

CHAPTER

THE ORIENTATIONS OF EDUARD GLASER. HYPOTHESIS ON POSITIONS, MOTIVATIONS AND MOVEMENTS OF A EUROPEAN SCHOLAR IN THE MENA REGION (1880-1888)

ENRICO FLORIDDIA
VIENNA

Abstract

Eduard Glaser lived all his life as a stranger. Born in to-day Czech Republic from a Jewish family, he spent his life wandering. Glaser was an astronomer, an epigraphist, an archaeologist and an expert of Judeo-Arabic culture in South Arabia. Assuming the building method of the “spolia”, Bildungsroman proposes a biography made of found documents, supposed dreams, liminal texts and pop music videos that unfold along a rather tortuous line. Sometimes it becomes a hagiography of a Sun worshipper.

Bildungsroman traces the first part of Glaser’s life throughout his studies in Prague and Vienna, his journey by foot to Paris, his troubled time in Tunis and Alexandria before he reached his craved destination, Yemen. The so-called Arabia Felix has been the place where Eduard Glaser finally stopped his quest. Just to start digging.

After all, was Eduard Glaser a scholar, a library rat or rather a trader and an explorer? Based on the memoir of his local guide in Yemen Hayyim Habshush and some letters preserved in Paris by the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres, this lecture tries to turn upside down the picture of Eduard Glaser that has been drawn until now.

Introduction

My name is Enrico Floriddia. I position myself as an artist. In my practice I try to build an ecology of recycled items: texts, images, stories as much

as materials and found objects. I am interested in speaking of the present by the means of the past. In this context¹, to explain this intervention I would like to use an image. Imagine that you are watching a film on a TV channel. At some point, suddenly, a series of advertisements pop up. Their scope, aim, language and tone are radically different from those employed in the film they interrupted. I am the advertisement.

There was a boy, a very strange, enchanted boy



Figure 1: Austrian Academy of Science, Library, Archive and Collections (BASIS), Sammlung E. Glaser, AT-OeAW-BA-3-27-P-45

I first encountered Eduard Glaser on the web, browsing the archive of the Austrian Academy of Sciences, before coming for an artist residency in Vienna in Summer 2018. I immediately got interested in him. I was looking for someone to enter in dialogue with: I found this very bad photographer. I am a failed architect turned into a photographer. Then artist, then

¹ Lecture performance given on the 15th of June 2019 at the symposium *Out of Arabia: south Arabian long-distance trading in antiquity*, 23rd Rencontres Sabéennes, organised by the Austrian Academy of Sciences.

scholar, then writer, then artist again. It is about multiple positions that I want to talk today. Eduard Glaser's multiple and vanishing positions.

*
**

The first position I am interested to describe is the position of the *home foreigner*. Eduard was a *K und K* citizen, but a second class citizen. Of course, on paper the empire granted to Jews the same rights than everyone else in 1867, when Eduard was 12. Still, not everyone can resort to law, and the son of a farm owner in a tiny village in to-day Bohemia was seldom able to do so. I name it the position of *home foreigner* not because to say *minority* would be anachronistic, I am not scared to be anachronistic. To me, *minority* is today a term that has been charged with some negative interpretations, I would avoid it. A strange connection exists in many people's mind between the word *minority* and the idea of *threat*. And if you're considered a threat you are often looked upon as a bad person. Then discriminated. Then insulted. Then persecuted. You know the story, we see it happen every day. Being in that position, of *home foreigner*, you learn to be discreet, to be safe first of all. You shut up, because everything you say will be considered as representative of everyone that has been put in the same category as you. On the other hand, if you are considered part of a *majority* it will be taken for granted that you just speak for yourself. Being in Europe, Eduard was a *home foreigner*. An uncomfortable position in the very place where you are born, where you grow up and at the same time the place that some people make you feel you do not belong to, that you should leave. To go where? Towards where one should *orient* themselves?

A little shy and sad of eye. But very wise was he

When I first read Eduard Glaser's slim biography something revolved in my guts. How was it possible that I was so strongly identifying with him? Besides gender, we do not share any other biographical detail. Now, I am going to use some anachronism: in his context, Eduard was probably *white passing*, while I seldom do not pass for white. I was raised in a catholic environment, while Eduard in a Jewish one. I was born in a one million inhabitants city, while *Deutsch-Rust*, his natal village, counted something

like three-hundred inhabitants². Being young, I bathed mostly in one language, while Eduard was probably switching at least among three regarding to the context. Yet I am utterly interested in his life. I feel him. The bond multiplied when Petra Aigner made me visit the *Glaser Sammlung* and I saw this photograph.

