

Ghassan Zaqtan
Like a Straw Bird It Follows Me, and Other Poems
Translated by Fady Joudah
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Translations 'About' Ghassan Zaqtan: On The Powers Of Laughter

'the deep brotherhood that leads to no wisdom
the talk that's no longer suitable for high altitude.'
from 'The Canyon'

'The hermeneutic temptation to read these details as symbols and to search for their hidden meaning should be resisted: they are exposed fragments of the real which resist meaning. The meaning of their context—the terrible situation of the Shoah—is too traumatic to be assumed, so this sudden focus on material details serves the purpose of keeping meaning at a distance.'
Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*

In perhaps his most distinguished work, *The World, The Text and the Critic*, Edward Said suggests that Conrad's stooge-like innocent in *The Secret Agent*, Stevie, provides a reading direction for how Conrad, qua artist, viewed the state or being of the writer 'in extremis.' He suggests that Stevie is this kind of icon, by being wrenched between the two poles of an autistic and endless doodling on the page and being blown to smithereens. Said anticipates a view common in Conrad scholarship, that Conrad's 'impressionism' or early modernism highlighted the 'an-archy' of the literary in the modern world; was a writing targeted to display (or impress?) the disintegration, the 'un-writing' of and in a world which, to use Kermode's term, no longer had a 'sense of an ending.' In the introduction to his translations in *Like a Straw Bird It Follows Me, and Other Poems*, Fady Joudah makes a somewhat similar claim for the Palestinian poet Ghassan Zaqtan. Putting the two together—a synthesising which is actually at odds with Zaqtan's aesthetic as critiqued below—we might see this logic of disintegration, this, as we will see, 'purposiveness without a purpose' (Kant), as indeed emblematic, par excellence, of exilic status.

That said, Palestine-born Zaqtan now lives in Ramallah. If he is an 'exile' it is, I would argue, because Palestinians aren't at home in their own home. Indeed, and this is something that I will alight on below: the reason they are so harrowed and hounded by a terrorist state, is perhaps because, suffering all the irrationalities and highly skewed rationalities of a wild persecution complex, the Zionist state (and not of course, by any means, all the inhabitants), is itself not quite at home in its own psyche. In his introduction, Joudah reiterates that Zaqtan's presiding mentality or structure of feeling is that of a skeptic, which is to say, a doubting conscience. But doubt, logically, cannot exist if all there is is doubt: it needs must feed on certain certainties. Zaqtan's doubt is the doubt of the scarred and damaged. And one is damaged because one was once whole. What's doubtful about Zionism is that its unhinged identity is as it is, because it is always, always reactionary, in both senses, not integral. Indeed, this panic was recently evidenced by the US government. Intending to tour America with his translator (Joudah), Zaqtan was initially refused a visa, until eventually being allowed to tour but, naturally, after much unnecessary anxiety over the decision. Which tells us something: poetry might 'make nothing happen' in the UK, say, or in the US by its native denizens, but the case is different with critical instances, like Palestine, like Ireland, like China. In any case, reading Zaqtan (and for the first time), something did happen to this reader. In his poetry as I read it, Zaqtan finds a way of housing what seems to be unendingly nomadic. Perhaps most of all, by *not* totalizing damaged experience: rather by flaunting the wounds: and this both thematically and, often, in his lightsome free verse, which seems to flit, like a bird, a straw bird: a bird harrowed, hollowed.

Indeed, the act of writing, being both Other-sourced and Other-directed, is a way of spending (a kind of *kenosis*) the self or the subject. A way of losing one-self, or at least, using the resources of the authorial self to reach back (expressively rather than discursively) into the 'real' of a pre-configured way of being, a kind of reality before the dire ego's organization. There is, thus, a commonality between what I have suggested (after Joudah) is Zaqtan's Humean or skeptical endeavor and the more licit kind of 'postmodern-ism' teased out in various ways in the discussion which now proceeds. If, say, modernism is a registering, speaking generically, of a new realization of exilic status, of being un-housed in the world as 'absent whole,' *here* we have it, quite literally, compounded, *squared*. In his introduction, Joudah suggests that part of this artistic gambit is achieved by list-making, a disenchanting form of litany, a detailing of the demotic and the quotidian. True. But Zaqtan makes use of other techniques as well: one which I will highlight being the infinite regress, the (implicit)

