just another Latin, a dead language, and noticed that his professors were interested in the past not the present, and that for this reason none of them took the trouble to visit the countries they studied. In other words, the Orientalist approach, as argued by Edward Said, was almost exclusively a static textual approach that completely ignored the natural products of human geography and living history.

Nor did the Orientalists generally hold modern Arabic literature in high esteem. A case in point is Sir Hamilton Gibb who, in the preface to the second edition of his 1963 *Arabic Literature*, regards modern Arabic literary works not as artistic achievements, but as mere social documents (Memories 21). The crudest and most simplistic statement about Arabic literature, however, was made exactly a decade later by Patai. No adroit attempt at summarizing can do justice to his ludicrous generalization about Arabic literature, from pre-Islamic times to the late twentieth century, than his own unabridged reduction:

> Only a few words can be added here to show that the traits characterizing Arab visual arts and music can be found in Arabic literature as well. We have found that both the visual and musical expressions of the Arab artistic inclination are characterized by small units used as basic building blocks; in both, the whole work of art contains a seemingly endless repetition of one, or occasionally two, elemental units. Moreover, just as time is an undifferentiated continuum for the traditional Arab mind, so in his works of art the Arab does not strive for a crescendo which reaches a culmination, after which the creative surge diminishes and subsides, but finds his satisfaction in repetition, with minor modulations
filling equally and evenly a physical space and time span. Occasionally—especially in the largest-scale works of art ever produced by Arabs, their architectural masterpieces—the single units which are repeated again and again to combine into an overwhelming whole can be quite complex in themselves; but the principle of many identical or almost identical units making up the whole is adhered to unfailingly.15

Undaunted by such prejudiced pseudo-scholarly drivel, Johnson-Davies, who has long realized that Orientalists were determined to keep modern Arabic literature locked up in their academic cupboards as long as possible (Memories 78), took a completely different course from that followed by his professors and compatriots. During well over six decades—most of which he spent in Egypt, Lebanon, UAE, and Morocco—he managed to translate into English more than thirty volumes of short story collections, novels, and plays from all over the Arab world. Drawing also on Goha anecdotes and animal fables popular in the Arabian peninsula, Egypt, Sudan, and Morocco, he turned such rich material into stories for children. Moreover, he translated some Prophetic and Qudsi Hadith (the latter being sayings of the Prophet in which God expresses Himself through the mouth of the Prophet Muhammad), authored a book on the battles of the Prophet Muhammad, one on the Rightly Guided caliphs, and another on Islamic table manners. This diversity reflects the translator’s keen interest in conveying a panoramic view of Arab history and culture which, in one way or another, inform much of modern Arabic literature. It is also an expression of his desire to effect an intercultural dialogue between Arabs and Westerners at a time dominated by unfair stereotypes in the West about Arabs. This is particularly clear in his many adaptations of Arabic folktales for English-speaking children. At a time when Western and Israeli textbooks teach children that Arabs are incorrigible terrorists, Johnson-Davies offers a contrapuntal image where names such as Muhammad, Mustafa, or Ali are not synonymous with “terrorist.”

A Translator in the Works

Because of his father’s job, Johnson-Davies grew up in two Arab countries: Egypt and Sudan. But at the age of twelve, he got sick, and his father had to ship him back to England. There he was placed in a boarding school and he was supposed to study Latin and Greek. Denys was fond of squash, a sport he played so well that he became the school’s champion. The headmaster of the school, however, made a rule preventing boys under sixteen to play in the always crowded playgrounds of the school. When Denys’s father failed to convince the headmaster to go back on his decision, he had to pull his son out of the school. That’s when the matter of what Denys wanted to study came up, especially that his study of Latin and Greek was not successful. When his father asked him what he wanted to do, he unthinkingly said, “I would like to study Arabic” (Memories 2). In fact, while growing up in
Wadi Halfa in Sudan, Denys spoke Arabic fluently with his Sudanese peers, but he had forgotten all of that by now. Because he was too young, Denys could not be admitted to Cambridge, and thus his father decided to send him to the School of Oriental Studies in London (later to be renamed the School of Oriental and African Studies) in order to spend a year before he could be formally admitted to Cambridge.