² The name of this village to-day is *Podbořanský Rohozec* and it is located in the Czech Republic. As for January 2017 it counted 143 inhabitants, but sources attest that in the middle of the nineteenth century population was almost doubled and half of it was Jewish.



Figure 2: Austrian Academy of Science, Library, Archive and Collections (BASIS), Sammlung E. Glaser, AT-OeAW-BA-3-27-P-24a

I would be curious to know what do you see in it, to me it showed amazement. It showed an expression, it showed partial faces, it showed bodies that probably will never have a name. It showed the labour that

Eduard Glaser carried with Yemeni people. Or rather the labour he asked them to carry out. The reason why he did so remains obscure.



I try to understand why Eduard wanted to go to Yemen, I have some hypothesis³ about his motivations, but here I rather want to listen your opinions about it. Finally, most of you are in a position closer to his than myself⁴. He moved out of his village, he went first to Prague and then to Vienna to pursue his studies. In these two cities he started to study the Arabic language, he was craving for it. He was *oriented*. We don't know why. When he had the opportunity to go abroad to work in an Arabic speaking country he didn't even think about it. There he was, being the personal tutor of the son of His excellence Theodorovic, *Generalkonsul* for the *K und K* in Tunis. The year is 1880. He now is a *protected foreigner*. The new position Eduard gained is a rather interesting one. Here, for a savoury twist of fate, he was part of a minority that wasn't oppressed, on the contrary, he was part of a minority that enjoyed privilege. *Expats* nevertheless, keep on seeing themselves in a risky position. As much as not every position of being home is a position of strength, not any position of being abroad is a position of weakness. Being part of the official embassy of an empire – even being a dying-empire into a soon-murdered-empire – put suddenly Eduard in a situation that he had never enjoyed before. Forget the hours of night shifts to guard his father's fields in winter, forget the years of starvation in the big city where no-one care about you, forget the remarks about the shape of his nose or on his headwear, forget the mocking looks! He was in Tunis! He was lodged in a lavish palace; he was able to read every week newspapers from Europe,

³ Enrico Floriddia, *Bildungsroman*, bookwork, to be published;
 Enrico Floriddia, *How to become oriented*, lecture performance, *philomena+*, Vienna, 14th of February 2019;
 Enrico Floriddia, *Masters of the eclipse*, lecture performance with the participation of Aline Lenzhofer and Raffael Pankraz, *Kunsthalle Exnergasse*, Vienna, 20th of February 2019;
 Enrico Floriddia, *Queen of Saba a.k.a. βασίλισσα του νότου*, lecture performance, *philomena+*, Vienna, 26th of February 2019;

⁴ The bulk of the audience were *orientalists*: archaeologists, epigraphists, art historians, philologists, etc...

and the Levant; he was able to learn the Arabic language by speaking it, he was feeding himself of sunbeams.

**They say he wandered very far, very far, over land and
sea**



Figure 3: Austrian Academy of Science, Library, Archive and Collections (BASIS), Sammlung E. Glaser, AT-OeAW-BA-3-27-P-47

Sunbeams. Is it what Eduard Glaser was obsessed with? I have thought so. Probably because such an obsession is impossible to prove. Probably because I long missed the sun and the sight of the Mediterranean Sea. It is now ten years that – in a movement opposite of Glaser’s one – I left those shores to go up to Western Europe. Go north. I am convinced that Eduard Glaser had a sort of nostalgia for those shores too. Like me. An inherited and long cultivated nostalgia. An inherited and long cultivated trauma. I don’t have any. But I share the same unexplained drive and interest that Eduard had. I look at his photographs, he appears there because he was a bad photographer. As much as many people that worked for him appear in

the photographs despite his will. At the edges, far away from his object study, we see bodies. This is what I am interested to show. I am still looking for an honest way to do so.

*
**

In 1881, Eduard Glaser witnessed the occupation of Tunis by the French, the violence that followed: slaughter, rape, incarceration, executions, repression.

