

Pedagogica Deserta

Memoir of a Fulbright Year in Syria

SAMUEL PICKERING, JR.

“**D**EAR MR & MRS PICKERING please don't get out to day after 5 in the evening.” My wife and I found this note on our door one day in March after we returned from the market. Again rumor predicted trouble in Latakia and we had been warned. We stayed in our apartment that night. This, though, was nothing new; we had not been out on the streets after six o'clock since the end of November.

Each academic year the Council for International Exchange of Scholars sends some five hundred “Fulbrighters” to study and lecture abroad. Most go to Western and Eastern Europe and to, if not the westernized, at least the semi-industrialized, world. A number, however, end up in those countries which drive sensitive men to drink before noon. In 1975 I taught English and American literature at the University of Jordan in Amman. This past year I was headed for Ghana. Early in the summer, though, a coup changed my plans, and in September my wife and I arrived in Damascus.

My post was at Tishreen University in Latakia, six and a half hours from Damascus by bus. A town of slightly over two hundred thousand people on the Mediterranean, Latakia is Syria's most important seaport. Before we left the United States, an official in Washington assured us that the city supported a thriving international community. Since the troubles in Beirut, he said, many people had moved to Latakia. The discrepancy between what was described and what we found was great. No native speakers of English lived in Latakia, or at least we never discovered any. Two months after we arrived we met a French couple and they became our only Western acquaintances. In the fall many Russians were present in the city. Later, after the Moslem Brothers, the terrorist organization, had assassinated a few, they disappeared into their compound, leaving us alone on the streets.

In September our embassy in Damascus tried to be helpful. Unfortu-

❖ SAMUEL PICKERING, JR., teaches English at the University of Connecticut at Storrs. His most recent book, *John Locke and Eighteenth Century English Children's Books*, is soon to be published by the University of Tennessee Press.

nately they knew little about Latakia or Tishreen University. Stretched bloody by violence between religious sects (or "insects," as a student mistakenly but perhaps accurately labeled them in an essay), wedged between the rocks of Soviet imperialism and Iraqi destiny and the hard place of the Israeli position on the question of a Palestinian homeland, and stuck in the morass of Lebanon's internecine warfare, Syria itself is not easy to know. Policy can change like the desert wind, the press is strictly controlled, and rumor becomes the only truth.

Classes were scheduled to begin at Tishreen on September 29, so after a week of waiting in Damascus while the embassy decided if Latakia was calm enough after recent riots, we left on a bus. Finding an apartment was easy. The assistant dean asked how much we had to spend, then told us he knew just the flat for that price. Not surprisingly, we later learned that the owner's wife was the dean's cousin. Assuredly the dean received a commission, but that was all right, for our landlord was a superb man. He was an Alawite general in the army. Because they are only 10 percent of the population, the Alawite Moslems from northern Syria had long been treated as second-class citizens by the dominant Sunni majority, some 70 percent of the population. Like rural southerners in the United States, a disproportionate number of Alawites made careers in the army. When Hafez al-Assad, an Alawite, became president of Syria in a coup in 1970, the Alawite military came into its own, financially and socially. For a time this did not cause much resentment among the Sunnis. Assad brought much-needed stability, and as schools were built in, and electricity spread to, poor isolated villages, the Alawite underclass rose above mere servanthood. Although a Sunni town, Latakia was surrounded by Alawite villages, and many of my students were villagers seizing the first opportunity for higher education they had ever been offered.

During the past three years, however, resentment of Alawites has grown. Business has been bad; military expenditure is awesomely high; Sunni merchants blame Assad for the nation's economic problems and accuse the government and the army of corruption. In hopes of destabilizing the government and bringing an Islamic revolution to Syria, the Moslem Brothers have viciously assassinated the Alawite educated elite, whether or not individual Alawites have had anything to do with the government. The disenchanting Sunni majority has not lent the Brothers active aid. On the other hand, the Sunnis have not condemned them either. Since there are few Moslem Brothers, the Sunnis reason that when the government falls they will be able to brush them aside and establish a government of their own. During the past year, hatreds have boiled. The good are silent, and violence has spiraled as the government's secret police have viciously repressed dissent or potential dissent. At times dur-

ing the year, Aleppo and Hama seemed foreign countries brought back under Damascus's rule only by tank law. "You don't know," a student told me with tears in her eyes. "The people die like rain."