reductio ad absurdum, the duplicity that leads to a sense of abyssal dispersal—all of which might be a way of seeing Zaqtan as that kind of ‘chameleon’ poet with a ‘negative capability’, a kind of ‘impersonality’, which Keats made his ideal after Shakespeare. The (somewhat hidden) Palestine behind Zaqtan’s liberating verse is, after a manner, a kind of ‘Kurtz’; which is to say, a break-down, an analysis, though deeply lyrical, of mentality or ideality into the vivid life of the bare and nude and sensual. After the sort of mindless persecution Palestinians have undergone, it is quite understandable that the ‘symbolic’ register—where life is *essentially* a ‘tragedy’—is deftly replaced by a more existential or pragmatic kind of imminent/immanent ‘building’ of day-to-day worth in and for the surviving, the living (see also ‘Cavafy’s Builders’—a reference perhaps to Cavafy’s demotic reworking of classical *mythoi*). Zaqtan, thus, is arch reflector of a people at tipping point:

some murmur sprang from the walls
and resembled the air
as it says to you: Here

here

Who’s in the city besides us?

(‘Neighboring Sounds’)

The indexical (spoken by air!) is a last resort, after discourse no longer avails. And, invoking Cavafy’s notorious conceit perhaps, it is the last resort, the extreme of a self *questioning it-self*; a self in the process of ending, *at the ending*. The liminality, which is in fact the equivalent of (the impossibility of representing) death is revealed as significantly evident in a different manner later in this article. For Zaqtan, then, as dispersed, ‘the birds have bought my journey’ (‘A Regretful Young Jaheer Man’); as within ‘The Canyon’ he begins to ‘climb’, so he seems to write merely ‘because the matter requires it;’ a world, then, where ‘the signifier and the signified get lost’ (‘Alone and the River before Me’); the poet’s ‘only profession’ in ‘This Is My Only Profession,’ is at its base exilic, a being left radically stranded and in the cold, untenanted, a thoroughgoing inhabitation, we might discern, *of sickness*: ‘This is my only profession / ...and gathering their sleeves from the corner of their seats / like a cold I gather them.’ Thus the ill logic of the world for a Palestinian and a professional Palestinian, which is to say, a Palestinian *poet*.

To outline the remainder of this article: I will now proceed to discuss the following constellation of senses to be read out of Zaqtan’s verse: one, the effects of duplicity and of doubling, abyssal sense-making or sense-wrenching; two, a postmodern temporal mooring, a weird way of seeing the present from the perspective of future anteriority, a stance highlighted by Jean-Francois Lyotard in his notorious work on the postmodern condition; three, the displayed aporiae of language itself, as against the *auctoritas* of a (safe or housed) ‘intentionality’; four, the sense of moral responsibility which Zaqtan evinces by inhabiting the perspective of the Other, rather than sentimentally, facilely and dichotomously opposing victimhood to power; five, under Freud’s banner of the ‘uncanny’ we will see a politics emerge which is virulently opposed to different kinds of borders and borderlines—ambiguity at the last shown to be a boon: as against the opening images of ‘light’, we finish with the light of a ‘light’ which is itself lightless. The conclusion will implicitly be that the only way to fight power—as evidenced in Zaqtan’s poetry as I read it—is to reduce its effects, however affectively, to absurdity. Bullies are most riled by laughter after all, however deeply embedded and deep in mode that laughter is.

The volume opens with ‘The Dead In The Garden:’

Beneath the light
their dust was coming apart

it had rained at night
all night.

Beneath the ‘light’ the dust that *just is* (or perhaps was) the dead is ‘coming apart.’ With the poem’s ending, we have a subtle double entendre: both the sense of time, night, and the figurative sense of ‘darkness,’ or the evil, whether moral or natural, of ‘death.’ We start, then, with death; but not finality or some sort of transcendent sanctioning or guaranteeing. Even the dead, as dust in the light, come apart. A fact of nature is gathered for other purposes, but only as a fact of nature. Or, opening ‘Additions To The Past:’

The letters are in the widow’s room
in the straw basket
on the bed that is purged from sleep...