But his year in London was spent in vain where he suffered from loneliness and the English weather with which he could never cope. During that fateful year, he neither learned Arabic nor was he prepared to enter the awesome academic world of Cambridge. At any rate, he spent another fruitless year at that ancient university. Then World War II broke out—just in time to save him! Instead of being conscripted in the army, he received a phone call from the BBC to work as a trainee in the Arabic Section of the broadcasting corporation. And here really began his serious study of Arabic where twenty native speakers of the language served as a third university for him, as he put it. At the BBC, he was introduced to Nevill Barbour, one of the early Arabists who took note of the burgeoning Arabic literary renaissance and who also was the translator of some writings by Tewfik Al-Hakim. He also made the acquaintance of E. H. Paxton who translated the first volume of Taha Hussein’s autobiography, *An Egyptian Childhood*.

As soon as Johnson-Davies mastered Arabic, he started translating and publishing some short stories by the Egyptian author Mahmoud Teymour. Then he left his job at the BBC and went back to Cairo to teach translation at the British Institute. During his two years there he made the acquaintance of Egypt’s most famous intellectuals, writers, and artists. This somehow incensed the director of the British Institute who decided not to renew his contract. Being only recently married, this decision came as a big blow, but then he found comfort in the Quranic verse, “Perhaps there is something that you dislike which is in fact best for you, and something you like which is worst for you” (*Memories* 27). Thus, while walking alone one day, he met a professor of English at Fouad Al-Awwal University (later renamed as Cairo University) who invited him to teach in the English department, where he spent the happiest two years of his academic days ever. During his two years at the British Institute, Johnson-Davies translated a collection of stories by Mahmoud Teymour whom he came to know during this time and who introduced him to young Egyptian writers. Abdel-Rahman Azzam Pasha, Secretary General of the Arab League, wrote an introduction to this collection, perhaps the first English translation of Arabic short stories, and Johnson-Davies paid for its publication from his own pocket.

**Consorting with Egypt’s Pioneering Literati**

Johnson-Davies used to visit Tewfik Al-Hakim in his office at *Al-Ahram* or meet him in one of his favorite cafés in Qasr Al-Neel Street. Upon reading Al-Hakim’s
Yawmiyyat na’ib fi-l-aryaf (“Diary of a Country Prosecutor”), Johnson-Davies thought of translating it but he was regrettably told that Abba Eban, who was at the time a British army intelligence officer in Cairo (later to become Israel’s foreign minister), had already been granted permission to translate it. Nevertheless, Johnson-Davies decided to introduce the novel to the English-reading public through a talk on the Egyptian State Broadcasting (ESB), which included programs in English. Johnson-Davies found in ESB an outlet to broadcast his translations of stories by the writers of the time, some of which were published in Cairo Calling. Among the plays of Al-Hakim translated by Johnson-Davies were The Tree Climber, The Fate of a Cockroach, The Donkey Market, and The Sultan’s Dilemma, some of which he published in the Arab Authors series which he started at Heinemann.

Johnson-Davies came to know Naguib Mahfouz during his stay in Cairo from 1945 to 1949, and the first work he translated by the future Nobel laureate was a story from his first collection entitled “Hams Al-Junun” (“The Whisper of Madness”) which was to be broadcast on the English program of the ESB. Reading Mahfouz’s Midaq Alley in Arabic around 1947, Johnson-Davies felt that nothing like it was written in Arabic, but was surprised that no one at one of Taha Hussein’s soirées had heard of the novel or its author. Nevertheless, he started translating it, but eventually he gave it up because he felt he wouldn’t find a publisher for it. It was Johnson-Davies who advised Philip Stewart, then a student at Oxford, to translate Mahfouz’s Awlad Haritna, which Johnson-Davies published in Heinemann’s Arab Authors series under the title The Children of Gebelawi. More than four decades later, when Mahfouz was already an internationally recognized novelist with nine novels of his published by the American University in Cairo Press, Johnson-Davies was consulted about nominating Mahfouz for the Nobel Prize. Other Arab writers (Adonis, Yusuf Idris, and Tayeb Salih) were also considered, but eventually Mahfouz was picked because of his prolific output and because he was better known to readers of French and English than the other nominees. Other Mahfouzian works translated by Johnson-Davies after the Nobel Prize include The Journey of Ibn Fattouma, Arabian Nights and Days, and a volume of Echoes of an Autobiography.

