

ENGL 2415: The Practice of Literary Translation
Professor Peter Cole

By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations. —Justin Hsieh

Strange Corpse: Translating Mohamed Choukri's *Al-Jutha al-Ghariba*
by Justin Hsieh '27

*A good poet is no more like himself in a dull
translation, than his carcass would be to his living body.*

—John Dryden, Preface to *Sylvae*

Mohamed Choukri is a writer whose life is a case study in the power—and problems—of translation. Translations of his autobiography *Al-Khubz Al-Hafi*, beginning with American author Paul Bowles' *For Bread Alone* in 1973, launched Choukri to international literary stardom. Since then, however, that first translation has been subject to considerable critical scrutiny, particularly of what some scholars have found to be problematic differences between Bowles' English text and the Arabic text published by Choukri in 1982. While *For Bread Alone* remains to this day the only English translation of *Al-Khubz Al-Hafi*, in recent years new translations of Choukri's other works have offered alternative visions of Choukri in English, versions that might demonstrate ways to avoid the charges critics have raised against Bowles' text. In this paper, I will compare two translations of Choukri's 1971 short story *Al-Jutha Al-Ghariba*—Bowles' "Men at Work" (1979) and Jonas Elbousty's "The Strange Corpse" (2023)—and argue that the latter's closer hewing to Choukri's language better conveys his distinct style and broader literary project, at the occasional yet justified risk of less natural English expression.

The beginning of *Al-Jutha Al-Ghariba*, and of its two translations, immediately reveals a difference in Bowles and Elbousty's respective ability to convey two key features of the Arabic text: immediacy and economy. The contrast is at first subtle: while Bowles' opening sentence reads "A cry in the big square," Elbousty has "Screams in the big courtyard," opening on the

noun just as Choukri's text does: *siraakh fi as-saaha al-kabira*. In the second sentence, the gap widens: where Elbousty has "A living body falls to the ground," matching Choukri's *jism hayy yasqut 'ala al-'ard* word-for-word, Bowles has "A human body has fallen to the pavement from above," lengthening and diluting Choukri's sentence by introducing the present perfect and the redundant 'from above.' This dilution of Choukri's immediacy is a pattern throughout Bowles' translation of the story. In the third paragraph, for example, Choukri writes:

الناس في النوافذ، على السطوح، فوق الأشجار. يصلون ويصلون من جميع الجهات...

Bowles renders this:

More bodies come onto the scene from all directions. They line the roofs and balconies, and fill the trees. And still they keep coming...

In addition to fleshing out Choukri's blunt 'in,' 'on,' and 'above' into the verbs 'line' and 'fill', and turning his 'people' into the abstract 'More bodies,' Bowles reverses the order of the Arabic sentences, a loss of Choukri's powerful lead-in felt keenly when one sees Elbousty recover it:

People at the windows, on balconies and roofs, even in the trees. They arrive, on and on, from every direction...

In short, these examples show how Elbousty avoids Bowles' attenuation of Choukri's striking directness, preserving the abrupt and dense expression that characterize the Arabic text.

Elbousty's attention to the concision of Choukri's language is also significant in the way it allows him, unlike Bowles, to capture another characteristic technique of Choukri's prose—its departures from that concision. As Moroccan author and critic Mohammed Berrada writes in his introduction to Choukri's short story collection *Majnun al-Ward*,

Choukri's language is characterized by an economy close to scarcity. Justifying this impression are... the short sentences backed by present-tense verbs that dominate most of his stories. Yet interspersed throughout this general linguistic structure are moments that suddenly break it, through long, cohesive sentences... [that] move us from the world of things to their extensions in the writer's soul.

Then the text returns to its original level, until the next time it breaks. (Berrada 9, my translation)

An example of this essential technique of Choukri's expression comes in the fifth paragraph of *Al-Jutha Al-Ghariba*. In Bowles' translation (which combines the fourth and fifth paragraphs of the Arabic), the sentence that 'breaks the structure' has been rendered practically invisible:

Eleven o'clock in the morning. The body is still there. Many of the people are seated now. From time to time others sit down, all of them keeping their eyes on the body. Small sparks are flying up from it. The people yawn. Some of them fall asleep where they are sitting. Others drink Coca-Cola and eat sandwiches. They smoke and chew gum to pass the time. They laugh, smile, and nudge one another playfully as they look for the most advantageous place to stand or sit. Some wander here and there, asking one another for information about the body.