Death, early on, fore-grounded again. What exactly *is* 'a bed' 'purged from sleep'? We would, perhaps in Aristotelian mould, normally associate purging with the opposite of sleep, a way of *waking up* to the wounds of the (represented) world. But it is not *us* being purged, which is to say, not human beings. The 'bed' is being purged. As we will see later, in different ways, subject and object are (intentionally) blurred. A way of saying the world, or our wounds, do not quite make sense. And the past, however hurtful, is only compounded ('Additions'), not redeemed by representation: '[p]erhaps because the light / needs to find its way' ('The Song Of The First Patrol'). Whether in time or in place, death means, in effect, that 'the dead / return through the door's opening to steal / the bud vase / the orange sheets / and blankets' ('Additions To The Past'). This last ending of the poem, suggests, again, that death is *not* a purging *for us* (the letters have not been opened yet), not a way of totalizing life into sense, but rather an endless dying of the dead, so to speak. Indeed, that last cadence reminds me of the ending of Larkin's 'Home Is So Sad,' which ends, quietly plaintive with the short gesture of a sentence: 'That vase.'

There is perhaps another double entendre in the title of 'Like One Who Waits For Me', in which, much like the (more recent) Heaney of 'The Blackbird Of Glanmore', the poet, though addressing his father, *is also* becoming his father. The poem opens: 'When I remember him standing / under a soft light / like one who waits for me to remember him,' and in this context the future memorializing is done by both father and son (subject and object) at the same time—his father like/as one who waits for him, and he, 'like' his father, waiting for one who waits for him. Exile, thus, displaced and condensed within the bounds of intimacy. Or, as later, 'Biography In Charcoal' has it:

Then the sound sculpts me until I disappear
in order for those who saw to remember me.

Thus the singer
and the song
are alike.

Or, similarly fudging time and place and person, ending (significantly titled) 'The Absentee's Song:'

you aren't real for us
to love you as we would
other girls, leave for twenty years
so we can love you
and wait for you,
and don't grow older in the fog
lest we die.

It's as if distance, both in time or in place, or as earlier, from person to person, whether alive to alive, alive to dead, or dead to dead—*intransitivity*, in short, however smooth the verse, is the prerequisite of sense or harmony or, just, love. Which is to say, the impossible makes the possible happen; or, in other words, it is only (to refer to Conrad again) at (literally) the end of one's tether that one can begin to tether. In 'The Camp Prostitute'—and we are already alienated by the title characterization—'The intentions of those heading to her houses.... / behind the children / behind the carriage / and the coffin,' are 'pure on their way to intent.' There is arcane laughter in the temporal texture here, as otherwise. The soi-disant 'pure' are being ironised as distinct from the passed 'prostitute.' They are only 'on their way' to 'intent'—the latter being the hallmark of a self. The past is before them, in both a temporal and figurative sense, and won't 'grow older in' that/this 'fog.' The past, to make use of another 'translation', does 'not go gently into that good night.'

Indeed, in 'The Horses' Hymn' we close with:

The horses that released our kin
from the garments of smoke
then tossed their turbans in time

did not wait for us to say

The horses
the horses
the horses!

The real, or just (most nude, rudest) being, is ruptured from the 'I' that thinks or intends onto the page; poetry, however fine, not literally, but as encoded, becomes in a way the doodling pen. To paraphrase the Lacan of Seminar XX: where the horses are (time's fleet, say), we are not, and where 'the horses(!)' are, the horses aren't (ours!) Life, the wound of life, does not quite add up—and perhaps as shown above by the line-breaks among other formal features, it is only the expressive in *poetry* that can both be a writing of sense and an 'un-writing' of sense (*pace* Joudah's introduction and indeed my own above.) The sense that it is time (the horses) or language ('the horses') which are aporetic, is suggested for me in a stanza in 'A Graphic 1994' which I read, however askance, as an image for language's native dispersal of itself and of its putative bearer (an old poststructuralist motif of course):

The glass windows let the night flow into the rooms
where now some other people breathe,
watch the belongings of strangers in silence
and remember their absence.

