

SCOTT MINAR

Translating in Aleppo

It is 3:30 in the morning here, and the email chime on my phone rings. In Syria, it's 10:30 a.m. Saleh Razzouk writes, "I am happy you are not on the verge of insanity, the edge of the thing like me. Yesterday I was about to lose my flat because an act of terror hit our vicinity." He is referring to a bomb exploding on his block in Aleppo—it shook his six-story apartment building and rattled him severely. Last week, he mentioned snipers in the Al-Zahra area of the city. He has to be careful. Once a mortar fragment he describes as "mute, direct, and hot" shattered his apartment window while he was having lunch. Every day we exchange at least a half-dozen emails over translation work we are doing together, along with poet Phil Terman in Western Pennsylvania

He sends this note about Arabic translations he is publishing in Syria:

The publisher is Linda. You accepted some of her poems for *Crazyhorse*.

I wrote a story; the hero in it is called a crazy horse.

And we have a night club named Crazy Horse. Very expensive, where Russian ladies dance striptease.... It is next to the house of the army generals.

He has been mugged and robbed in his apartment by thieves posing as "security men." His wife lives in another country; his son has been missing for two years and is presumed dead. He frequently has no electricity, and he sometimes stores water in bottles in his bathroom for the times when it stops flowing from his pipes.

This is what it is like living and translating in Aleppo, Syria today—this and more.



Saleh (pronounced “Sallie-hh Razook”) is a professor in Fiber Sciences at the University of Aleppo, but he began by teaching English. He was educated in Poland and England, a secular Muslim raised in a village that was half Muslim and half Jewish. I have had some of the best discussions about books with him that I can remember. He is working with Jewish-American poet Phil Terman to produce an anthology of contemporary Syrian poetry. Anyone working under war-zone conditions would be suffering, and Razzouk is. But fascinatingly, it is translation that keeps him sane. When I write that I am worried about burdening him with work, as both one of his co-translators and one of the subjects of his translation efforts, Saleh responds, “Do not worry. Doing this work keeps me alive.”

Saleh began working with Terman four or five years ago, and with me within the last year or so. A few years ago, he read a poem Phil published about Kafka and wrote to ask if he might be allowed to translate it for Arabic readers. At one point, Phil worked hard with some colleagues in Pittsburgh to see if Saleh might be brought over to the US as a visiting scholar. There were a number of complications blocking this, Trump’s immigration policies probably among them. But even in England, where efforts were also made on Saleh’s behalf, there were difficulties. Saleh reports that it is hard to leave without knowing his son’s fate, hard too to be without his wife whom he describes as his “heart beats.”

Caught between science and literary humanism, there is not much international room for him to move it seems. He mentions that he doesn’t need more laboratories, but humanitarian aid. In one email, he told me, “Writing cannot be done under stress with a brain occupied by fetching drinking water and little electricity to charge the computer to read with. Science cannot be against [the] human condition per se, as described by André Malraux in his novel on atrocities in Indochina.” About his own country, Saleh states, “If the [W]est wants changes so badly, [they] can be reached by slow and gradual manners. We are left now like orphans. [The] central government is

weak. The alternative was supervision without love or passions.” He adds in a second note, “The tide in here is [an] Islamic one with hatred against crusades. It *was* a hatred against imperialism. Terms are changing, but not the passion or the trend. I am abandoned because I understand being against imperialism ([an]old slogan), but I cannot see any crusade here. This time is very difficult for us all.”



Saleh Razzouk is a kind man. Upon learning of a recent surgery I had, he wrote,

We had a very hot day. Replacement of the speaker of the house. Many shootings in the neighborhoods. But I carry on reading. It is my only comfort in these days. Please recover soon. The magazine needs you.

–Saleh

Syria

He assures us over and over again that the work we are doing together keeps him going and gives him something back. It is hard to watch him going through this, but what can we do. We help as we can, in small ways. A friend of mine once told me, “When you have nothing, give something away.” This is Saleh. It may be, in a way, his saving grace—that he is the kind of person who wants to do so.

One day, he sent a remarkable message that was a bit of poetry itself:

Dear Scott—I am happy you respond. I spend daily some 15 h. alone in a hot flat on the top of a building. It is the niche my wife helped in preparing 2-3 years before our tragedy. It helps me to contemplate and elaborate [on things] since it opens [to] wide blue sky in summer and on [a] hardhearted grey sky in winter.

From the porch, early morning, I exchange salutes with passing birds. [Sometimes] my eye falls on their eyes and everything looks fine. We understand each other. In winter if you stretch your hand you can pick and harvest swimming clouds [all] around.

I do translation work on my own, so I started asking Saleh about his methods and practices. My friend Göran Malmqvist in Sweden mentions that the translator should stay as close to the poem as possible and “never try to improve the text.” But when questioned about his own excellent translations of his friend Tranströmer’s work, he said, “I just try to think of the best word in English, and I use that one.” Balanced between the literal and the interpretive, between the precision of language and the dynamics and animus of poetry, all translators worry about their children: the poems they interpret and force into a new language.