In Elbousty's translation, however, it is obvious:

Eleven o'clock in the morning. The corpse is still there. Many people sit there watching. Every now and then, some people who have been standing join those sitting. Their eyes never tire of staring at the corpse. Sparks start to fly from the corpse.

They yawn, doze, have iced drinks, eat sandwiches, smoke, chew gum, smile, flirt, laugh, and push each other, jokingly or seriously, as they try to find a good spot to stand or sit. They drift here and there. They try to understand what is so strange about the corpse.

The effect of this long sentence, after a page of short, spare, staccato sentences, is to highlight the bizarre contrast between the vibrant life of the community that has formed around the strange corpse, and the cruel indifference to its humanity with which the corpse itself is treated. Bowles' translation cuts the sentence up, and conjoins several of the shorter sentences that precede and follow it, blending the entire section into a textureless sludge of uniformity. It resembles the translations of Genesis 1:3-5 in which, as Everett Fox writes, "the passage... reads smoothly—so smoothly that one glides past it as if creation were the same as any other narrated action" (566). In Ezra Pound's words, "Death has become melodious; sorrow is as serious as the nightingale's, tombstones are shelves for the reception of rose-leaves" (278). Elbousty, on the other hand, in

reproducing the experience of sudden transcendence in a long sentence bracketed by short ones, accomplishes for Choukri what Johann Gottfried Herder identifies as the aim of every translator toward their author: to “capture the soul of his writing style, indeed the very strokes of his pen, his phrases and colorings, his ruling disposition, the genius and heart of his poetry” (207).

In defense of Bowles, one might argue that what his translation aims for is not a precise replication of Choukri’s style, but rather a text with integrity as English. Bowles himself makes this argument in his translator’s note to *Five Eyes*, the collection of translated Moroccan short stories in which “Men at Work” was published:

When we were translating his autobiography *For Bread Alone*, [Choukri] sat beside me, in order to see that I was making a word-for-word version of his text. If he noticed an extra comma he demanded an explanation. I was driven to reiterating: But English is not Arabic! Finally we devised a modus operandi which involved our sitting on opposite sides of the room. (Bowles 8)

It must be noted that Choukri-esque brevity and directness are not unthinkable in modern literary English, as Robert Alter points out in defending fidelity to Old Testament simplicity of syntax—among the precedents he cites, Hemingway is an apt example for Choukri (xxxiv-v).

Nonetheless, it is true that in some cases, Bowles’ departures from particulars of the Arabic text allow him to write slightly more idiomatic English than Elbousty’s: “Horrible!” as opposed to “A scary incident,” or “And still they keep coming” as opposed to “They arrive, on and on.”

The danger in Bowles’ attempt to achieve a smooth experience for the English reader, however, is that he often ends up over-specifying or changing the sense of a sentence or a scene. For example, “Horrible!” is arguably too emotionally involved a phrase for the spectators of *Al-Jutha Al-Ghariba*’s opening scene, since a key aspect of the story is the consistently detached attitude of its characters toward the corpse—an attitude reflected in something like Elbousty’s

“A scary incident.” In another case later in the story, an old man collapses under the heat of the midday sun, which inspires a brief conversation between characters. Elbousty writes:

An old man loses his balance and staggers, collapsing against a girl standing nearby. Women scream. Children burst into tears. The girl looks horrified.

“It’s just a dizzy spell. Don’t worry. He isn’t dead. It looks as though the hot sun has got to him.”

“Go home!” (He looks around him: where does the old man live?) “You can’t stay here under the burning sun.”

“Leave me alone,” the old man says, moving weakly. “Get me some water.”

Elbousty closely mirrors the Arabic text. Bowles, on the other hand, writes:

An old man totters and falls onto a girl, and women scream. The babies begin to yell. The girl’s face shows terror.

It’s all right. He’s just dizzy. He’s not dead. The sun was too much for him.

The old man’s eyes open and he stares uncomprehendingly into the faces of the people surrounding him. Someone leans over and says: You’d better go home. You mustn’t stay in this sun. We’ll take you.

He moves feebly and says: No! Leave me alone! I want to stay here. Just bring me some water.

Yes! Get him some water!

