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The magic of transferring meanings, sometimes bodies

I never met my English translator. He lived in South Africa and then moved to Madrid, while I lived in Cairo and don't move anywhere anymore. When he was still visiting Cairo, he had only translated two of my short stories; stories I thought were too short to require personal meetings between author and translator. So, we started communicating at length via e-mail, Zoom, and Messenger. But he stopped coming to Cairo when I finished writing my last novel.

One day, sitting in my house in Cairo, rejoicing that the translation of my novel was finally published in the United States, I was surprised to see water leaking from the ceiling. While trying to fix the problem, I've gotten to know my neighbor, whom I don't see often. His door is next to mine, but our doors are often closed. I knew he was British, that he has been living in Egypt for years, and as I entered his kitchen, I saw an enormous library in the hall; so enormous that I had to ask him about his work. "I'm a book editor!" he said.

I told him: "I also edit books and write them too. Also, my English translator is British – like you. His name is Robin Moger. Do you know him by any chance?"

The mysterious neighbor smiled. "Robin. He is a dear friend. He often visited me here in this house!"

I paused for a moment. So, while I was writing my novel, presuming that Robin was in Cape Town, ten thousand kilometers south of Cairo, translating my short stories, there were moments when we, the writer and translator, Egyptian and British who never met, were sitting behind two adjoining doors, a thin wall separating us, under the same leaky roof. On one hand, the situation seemed like a passage from a psychological thriller or like one of the lessons that drama students receive to teach them the difference between reality and the dramatic scene – we have a strange coincidence, a problem, and a mysterious neighbor. On the other hand, just as in reality, I failed to find the moral of the story.

But it made me think I hadn't met my other translators either. The word "my translators" – with the possessive pronoun – is inaccurate here. Let us say: the people who translated my work, primarily poems, into French, German, and Greek. Strangely enough, English was the last language my work translated into. Still, it was the language that "brought me here," as Nataša said when we met at Shambaugh House, "because we wouldn't have known about you if it had not been for Robin's work."

"Oh, then they didn't bring me here just because I'm a great writer," I thought in my mind, remembering the importance and strangeness of the translation process. We don't pay enough attention to the magic inherent in it; the magic of transferring meanings from one language to another, and in my case, this magic brought me across the ocean to Iowa.

But like all magic, it can suddenly take strange paths if you don't heed it. One day, I read Lorca's wonderful poem "Elegy to a Bullfighter," translated into Arabic by a great Arab poet. I was very agitated by the translation, not because I knew Spanish – I don't know Spanish – but because I memorized the poem from another translation – done by a man who was neither a poet nor a translator. He was a novelist who put

the same Lorca poem one of his novels after he translated it himself because one of the novel's characters loved the poem. His translation was charming, wonderful. It led me into the world of the great Spanish poet.

But now, having read the other translation, which is very different, I no longer knew which one transmitted the real Lorca. Then I thought, Lorca's lyric poems, close to the land and the people, might be more appropriate if they were translated into the Egyptian vernacular instead of Standard Arabic, so I immediately began translating them myself. From Spanish? No, I instead "translated" it from classical Arabic into colloquial Arabic. I asked myself, didn't most Arab readers read Dostoevsky's novels through translation from an intermediary language, such as French, and not directly from Russian? So why don't I consider Standard Arabic an intermediate language as well? Some readers liked these poems "translated" into the Egyptian dialect, but I stopped after a short while, for I no longer knew, having put Lorca through all these mediums and gates, whether these words were still Lorca or had begun to be mine.

I was already suffering from another type of translation, which I called "internal translation." Throughout my life, I have written poetry in classical and colloquial Egyptian. In my country, the poet usually chooses one of the two. In my case, I published four poetry collections divided equally between the two "languages". I "translated" the poem within me for a long time before I wrote it, from the vernacular to the classical and vice versa, to choose the most suitable form. Even in that little journey between the language and one of its dialects, I realized the simple and astonishing truth; synonyms are not accurate, and we permanently lose things in translation even if we translate our poems.