Last week, I sent Razzouk a few questions in interview format. I asked him if it was difficult translating Arabic poetry into English and vice versa. He responded,

No, it is not difficult. It seems to me it is an act of love. Once you feel the poems, translation becomes easy. But I have a view here. Thinking in English is the first step toward mastering the translation from Arabic, and vice versa. You have to think in terms of the target language. In other words, you have to forget the original, keeping in mind the meaning alone and not the words. Words are things. As Foucault said, “Words are graves of meaning.” As for difficulties? Oh, there are many difficulties. Certain tricky words play with the flow or the sound of words to denote something hidden behind graphemes, etc.

The first poem I read from Saleh’s translations is by Riad Saleh Hussein, a poet who died in the 1980’s apparently abandoned by his own country. “Smoke” begins like this:

Depressed and open like the sea,

I stand, angry, coherent and continuous,
 to tell you about the sea,
 when the window has two eyes to see my despair
 the walls fingers to touch my ribs
 the doors tongues to talk about me.

His autobiography, lyricism, and personification are something that might fit Pablo Neruda. But the poem's ending shows how formidable Hussein is as a poet, despite the fact that most people in this country have never heard of him:

I'll stand
 to talk about myself
 in the same way the dictator stands to talk about his prisons,
 the millionaire about his millions,
 the lover about the breast of his beloved
 the child about his mother
 the thief about his keys
 the world about its rulers.

I'll talk to you with love, with love, with mad love, but only after I light a cigarette.

The ending line is so sardonic. The rant that precedes is a psycho-narrative list, a small rant—but the ultimate image seems to walk it all back—as if futility and acceptance were a kind of power. I love this ending; I don't think I've ever seen anything quite like it. Even if we didn't know that Hussein died rejected and alone in another country, we might catch a bit of that story in his poem, his attitude toward it. He is a speaker who doesn't need to be saved, though we would surely like to do so—another paradox, like so many found in the Middle East and elsewhere.

Saleh recognizes one of translation's acknowledged limitations: the poem's new version may require more than the text itself. It is difficult for most translators to admit perhaps, because many are writers themselves who want the whole poem without explanations. There is a well known story about Robert Frost allegedly being asked what his poem "means" after a reading at Harvard. And Frost said, "It *means*..." then proceeded to read the text of the poem again.

When I asked Saleh to describe a translation challenge from Arabic into English, he wrote this:

[...] sometimes you must manipulate the translation. Sometimes I use footnotes to explain a thing readers might miss otherwise. For example, once the nickname of a character in a piece I was working on was Rasasy—because he always wears grey suits. I had then to explain that in Arabic *rasas* means *bullets*, and thus the reader could see the relationship between the colors from these two sides and understand where the name comes from.



My conversations with Saleh are comfortable, familiar, but I'm overwhelmed when I remember his situation and his living conditions. The thought I am left with, stark and distinct—like snowflakes on black wool—is that our discussions of literature and translation mean a lot to him, far more than they could to me. His bravery is on his sleeve, but he didn't put it there. He is just trying to live, to survive. He wears it because of who he is and what it is he is trying to do. His love of literature and art seems mythic to me. I have a very distinct memory of picking up Albrecht Haushofer's *Moabit Sonnets* off of a table of free books when I was in graduate school. The biography on the dust jacket mentions that Haushofer wrote these sonnets using a pin and his own

blood, sometimes feces or urine, and that he was often chained to a wall in Moabit Prison in Berlin where he was held during World War Two. He was part of an attempt to remove Hitler, a bomb plot that failed to kill him. The opening poem in *Moabit Sonnets* is titled “Fetters”—a literal image rather than a metaphor. Saleh Razzouk lives in a world only marginally removed from Haushofer’s, and even this may be a stretch. Perhaps most incredible is the fact that there are thousands, tens of thousands, in similar plights. Aleppo and Berlin have things in common. One small piece of these is the literary context—the thing that he loves.



I asked Saleh about his personal approach to translation—specifically, “Do you try to stay close to the original text or do you interpret and negotiate with the text in order to make the translation fluent and fluid?” He wrote in response, “I negotiate. I do not like to scar the original with primitive and direct approaches. This type of scarring is to be avoided at all costs. We have to understand each other before the chemistry of two languages mingles nicely and mixes into one.” When I asked him, “Why do you do your translating work? What does the work bring you or give back to you?” he added, “Pleasure. I enjoy it, and I make friendships in this way.” For someone in his place and time—a multitude of sorrows he speaks of often—friendships are no small thing, even at a great distance and across cultural and linguistic borders.

I think it necessary to thank Saleh Razzouk for so many things. He answered a question I was not smart enough to ask, and he did it graciously, generously, with compassion. He has nothing, as my friend put it, but he is giving something away. I hope the courage and wisdom of doing that brings him at least to the edge of some sanity—for himself, his country, and for people like him in too many places in the world.

The condition of human beings all over the world has always been literature's subject and deep concern. Yet, paradoxically, a single human being's suffering seems greater than general observations like this. Here is what Saleh's signature looks like in his own language, in Arabic—**صالح الرزوق**. If this looks like a winding path, swirling sands, whorls in a rain-soaked forest floor, or patterns in a work of art—perhaps it is all of these things. But to readers of that language, the meaning here is like a bell, like glass. I think I understand it perfectly. I hope and believe he is coming through loud and clear.