

Elin Svahn

Håkanson, Nils (2021): *Dolda gudar. En bok om allt som inte går förlorat i en översättning* [Hidden gods. A book on everything that is not lost in a translation]. Stockholm: Nirstedt/Litteratur.

1/2022

DOI: 10.25365/cts-2022-4-1-7

Herausgegeben am / Éditée au /
Edited at the: Zentrum für
Translationswissenschaft der
Universität Wien

ISSN: 2617-3441

Elin Svahn

Håkanson, Nils (2021): *Dolda gudar. En bok om allt som inte går förlorat i en översättning* [Hidden gods. A book on everything that is not lost in a translation]. Stockholm: Nirstedt/Litteratur, 357 pp.

For many Swedish translators, November 22 2021 was a day of incredible joy and pride: Sweden's most prestigious literary prize, the August prize, was awarded to a book on translation history in the non-fiction category. The book in question was *Dolda gudar. En bok om allt som inte går förlorat i en översättning* [Hidden gods. A book on everything that is not lost in a translation] by Nils Håkanson (1975–), Ph.D. in Slavic languages (Russian), translator, writer, publisher, and long-time editor of the Swedish Encyclopedia of Translators. The jury's statement reads:

"Fjodor Dostojevskij, Jane Austen, Karl Marx och Toni Morrison har alla gemensamt att de har översatts från andra språk till svenska. Det har även Harlequinböcker och Bibeln. I Dolda gudar tar Nils Håkanson oss på en svindlande tur i översättningarnas landskap och sätter översättaren i centrum. Med finesse, humor och ett smittande intresse för språk och stil visar han hur synen på översättning och översättarens roll förändrats genom historien, men att en sak är konstant – översättningen är en omistlig del av textens väg till läsaren, rent av en egen form av litteratur."

[Fjodor Dostojevski, Jane Austen, Karl Marx, and Toni Morrison have in common that they have been translated from other languages into Swedish. The same goes for Harlequin novels and the Bible. In *Dolda gudar*, Nils Håkanson accompanies us for a winding tour in the landscape of translations and places the translator at center stage. With finesse, humor, and a contagious interest in language and style, he shows how the view of translation and the translator's role has changed throughout history. Still, one thing remains the same – translation is an unmissable part of the text's journey to the reader, even a literary form of its own.]¹

As the August prize jury expressed, *Dolda gudar* is a rich book with an abundance of thought-provoking examples, humorous metaphors, and insightful bibliographical portraits of Swedish translators across different eras. It sketches Swedish translation history from the early translation practices in medieval monasteries to the present day. The book alternates between chapters dealing with a theoretical problem and chapters dealing with a specific historical phase in Swedish translation history. The main headings have humorous titles – the first chapter is, for example, entitled "First chapter – in which Danish toasters develop into drain holes and literary classics dissimulate and are regenerated, all in an attempt to explain what translation really is." The subheadings give away the topics: 1) what is translation?, 2) on medieval Sweden's translated literature, 3) on free translation methods, 4) on translation during the reformation and Swedish empire, 5) on the translator's freedom, 6) on translation during the 18th century, 7) on translation and ideology, 8) on translation and the industrial era, 9) on translation during the 20th century and the situation today. In the first chapter, then, Håkanson uses the differences between Swedish and Danish

¹ All translations are made by the author of this review.

toasters – in Swedish toasters, the untoasted bread stands vertically, but in Danish toasters, it lies horizontal since the Danish bread is (apparently) fluffier – as the starting point for a discussion on how similar words (brödrost, brødröst) can signify different concepts as well as the, seemingly small, choices the translator faces when translating. Is the bread standing up or lying down? This sort of reasoning effectively portray the kind of practical difficulties the translator can face when translating.

As mentioned above, the first chapter introduces the concept of translation with the help of kitchen utensils and discusses the different approaches to translation within Christian and Islamic cultures. Starting already in the first chapter and continuing throughout the book, Håkanson relies heavily on examples of retranslations from different source languages. These examples have the pedagogical merit of efficiently showing how seemingly small changes on the lexical level can affect macro-level issues, such as how an author's style has changed over time in Sweden or how the entire authorship is perceived in Sweden in different eras. For a popular book such as *Dolda gudar*, where knowledge of the readers' familiarity with other languages is unknown and assumed to be limited, Håkanson is clever to focus on Swedish target texts. The first chapter also introduces the axiom that something is always lost in translation, to which Håkanson (2021: 27) replies:

"Men några sådana resonemang kommer inte att föras i här (sic) boken. För det första – för att det är trist och orimligt att enbart se till förlusterna på ett ställe där någonting just erövrats och vunnit. För det andra – för att denna upptagenhet vid 'det som har gått förlorat' ofta bortser från att original och översättning måste vara olika saker och att översättning per definition innebär en total omstöpning (eller åtminstone en mycket genomgripande förvandling av hela verkets språkform.)"