While still working at the BBC, Johnson-Davies read some works by Yahya Hakki, and when he moved back to Cairo he came to know him in person. Eventually, Hakki became one of Johnson-Davies’s few true friends (Memories 46). He translated more than one short story by him and finally he published a collection including the novella The Lantern of Umm Hashem (AUC Press, 2004).

Hooked on Translation

After leaving Cairo in 1949, Johnson-Davies worked as a representative or interpreter for some companies in the Gulf and Iran, then returned to London in 1954, where
he was prevailed upon by his father to finish his law studies and then worked as a lawyer. But he was “never happy in a wig and gown” (Memories 76), so he opened a translation office called Middle East Services which specialized in the translation of legal and commercial documents. Again, he was soon to find that “nothing is more soul-destroying” (ibid.). Overcome by his old passion for translation, he founded a quarterly literary magazine in Arabic called Aswat (“Voices”) that lasted only twelve issues. Johnson-Davies’s office became “something of a home-from-home for Arab writers visiting London” (ibid.). Such visitors included Badr Shakir Al-Sayyab, Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, and Yusuf Idris. Each issue of Aswat published at least one story by an Arab writer such as Zakaria Tamer, Ghassan Kanafani, Tayeb Salih, and Louis Awad. It was in Aswat that Awad published part of his novel The Phoenix, written while King Farouk was still on the throne of Egypt, and he did not dare to publish it until 1966 in Beirut. In Aswat Al-Sayyab also found an outlet to publish some of his poems.

During his editorship of Aswat, Johnson-Davies was asked by the British Central Office of Information to be in charge of a weekly quarter-hour television magazine program to be sent out to the various television stations in the Arab world. Called Adwa’ wa Aswat (“Lights and Voices”) by Johnson-Davies, each episode of the program consisted of four or five items that might be of interest to the Arab viewer. Arab visitors to London were sometimes featured in the program; a whole edition was devoted to Omar Sharif, another to the singer Abd Al-Halim Hafez, and one to the great Moroccan traveler Ibn Battouta (Memories 97-98).

By 1969, Johnson-Davies was fed up with living in England again. Then he found a job as director of a British-owned radio station in Trucial Oman (the United Arab Emirates today). After the British pullout from the UAE, Johnson-Davies suggested that the radio station be handed over to Sheikh Rashid, the ruler of Dubai. The latter asked Johnson-Davies to stay on, offered to double his salary, and gave him permission to run his own advertising agency in the Emirates. Notwithstanding Sheikh Rashid’s generosity, Johnson-Davies once again submitted to the dictates of his first love: translation! To answer this passion, he moved to Beirut where he spent four years (Memories 98-100). That translation became an addiction is evident in his admission, “I continually promise myself, with each book translated, that it will be my last, and yet, like the nicotine addict, I find myself returning to the habit” (Memories 129).

Working around the Embargo

Since their acquaintance, Johnson-Davies used to tell Yahya Hakki that he hoped that someday he would publish a collection of stories from all over the Arab world. This dream took two decades to be realized when Oxford University Press
agreed to publish *Modern Arabic Short Stories* (1967) provided that “a scholar of distinction should write an introduction to it” (*Memories* 46). Professor Arthur John Arberry, head of the Arabic Department at Cambridge at the time, provided such an introduction. However, English newspapers and journals refused to publish any book reviews or notices of the collection. To make things even worse, no Arab government bought a single copy, so the press was unable to sell the limited edition it printed. It was later sold off as a paperback in Lebanon. Yet even after Mahfouz won the Nobel Prize, Oxford University Press was not enthusiastic about printing a further, up-to-date volume. Once bitten, twice shy.