As comparison of the two translations demonstrates, Bowles’ text not only elides the disorienting interjection of the unknown speaker, changing the man’s nonverbal question to the other spectators into an explicit description of the old man’s confusion; it also adds multiple new lines of description and dialogue. The first loses the suggestive moment in which the old man, despite being spoken to and about, is himself temporarily silent and absent from the text—like the corpse in the same courtyard. The second, again dilutes the impact of the spare Arabic prose, which—as reflected in Elbousty’s close reproduction—ends the scene with the old man’s desire not to miss out on the spectacle of the decaying corpse, which is more powerful when subtly implied than when Bowles spells it out. What Bowles does is described well by Wilhelm von Humboldt:

wherever the original only intimates without making itself clear, where it indulges in metaphors whose tenor is elusive, where it omits connective ideas, there the translator would do violence to the text by arbitrarily clarifying and so distorting it... (Humboldt 240)

Finally, it is worth noting that the differences in Elbousty and Bowles' translations of *Al-Jutha Al-Ghariba* affect not merely the story's style and meaning, but also its consistency with the broader literary project of Choukri's work. Nirvana Tanoukhi argues that unlike Bowles' postmodernist "skepticism toward language and historical narration" (129), Choukri takes part in "contemporary leftist Arab thinkers' search for a 'new realism'... a politically engaged aesthetic that could address immediate sociopolitical conditions" (131). In his short stories, this realism takes the form of what Abdellatif Akbib calls a "determination to shock the reader into full awareness of reality as it was" in the extreme political and economical hardship of the Moroccan 1970s, and the result is that "the use of euphemism [is] invariably absent from his" work (62). Instead, he exposes with almost journalistic objectivity a world "where everything bows to the rules of market economy, and where human flesh and soul have a price" (Akbib 62). It is in this context, then, that Elbousty's retention of Choukri's unvarnished documentarianism of style, which evokes the callous absurdity of an urban society inured to human suffering, represents a reclamation of Choukri's vision from the dilution and abstraction of Bowles' translation—a familiar body, rather than a strange corpse.

Appendix: Arabic and English Texts

- Choukri
93
صراخ في الساحة الكبيرة. جسم حي يسقط على الأرض. الناس يصلون من كل مكان راكضين.
الجسد المحتضر ينظر إلى السماء المشرقة. عيناه تطفئان شيئاً فشيئاً. همد.
العاشر صباحاً. الناس يصلون بسرعة من كل الاتجاهات. الشمس توقظ في الذاكرة ذلك الإله
القديم.
- لم يعد يتحرك.
- لا أحد يستطيع أن يحركه. إنه مات بكل غرابة. حادث مخيف.
- Bowles
123
A cry in the big square. A human body has fallen to the pavement from above.
Live bodies move in from all sides to look at it. The half-dead body stares at the
bright sky. Little by little the eyes go out. Ten o'clock in the morning. More live
bodies keep arriving at the spot. The sun awakens memories of other times when it
was God.
He's not moving now.
They can't move him. He's dying in a peculiar way.
Horrible!
- Elbousty
182
Screams in the big courtyard. A living body falls to the ground. People rush in,
running from everywhere. The dying body looks up at the bright sky. The light in
his eyes goes out bit by bit. He is motionless.
Ten o'clock in the morning. People rush in from all directions. The sun awakens
in memory, that old god.
"He can't move any longer."
"No one can make him move. He died very strangely. A scary incident."
- Choukri
93
الناس في النوافذ، على السطوح، فوق الأشجار. يصلون ويصلون من جميع الجهات، راجلين وراكبين.
الأصحاء والمرضى وال كبار والصغار، الأغنياء والفقراء. كلهم يدركون أن الجثة غريبة. لا أحد يستطيع
الاقتراب منها.
- Bowles
123
More bodies come onto the scene from all directions. They line the roofs and
balconies, and fill the trees. And still they keep coming, walking and riding,
healthy and infirm, young and old, with money and without. They can all see that it
is a strange body, but no one can go near it.
- Elbousty
182
People at the windows, on balconies and roofs, even in the trees. They arrive, on
and on, from every direction, by foot or riding, healthy and sick, old and young,
rich and poor. They all realize there's something strange about the corpse. No one
can go near it.