He then left for Alexandria. Towards the upper Nile to witness the total solar eclipse of 1882. There, he was a so-called *European*. The so-called *Europeans* have been used as an excuse for interventions by western European colonial powers. *European* in Alexandria was a tag assigned to a large variety of people. Armenians, Greek, Italians, Jews, and Maltese delving themselves in commerce constituted its bulk. These people have been then taken into *moral hostage* by powers that affirmed the will to protect them. They didn't ask for it. That affirmation gave to these powers some legitimation in the public eye to tamper into Egyptian affairs. When Eduard Glaser left Tunis for this marvellous city port, he switched position again. *Instrumental stranger*. The circular rhetoric of "protecting our citizens" was fuelling the crush of the revolt lead by Colonel Ahmed 'Urabi (أحمد عرابي), who was mostly followed by the Fellahin population. It is maybe in this place and time that Eduard Glaser first learnt the lesson of disguise. Suddenly, Eduard was at the same time an *instrumental stranger* and an *occupying stranger*. He didn't ask to be either, he start hiding his identity.

**And while we spoke of many things, fools and kings, this
he said to me:**



Figure 4: Austrian Academy of Science, Library, Archive and Collections (BASIS), Sammlung E. Glaser, AT-OeAW-BA-3-27-P-48

I recently realised how much to-day Yemen, Ethiopia and Eritrea had a common remote past and culture. As much as any other sea – be it of the North, Black, Middle, White, or Red – a body of water is a connection rather than a barrier. When few months ago I found myself in Massawa, on the shores in front of al-Hodeida, I saw the bridge: Massawa, beautiful and proud of her scars from the 90s, was watching al-Hodeida being now constantly raped. I saw the bridge between me and Eduard. Shortly after, I landed at the Italian Cultural Institute in Vienna⁵. While browsing among the “exiled” books I found traces of another – damned – bridge between colonial Italy and the Horn of Africa. Books are strange. People working

⁵ For a residency at the end of which I proposed the *in situ* installation *In nome della scandalosa forza rivoluzionaria del passato*, Italienisches Kulturinstitut Wien, 20th of March - 19th of June 2019.

with them are often considered up in the air, not practical. Yet books weight. Books cut. Books are fragile. Books squash. Books liberate.



One thing that is often mentioned about Eduard Glaser is his ability to disguise himself. Does this ability go with the sense of guilty that arises from the act fooling someone? Once arrived among the Jewish community in Sana'a, Eduard Glaser never mentioned his own affiliation to the Jewish faith. He was presenting himself as Muslim. This is a very unique position, rather original. Eduard Glaser was faking to have Muslim customs among his “fellows” Jews. Of course, customs of Yemeni Jews were utterly different from those of a mittel-european Jew, but it is still a rather peculiar stretch. But he knew that something was in between the Yemeni that he was employing and himself. You can see how Eduard photograph them. Or rather how he accidentally photograph them while taking pictures of his object of interest: material objects. In the end, Eduard was a *stranger among fellows*.



Figure 5: Austrian Academy of Science, Library, Archive and Collections (BASIS), Sammlung E. Glaser, AT-OeAW-BA-3-27-P-44

I am fond of Eduard Glaser and his story. In every new place, in every new occasion I give a new account of it. I navigate and displace myself. My position is multiple. My path didn't pass by Yemen but on the other side of the Red Sea, and I don't know yet where this research will bring me. Back in Europe, Glaser floated in academia for years. He had not much of a choice, he was just the shadow of himself, he was keeping his research, stubborn and passionate, he was listening around him and translating what he was feeling into another language, an invented language, a bastard Gabelsberger shorthand⁶ that was yet to be coded, he was, like myself, a *stranger among fellows*.

Bibliography

Donna Haraway, *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective*, in *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 3, Autumn, 1988;

⁶ All the diaries of Eduard Glaser conserved at the ÖAW are mainly written in the Gabelsberger shorthand with insertions in Hebrew, Sabaeen and Arabic terms.

- Hayyim Habshush, *A vision of Yemen*, edited by Alan Verskin, Stanford University Press, 2019;
- Edward Said, *Orientalism*, Pantheon books, 1978;
- Judith Halberstam, *The queer art of failure*, Duke University Press, Durham-London, 2011;
- Edmond Jabès, *A foreigner carrying in the crook of his arm a tiny book*, Wesleyan University Press, Hanover-London, 1993;
- Vilém Flusser, "Taking up residence in homelessness" (1987), in *Writings*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis-London, 2002;
- Jacques Derrida, *Le monolingualisme de l'autre. Ou la prothèse d'origine*, Galilée, Paris, 1996;
- Larry Wolff, *Inventing eastern europe, The map of civilisation on the mind of the enlightenment*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1994;
- James Baldwin, *Another country*, Dial Press, New York, 1962;
- Ella Fitzgerald, Joe Pass, *Nature boy*, 1947.