[But that sort of reasoning will not be dealt with in this book. Firstly – because it is boring and unreasonable to only look at the losses in a place where something has just been conquered and gained. Secondly – because the preoccupation with 'what has been lost' often disregards the fact that an original and a translation *must* be different things and that translation per definition includes a total recast (or at least a very thorough reformulation) of the work's linguistic form.]

This serves as an early helpful reminder for the reader.

The second chapter starts the historical exposé with an overview of the earliest Swedish translations: the *Eufemia poems* (early 14th century) and Saint Birgitta's revelations (late 14th century). Rather than using concepts from translation studies, Håkanson introduces and bases his discussion on several rather witty concepts rooted in specific events in Swedish translation history. These are, for example, *the Vadstena principle*, *the gravitation law of the source text*, and *Ohlmark's phenomenon*. The *Vadstena principle*, for example, which is based on the source-oriented translation practice at the Vadstena monastery where Saint Birgitta's revelations were translated, stipulates that the more respect a source text earns, the more source-oriented the translation tends to be.

The third chapter – "on free translation methods" – serves to discuss translations of different sorts that are generally translated in a "free" way. These include Harlequin novels, theatre, songs, and children's literature. Here, he again refers to the *Vadstena principle* – or rather its inverse: a source text inducing low respect tends to be translated freely. Similarly, Håkanson uses the so-called *Ohlmark's phenomenon*, which refers to Åke Ohlmark, the first Swedish translator of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, "to describe how an objectively poor translation reaches large public success"

(HÅKANSON 2021: 71). This chapter shows the richness in different sorts of translations that are less often studied but often widely read.

In the fourth chapter, Håkanson's historical exposé continues with a focus on developments during the reformation and the Swedish empire (1611–1721), starting with Biblical translations. During this period, the Swedish crown/state took over the role as the primary customer for translations, a position previously reserved for the church; state-commissioned translations were to a large degree propaganda-like texts of the Swedish state itself. In 1622, a position as *translator regius* was founded.

The fifth chapter dwells on the translator's freedom. It begins with a rather elaborated metaphor, where translators are compared to demiurges, "an evil or sometimes benevolent undergod" (HÅKANSON 2021: 116); the author has left the stage and readers are now in the hands of the translators, the demiurges. Readers, in turn, are referred to as "little paramecia," who "wander around in the demiurge's world and take it for the only real one: an independent universe – and yet a reproduction" (HÅKANSON 2021: 116). But how free is the demiurge, really? After a somewhat peculiar but thought-provoking introduction, the rest of the chapter discusses different examples of the constraints that limit the translator's freedom, such as time, language combinations, the translator's background and the society she lives in, genre, how it is valued in society, and the source texts' level of difficulties, etc.

The sixth chapter continues into the 18th century, which, according to Håkanson, marks the starting point of when the present-day view on translation, as a balancing act between the source text and the target language, gained ground against a backdrop of the Enlightenment. The most important works of science and philosophy, such as those of Galileo Galilei and Isaac Newton, were only translated into Swedish at a later stage; the translations into Swedish during this time followed the new ideas but were more commercially oriented with an intended target reader in mind. Still, scientific and philosophical advancements strengthened the Swedish language as a language of science, literature, and theatre, with new genres being introduced.

In the seventh chapter, Håkanson zooms in on ideological perspectives on translations, defined as "a viewpoint of any kind that a priori determines a translator's interpretation of the work" (HÅKANSON 2021: 194). These viewpoints have had a diverse influence on translation. The most obvious is perhaps at the level of selection; Håkanson lists the many different shapes a translator can come in ("fascist, communist, socialist, syndicalist, liberal, conservative, feminist, absolutist" etc. – the list goes on) and how their preferences for what is a particularly interesting text has shaped Swedish literary history. This is an important point since the reader becomes aware that the decision to translate a particular text can seem haphazard and accidental in hindsight. Håkanson introduces two sorts of translators: the first kind translates for a living and takes on assignments proposed to them; this kind of translator is generally not driven by any ideological motivation, and Håkanson refers to them as "not translation activists" (2021: 204). On the other hand, the second kind belongs to the group of translators described above – this type of translator started translating because of "non-literary" ideas or, when translating from a minor source language, to act as interpreters and ambassadors for certain languages. Although this division is rather clumsy, it effectively portrays different approaches to professional translation. The eighth chapter deals with translation during the 19th century. A critical feature during this time was the professionalization of publishing houses. Together with an increasing awareness of the genius author and technical advancement, this paradoxically led to the translator losing control over the process when a translation became a book and hence also loss in status. With a clear division between authors and translators, the latter took a step back into the shadows. It should be mentioned that

throughout the book, Håkanson presents numerous engaging translators and contextualizes their lives and their translations in the time when they worked. This arrangement certainly flirts with Pym's idea of humanizing translation history by taking translators as the point of departure. Håkanson does not go that far, but these bibliographical portraits add to the book not only telling about translators but also *showing* who they were and what they did.