Choukri
93-94

الحادية عشرة. الجثة ما تزال هناك. كثيرون جالسون الآن. بين حين وآخر ينضم الواقفون إلى الجالسين. عيونهم لا تتعب من النظر إلى الجثة. شرارات تبتلير منها الآن. يتشاءبون، ينعسون، يشربون مشروبات مثلجة، يأكلون الشطائر المحشوة، يدخنون، يلوكون العلك، يبسمون، يتغنون، يضحكون، يتدافعون بالمناكب مزاحاً أو جدياً، يحاولون العثور على مكان مناسب للوقوف أو الجلوس. يذهبون هنا وهناك. يستفسرون عن غرابة الجثة. يختفون في جولة قصيرة ثم يعودون وحدهم أو صحبة الواصلين الجدد.

Bowles
124

Eleven o'clock in the morning. The body is still there. Many of the people are seated now. From time to time others sit down, all of them keeping their eyes on the body. Small sparks are flying up from it. The people yawn. Some of them fall asleep where they are sitting. Others drink Coca-Cola and eat sandwiches. They smoke and chew gum to pass the time. They laugh, smile, and nudge one another playfully as they look for the most advantageous place to stand or sit. Some wander here and there, asking one another for information about the body. Some walk away for a few minutes and then return, together with others who are coming to take their first look.

Elbousty
182-3

Eleven o'clock in the morning. The corpse is still there. Many people sit there watching. Every now and then, some people who have been standing join those sitting. Their eyes never tire of staring at the corpse. Sparks start to fly from the corpse.

They yawn, doze, have iced drinks, eat sandwiches, smoke, chew gum, smile, flirt, laugh, and push each other, jokingly or seriously, as they try to find a good spot to stand or sit. They drift here and there. They try to understand what is so strange about the corpse. They go for a short stroll and disappear, then they come back again, either by themselves or with newcomers.

Choukri
93

الحادية عشرة ونصف. كثير من الموظفين يصلون إلى الساحة مندهشين. خرجوا من مؤسساتهم قبل الأوان ليروا الجثة الشهائية وهي في بداية تشوهاها الشمس كاوية. يجففون عرقهم بمناديلهم وأكمامهم. يتزاحمون بضيق على احتلال الأماكن الظليلة بالأشجار أو تحت أسقف المتاجر والمقاهي. شيخ يترنح. يسقط على شابة واقفة. نساء يصرخن. أطفال يبكون. رعب شديد يبدو على وجه الشابة. - إنها الدوخة فقط. لا تخافي. لم يمت. يبدو أ هذه الشمس الحارة أثرت عليه. - امش إلى منزلك. (يلتفت حوله: أين يسكن)؟ إنك لم تقوي على البقاء هنا تحت هذه الشمس القوية.

الشيخ يتحرك بضعف ويقول:

- خلوني هنا. هاتوا لي قليلاً من الماء.

Bowles
124

Eleven thirty in the morning. Many government functionaries arrive in the square and are astonished by what they see. They have left their offices early hoping for a chance to see the body before it is burned beyond recognition. By now the sun is fiercely hot. Men rub their handkerchiefs or their sleeves over their faces. There is pushing as they try to get up under the shade of doorways or under the trees, or behind the awnings of the shops and cafés. An old man totters and falls onto a girl, and women scream. The babies begin to yell. The girl's face shows terror.

It's all right. He's just dizzy. He's not dead. The sun was too much for him.

The old man's eyes open and he stares uncomprehendingly into the faces of the people surrounding him. Someone leans over and says: You'd better go home. You mustn't stay in this sun. We'll take you.

He moves feebly and says: No! Leave me alone! I want to stay here. Just bring me some water.

Yes! Get him some water!

Elbousty
183

Eleven-thirty. Many employees arrive in the courtyard. They're astonished. They have left their offices early to look at the graying corpse as it begins to decompose. The sun is blazing. They use their napkins and sleeves to wipe off their sweat. They jostle to get a spot in the shade of a tree or beneath the awnings of shops and cafés. An old man loses his balance and staggers, collapsing against a girl standing nearby. Women scream. Children burst into tears. The girl looks horrified.

"It's just a dizzy spell. Don't worry. He isn't dead. It looks as though the hot sun has got to him."

"Go home!" (He looks around him: where does the old man live?) "You can't stay here under the burning sun."

"Leave me alone," the old man says, moving weakly. "Get me some water."

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