However, the Oxford volume enjoyed a new lease of life when it was reissued as a paperback in the Arab Authors series which Johnson-Davies started at Heinemann. Heinemann had and still has a popular series called African Authors, in which Johnson-Davies was able to publish translations of works by Naguib Mahfouz, Tewfik Al-Hakim, and Tayeb Salih. When Johnson-Davies asked James Currey of Heinemann what could be done about works by writers from, say, Iraq or Palestine, it was agreed that an Arab Authors series be started, provided that Johnson-Davies acted as a consultant. This series prospered for several years during which some 24 titles were published in Britain. These same titles were also taken up in the United States by Three Continents Press (*Memories* 48). Auditors at Heinemann, however, decided to discontinue this non-lucrative series unless financial support—a mere £5,000—from the Arab world could be obtained. Unfortunately, Johnson-Davies was unable to find such support to save the series—sadly and ironically, “this happened literally months before Naguib Mahfouz was awarded the Nobel prize” (ibid.). Another sad irony is that it was the AUC Press, and not any Arab publisher or cultural institution, which bought rights to the Arab Authors series in the 1980s.

When Mahfouz won the Nobel Prize in 1988, Johnson-Davies suggested that the AUC Press establish an annual award under the former’s name for the best novel in Arabic (*Memories* 63). His suggestion, however, went unheeded—until Mark Linz, the former director of the press, returned in 1995 to Cairo to take up the same post. The prize, the Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature, was awarded the next year. The prize consists of a silver medal, a thousand dollars, a translation of the winning novel into English and publication by the AUC Press. The prize made some successes—at least the translations were professionally made, well produced and marketed like any other book in the West.

**Bringing Coal to Newcastle**

In Chapter 8 of his autobiography, Johnson-Davies speaks about all sorts of hardships an Arabic-English translator is likely to face. On one hand, not a single publisher in London employs someone who is interested in Arabic literature or can read Arabic;
whereas a translator from French or German does not choose what to translate but is often commissioned by the publisher to do so. On the other hand, a translator from Arabic must look for a publisher first, and very often s/he starts translating and ends up not finding a publisher after all. Moreover, there is no equitable financial reward in translation from Arabic—a sad fact that led more than one in Egypt, including a professor, to conclude that Johnson-Davies must be an English spy! And worst of all, an English reader, unlike their French counterpart, keeps away from all translations (Memories 58), especially if such translations are connected with Arabs and Islam. To illustrate, Johnson-Davies argues that one of the novels by Amin Maalouf, the Lebanese author who writes in French, sold more than a million copies, whereas the English translation could not sell more than two thousand. In other words, trying to market Arabic literature in England is like bringing coal to Newcastle.

**Stranded between Two Cultures**

Two incidents mentioned by Johnson-Davies are worthy of consideration here, though for different reasons: one showing how he unconsciously internalized, and acted in accordance with, Arab customs even in London, the other shedding light on the price he had to pay for living among Arabs. After returning to London from the Middle East in 1954, he would pass every morning by a kiosk to buy cigarettes. One morning he asked the girl for his usual packet and when he searched through his pockets, he realized that he had no money and offered to pay the girl the following morning, “But she was there before me and had retrieved the cigarettes. This told me that I was no longer in Egypt” (Memories 76). Of this incident he says it was one of the things that confirmed his “dislike of living in England rather than, for instance, Egypt…” (Memories 75).