The book's ninth and final chapter deals with translation from the 20th century to the present day. It focuses on translator's ethics, digitalization, (the lack of) translation criticism, and English-language hegemony in the Swedish publishing industry, four aspects that Håkanson contends characterize today's situation. However, in this final chapter, it becomes clear that Håkanson's expertise lies primarily in the historical realm and that he may not be up to date with contemporary translation studies. I was, for example, surprised to see a discussion of ethics without any reference or allusions to the significant interest this topic has attracted within translation studies recently. In particular, Håkanson notes that contemporary Swedish translators translate more faithfully than they did before favoring "strict compliance with the original" (HÅKANSON 2021: 286), which he connects to a sort of "translator ethics" that has evolved among Swedish translators since the 1950s, when literary translators joined forces. A professional association was established alongside a more union-like engagement. This new, more source-oriented approach should have evolved organically with a starting point in the professional association and their claim for high quality translations. For example, Håkanson writes, "This [the new translator ethics] is the reason why many of the younger text examples in this book are considerably closer to the original than older ones" (2021: 299-399, my translation). As a translation sociologist with a special interest in the 1950s literary translation milieu in Sweden, I find this explanation interesting and I have in my own research seen the influence of the newly founded association on translators of the time and their professional awareness. Still, I was surprised to see this presented as the main reason, which does not take into account other possible explanations, e.g., language hierarchies and how it affect translation. In general, explanations given in the book are rarely connected to macro-level theories from translation studies, e.g., system descriptive theories. Of course, this lack of theoretical discussion may be a natural consequence of writing a book for a general audience, but the consequence might be that readers will rest uninformed that there is such a thing as an academic discipline called translation studies with its own theories and traditions.

The book draws heavily on Håkanson's work as an editor for the *Swedish Encyclopedia for Translators*, both in the sense that he has written many of the entries he refers to and the general overview of Swedish translation history that the work entails. Without a doubt, this book could not have been written by anyone other than Håkanson. For readers familiar with Swedish translation studies and Swedish translation studies scholars' work, some of the material, examples, and authors will be familiar. This includes Lars Wollin's work on translation in the monasteries, Yvonne Lindqvist's work on Harlequin novels and Toni Morrison, Mats Larsson's work on *Soldaten Svejik*, and Stina Hansson's work on translation in 17th century Sweden. Håkanson's predecessor, Greta Hjelm Wallin's *Gud nåde alla fattiga översättare. Glimtar ur svensk skönlitterär översättningshistoria* [God have mercy on all poor translators. Glimpses from Swedish literary translation history] from 1996 deserves a special mentioning. These titles are all acknowledged in the text as well as in notes for each chapter at the end of the book. Håkanson's impressive achievement is that he takes the work of these scholars, applies different theoretical frameworks and uses different models, and brings them all together into one coherent picture of Swedish translation history. For someone who is

not familiar with Swedish translation studies – and this is indeed the case for most of the book’s intended readers – Håkanson presents an accessible, fascinating, and, yes, entertaining history of translation, an aspect of history of which most Swedish readers have little or no previous knowledge. It can be noted that Håkanson, throughout the book, uses the term “översättningslitteratur” [translation literature], a term that is usually not used in Swedish translation studies, but which reminds the reader that translations are a part of, and so to speak are on equal terms with, Swedish literature. This connects to one of the main merits of the book: a thorough perspective that translations are a vital part of Sweden’s literary tradition and hence also its literary history. As such, *Dolda gudar* can be said to embody Toury’s claim that translations are facts of the target culture. This is, of course, a well-known perspective for translation studies scholars and students but might not be as evident for the broader audience Håkanson’s book is aimed at.

Without a doubt, Håkanson’s book marks a significant achievement by presenting translation history in such a clear, systematic, and accessible manner. I have several times mentioned that the book is humorous. Although humor is not commonly associated with translation history, this reader (part demiurge, part paramecia) laughed out loud several times while reading. The combination of the book’s vivacious style and its informative content is probably one of the reasons for its success. For researchers and teachers of translation, it also serves as a reminder that translation can, indeed, be both entertaining and interesting.