Maybe the glass windows are representation itself. And representation or poetic expression is thus something which, as shown above, is not only other-sourced and other-directed ('some other people') but also, a bit like Lacan's 'phallus' as 'the signifier of lack,' a re-'sounding' re-presentation of strangers 'in silence' which, to compound it, re-members 'their absence.' This leads me to my penultimate point: the way in which Zaqtan is able to disavow emotional collusion *and thus* (ultimately) political collusion. (This is in fact, the nub of one of Gillian Rose's arguments in her *Mourning Becomes The Law*.) Ending 'Salty Hills,' then:

What shall we do for your sake
when the horn is blown
for our sake?

What shall we do for your sake
when every time we fall asleep
we someone other than you?

The title is redolent with the fate of Lot's wife, someone who 'looked back;' which is to say, someone who reflected. This dialectical maneuver is of the essence. It is of the essence in Rose's late work, for truth, or value to emerge, to eschew bipolar or dichotomous ways of thinking. One should not—*unlike*, say, the film *Schindler's List*—demonize the other; rather to be faithful to your-self, the victim, one should imagine or re-represent the other in its own 'otherness'; a conflicted Nazi, say; a conflicted Zionist, say. This is meaningful in regard to the above poem because the father of Arabs is named there, 'Ismail', that 'other' progeny of Abraham. Indeed, in 'An Enemy Comes Down A Hill' there is almost tenderness in the description of the foe with

His caution when he comes down
like one postponed by a hush,
and by his not being "us"
and not "here"
death begins...

The hale paradox I've intimated is perhaps lived out in the force-field between the discourse of 'his not being us' and the near-frontal rhyme of 'hush' with 'us.'

I conclude with what this last reading direction—the sturdy countenancing of otherness—suggests. It seems to harness all the senses so far read into Zaqtan's poetry, namely, doubleness, anticipatory retrospection, disintegration of selfhood, and moral responsiveness and responsibility. Famously, in his essay on the 'Uncanny' Freud added to the usual sense of the blurring of boundaries—between say, real and unreal, or self and other—the temporal duplicity of *déjà-vu*. Speaking literally, the latter is, though not necessarily cynical, at the least skeptical. It leads to or allows for solipsism. And it is this sense of solipsism with which I would like to end. If Zaqtan's titling and imagery at times uses the voracious image of 'wolves'—and we know that 'man is a wolf to man,' special ground for the skeptic no doubt—then he also, at a *deep meta-phorical level* I'd like to argue, suggests the *pragmatic* or *immediate* solipsism of a 'one-state' solution. As Edward Said often argued, it is 'utopian' from a power-politics perspective: however it is the sole solution which has and might have objective validity or longevity. And perhaps it is only poetry, as language which is 'about' language, in a sense, which can—*impossibly*—re-represent such health-giving tunnel-vision.

So, opening and ending the (archly) titled 'A Picture Of The House In Beit Jala':

He has no return to shut that window,
it isn't entirely clear
whether this is what he must do,
things are no longer clear
since he lost them,
and it seems a hole somewhere within him
has opened up....

he aimlessly walks
and the day's small
purposes are no longer clear.

Or, just two pages later, in 'As If She Were He', a gender-bending which mimics the minuet of narrative and lyric throughout the book, '...he could not discern her face, who kept / remembering him and sending a hazy confession of sins he almost / recognized....' Re-cognised is apt. It suggests the temporal dimension, as well as a spatial and a public/private, subject/object aspect of blurring. Indeed, remembering his mother in 'Where She Used To Stand' he closes with: 'She was telling him of the chill in her room / when she died -' and we have impossible temporality *realized* in verse, a fuzzy utopia which is of the essence. The dying fall of the whole book, the death of a poem titled, 'Everything As It Was' runs:

and the gentle light through the back window
remains in its same old place

Only the jasmine continued its climb, its eyes on the ceiling.

Throughout the first third of the book at the least, for all the paradox I've elicited, 'light' sprawls all over the place. So 'as it was,' it is here at the death, a death which is 'the same old place,' *rather than* some symbolic tragedian's transcending transcendent. And yet, what German Idealism—literally the cusp between Kant and Hegel—would call a 'concrete universal' or a 'purposiveness without a purpose' ends this powerfully evocative book of Zaqtan translations. The above, final image is thoroughly, thoroughly *concrete*. But as if to laugh at his own fore-gone an-archy, as if to laugh at the enemy that is him-self—for Zaqtan and/or us, there are perhaps deeper intents.

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