The other incident was the exact opposite. One day, a former Egyptian student of his, named Mohamed Habib, an ex-sailor on the king’s yacht Al-Mahrousa and a member of the Muslim Brotherhood who had formerly asked Johnson-Davies to keep in his possession a highly dangerous manuscript lest his room be searched, asked him a simple and pointed question: Are you a British spy? Yet, Johnson-Davies understands his interrogator’s blunt question. After all, he was not living “like every other respectable Englishman, in great style in a flat in Zamalek and going regularly to the English Club” (Memories 61). Fifty years after this incident, an Egyptian academic also writes a piece in Al-Ahram saying that “while in Cairo during the war I was a British spy, and that during that time I had succeeded in ‘picking up’ a bit of Arabic.” Johnson-Davies resignedly but bitterly comments, “The fact that I hadn’t happened to be in Cairo during the war at all was irrelevant. Many friends expressed their sorrow and apologies, while all I could do was tell myself that this was the price that one paid for trying to put down roots in a foreign field” (ibid.).

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Such hiccups were in no short supply, alas. A young Egyptian writer for whom Johnson-Davies translated nothing berates him one evening at Edwar Al-Kharrat’s flat, “Who are you to choose what writers you translate?” When Al-Kharrat intervenes on behalf of Johnson-Davies and asks the young writer what should be done, the latter quite obtusely says, “He should go to the Ministry of Culture and get a list of the books that should be translated” (Memories 59). A self-styled Syrian luminary at Aleppo University (not named by Johnson-Davies but the incident and its heroes are all too known to me) takes Johnson-Davies to task for not translating the title of a play by Tewfik Al-Hakim literally! In solidarity with his cocksure colleague, the head of the English Department decides to cancel the second lecture Johnson-Davies was to give in the afternoon (Memories 37). As a punishment for his “outlandish” views on translation, Johnson-Davies was not even offered a soft drink or a cup of tea, as his wife confided to me in 2009. Yusuf Idris who “had, at times, an embarrassingly exaggerated view of his position as a writer” tells him one day that he had made a big mistake in not dedicating his whole time and talents to translating his work (Memories 89). On another occasion, he criticizes him openly for publishing Tayeb Salih’s story “The Doum Tree of Wad Hamid” in one issue of Aswat, claiming that the story was poor (Memories 90). Yahya Taher Abdullah protests Heinemann’s stipulation that the author and the translator would split the royalties fifty/fifty, and, quite ignorantly and rudely, tells Johnson-Davies, “But you’re only the translator!” (Memories 104). Nevertheless, Johnson-Davies goes to see the deputy minister of culture in Cairo to secure the purchase of a number of copies of Abdullah’s Mountain of Green Tea and Other Stories (then forthcoming from Heinemann), only to be rebuked by this deputy for wasting his time “translating the work of such a vagabond” (Memories 105). His first meeting with Salwa Bakr was no less nasty. She had already given him a bundle of her stories in manuscript, and so he dared to say that some of the stories could benefit from a few changes here and there. To this she vociferously replies, “What are you, a translator or a teacher of writing?” (Memories 118).

Taking Refuge with Animals

Johnson-Davies says his interest in animals goes back to his early childhood in Sudan and Kenya where animals played a greater part in his own life than in the lives of most children. In that African environment, people lived in closer proximity with animals (including wild beasts and poisonous insects) than anywhere else. He recalls how he and other boys used to catch and sometimes torture birds, butterflies, and trapdoor spiders. The memory of torturing to death of a trapdoor spider is etched indelibly on his mind. So is the remembrance of how he used to kill birds for entertainment. As an adult, he comes across a short piece by a French
Orientalist, “pointing out that of all revealed religions Islam showed the greatest concern for animals” (Memories 126). The piece ended by noting that the subject has not yet been sufficiently and properly studied. Johnson-Davies goes to the Quran and finds that a number of suras were named after animals, and in Hadith he finds many stories commending kindness to animals. These readings awaken in him “a certain sense of guilt towards animals, a guilt that perhaps can be partly assuaged by attempting to do something in the cause of animals as and when I can” (Memories 127). As a result of his forays into the literature about animals, Johnson-Davies produced a children’s book called Animal Tales from the Arab World. He also made an adaptation of a tenth-century Arabic book called The Case of Animals against Man (written in Baghdad by the Brethren of Purity) and published it under the title The Island of Animals. In the introduction he wrote for this book, he outlined animal rights in Islam.

Turning to writing about animals may have been indeed motivated by a sense of guilt as Johnson-Davies says, but it may also be an expression of a pressing urge to break loose from the straitjacket of translation into the open space of pure personal creativity; for Johnson-Davies is not only a translator but a writer as well. His addiction to translation, however, simply got the better of him and suppressed his own creative impulse. However creative translation might be, it naturally serves to suppress other equally creative impulses (in a phone conversation Johnson-Davies once told me he regrets having spent his life translating other people’s works when he could have devoted himself to writing his own fiction). Still, there might have been a third reason: he may have wanted to take a warrior’s rest from a battle he has often fought alone—with no appreciation from those on whose behalf he fought it.

**Writing for Children**

Johnson-Davies’s interest in writing for children started with a commission from a wealthy Syrian friend living in England. The son of this rich man knew nothing about Arabic or Islam, and thus it fell to Johnson-Davies to write a biography of the Prophet Muhammad in English. Experiencing a temporary writer’s block—as a result of writing for children for the first time—Johnson-Davies eventually handed the finished product to his friend, who in turn sent it to an expert in Islamic history in Saudi Arabia to make sure the book contained no factual errors or anything objectionable. When the so-called expert’s report came, it claimed that the book contained some factual errors. After a diffident give-and-take with the Syrian financier, Johnson-Davies was saved by his Egyptian friend Dr. Ezzeddin Ibrahim, an acclaimed expert on Islamic history and a former professor of Arabic literature at Riyadh University (later to revert to its original name as King Saud University). Then on a short visit to London, Dr. Ibrahim testified that the biography written by

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Johnson-Davies was impeccable. With the misunderstanding cleared, there remained the issue of finding a publisher in Britain. Eventually, the book was given to Riad Al-Rayyis, a Syrian publisher operating from London. By the time Johnson-Davies finished correcting the proofs of the book, Al-Rayyis decided to transfer to Beirut. “Here the book was handed over to his local employees,” comments Johnson-Davies bitterly, “who purported to correct mistakes I had made in English and reset it, making a real dog’s dinner of it” (Memories 121). Several attempts were later made to have the book reissued in English, but all in vain. An Arabic translation, however, was made by the present author and is forthcoming in Abu Dhabi.

The bitter experience in writing for children paved the way for two more books sponsored by the British Council in Cairo, one a collection of Goha stories, the other a collection of Egyptian folktales. Johnson-Davies also translated Ibn Tufail’s Hayy Ibn Yaqzan, an Arabic Robinson Crusoe, from a simplified version by the Egyptian poet Salah Abdul Sabour. This was published under the title Alone on a Desert Island. Tales from Sudan was adapted from Jamal Mohamed Ahmed’s Sali Fu Hamr (a collection of traditional tales from Africa). Drawing on The Arabian Nights, Arabian myths, folktales, and Arab-Islamic history, Johnson-Davies published a total of fifteen titles—all published in English by Dar el Shorouk, Egypt’s leading publisher—with beautiful illustrations by Arab and international artists, to boot. Four other children’s books, with Arabian Gulf backgrounds, have also been published in Dubai.

Promoting Inter-Faith Understanding

Just as Johnson-Davies’s turning to writing for children was spurred by a friend, so were his religious translations. On one of his visits to Abu Dhabi, Johnson-Davies met his old friend Dr. Ezzeddin Ibrahim, who was then the cultural advisor to Sheikh Zayed, President of the UAE. Ibrahim proposed that they translate together a collection of Hadith known as An-Nawawi’s Forty Hadith. And so it was. Published by a Syrian publisher, the translation proved a tremendous success, thanks to the efforts of Dr. Ibrahim and the generous support of Sheikh Zayed. It went into twenty editions (not to mention pirated ones), and was later taken up by the Islamic Texts Society, which operates out of Cambridge, and Dar el Shorouk.

After this success, the two friends collaborated on a translation of Forty Hadith Qudsi, and The Goodly Word (an anthology of Hadith chosen by Ibn Taymyyah). Yet to see the light (posthumous for Ibrahim) is their translation of Quranic selections arranged according to subject matter. The only religious translation undertaken by Johnson-Davies individually is that of Book XI of Al-Ghazali’s Revival of the Religious Sciences, published under the title On the Manners Relating to Eating (about the obligations of a Muslim host towards his guest, Islamic table manners, etc).
A Place for Arabic Literature under the Sun?

In many places in his autobiography, Johnson-Davies wonders reproachfully why official cultural institutions in the Arab world do not make an effort to translate Arabic literature or culture. By contrast to this serious omission, he further wonders, “What, one asks, would modern Arabic literature in translation do without the efforts of the AUC Press, which has been responsible for thirty Mahfouz editions in English and more than fifty by other Arab writers?” (Memories 116). No less bitter is his recollection of how unsuccessful were the efforts of Abdou Gubeir, an Egyptian writer and critic, in alerting “the establishment to the role that the Arab Authors series was playing in bringing modern Arabic literature to the attention of readers of English” (Memories 107). Citing how Bernard Lewis, the well-known American Orientalist, was once struck by the extraordinary diversity in various translations of one Quranic verse, Johnson-Davies argues, “Is it not time, having accepted that the Qur’an is continually being given new translations, for al-Azhar University, for example, to gather together a body of scholars and produce, once and for all, a standard, ‘official’ rendering?” (Memories 94). Aware of how the Arabs of the golden past valued translation, especially under the reign of the Abbasid caliph Al-Ma’tmun, Johnson-Davies evocatively reminisces, “The early Arabs, it seems, showed greater appreciation for their translators” (Memories 131).

Throughout his life and autobiography, Johnson-Davies was constantly reminded of the odds that stood in his way. And it is these odds that make his efforts almost Herculanean, sometimes Sisyphian, and oftentimes stoical. Suffice it here to quote the often quoted aphorism of E. S. Bates with which Johnson-Davies concludes his autobiography, “Nothing moves without translation” (Memories 131). This summation indicates that without translation, Arabic literature would have been virtually doomed to remain locked up in its own cultural cocoon, and that translation is a trans-cultural bridge on which national literatures cross over to, enrich, and are enriched by each other.

Despite all the odds and the occasional regrets, the fact remains that under his auspices Arabic literature has made great strides on the world stage. Like Robert Frost’s poetic persona who told his story with a sigh of relief and/or grief, after having taken the less traveled road, thus making all the difference, Johnson-Davies was and will always be regarded as a path-breaker in Arabic-English literary relations. Just as it is impossible to think of the history of German translations of Shakespeare without conjuring up the names of Schlegel-Tieck, of The Arabian Nights into French (and thence into other European languages) without Antoin Galland, of Rubaiyyat of Omar Khayyam without FitzGerald, of Edgar Alan Poe into French without Baudelaire, of nineteenth-century Russian literature into English
without Constance Garnett, so will it be unthinkable to speak of English translations of Arabic literature without Denys Johnson-Davies at their forefront.

Notes

1. On the occasion of Johnson-Davies’s ninetieth birthday and official retirement, the British magazine Banipal published a special feature in its 2012 Spring issue no. 43 (to which this author contributed a personal testimonial on him).
4. Ibid., 72-83.
6. Ibid., 1.
7. Ibid., 163ff.
10. Ibid.
11. In an interview on Dubai Satellite Channel’s “Meeting Barween Haeeb” (April 20, 2008), Jayyusi reiterated the same accusation against the Zionist lobby.
13. Denys Johnson-Davies, Memories in Translation: A Life between the Lines of Arabic Literature (Cairo and New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2006), 9. Henceforward abbreviated as Memories, all references to this work will be cited in the text.
15. Patai, The Arab Mind, 174-175.