As a general, our landlord was well guarded. Three to seven soldiers lived on the third floor of our building. So when bullets began to fly in Latakia in the spring, we felt almost safe. Growing accustomed to automatic rifles, however, is not easy for a teacher used to nothing more violent than the correspondence column of *PMLA*. Sometimes when we climbed the stairs to our fifth-floor apartment, a new guard would greet us gun in hand. Frequently visitors received escorts up to our flat. Most took it in stride, but some never returned.

Tishreen University consisted of four faculties: engineering, medicine, agriculture, and letters. For years construction of a new university has been under way. Unfortunately the end is not in sight, and the faculty of letters is, and will be for many more years, housed in a secondary school building just beyond the freight entrance to the port. Unlike the United States, where the shortcomings of education are obvious, Third World countries seem to believe that education will provide the answers to all their problems. Consequently governments in such countries, in part because rational dissent is stifled, confuse themselves with the Great First Cause and create universities by decree. The planning comes later—if indeed it ever comes. Tishreen University as it is now was not the gleam that shone in the eye of its creator. In my first day at the faculty of letters, I asked to see the library. The assistant dean showed me an empty room and said, "This is the library, but we don't have any books yet." Since the English department itself was only two years old, the absence of books, although unexpected, did not unduly startle me.

In Jordan, when I was asked what I wanted to teach, I tried to be a good advertisement for my country and, trusting to the fairness of my colleagues, said I would teach what the department needed. As a consequence I, like everybody else, taught one elementary and two upper-class courses each semester. In Syria, when queried about courses, I responded as I had done in Jordan. But there I made a mistake. Dignity is important in Syria, and the accommodating man is often seen as a person of no consequence, to be used and abused at will. First-year classes at Tishreen contained large numbers of students, sometimes two hundred. By the second year many left the university, so that frequently classes had only forty students. In the first semester I taught sixteen hours of courses. Unlike my three Syrian professional colleagues, as I later found out, I had all first-year students. Six hours a week I taught prose and ten hours a week I taught composition. The chairman, a "specialist" in prose and poetry, taught only second-year students; the assistant dean, a specialist in drama, did the same. Most of the first-year courses were taught

by two demonstrators, recent graduates of Syrian universities, and me. This almost graduate-assistant kind of treatment did not make me resentful. To obtain a Ph.D., my Syrian colleagues had to work harder, make compromises, and suffer indignities which I knew I could not imagine. Theirs was a real achievement, one that marked them out in Syrian eyes as not merely different from, but better than, others.

My wife and I were the only Americans the majority of my students had ever met, and our style of living was different from that of the Syrian professors. Instead of buying a car or taking a taxi to the university, I walked across town. Unlike Syrian professors, who dressed carefully and kept themselves immaculate by never erasing a blackboard, I wore corduroy trousers, a corduroy sports jacket, and blue topsiders to class. When I erased my own blackboard and dusted myself with chalk during a two-hour class, students were astonished. Since the lowest workers, porters in the harbor, wore sneakers, my shoes provoked much discussion. Six months later a student told me that he and his friend had been puzzled by my shoes at first. "Every Doctor of Language in the university considered himself a minister," he said, "but you did not. We honor you for your shoes. You come to work." Since I did not appear as a minister, confusion about me and my position lasted throughout the year. In April a student who had attended almost every class but whose English was poor asked me if I were an elementary school teacher in America. Numerous times surprised students told my wife and me, "Americans are so simple and humble."

These students meant to compliment us. Complexity often implied corruption or favoritism. Our accessibility or simplicity or democracy was thought admirable. In contrast to the typical Syrian faculty member, I must have appeared as a man who carried himself in a manner unbecoming his position. By doing so I cut the ground from under that faculty member's hard-won achievement and obliquely undermined the hierarchical structure of university life. No wonder first-year courses were loaded on me and I was never consulted about my timetable. I only began a slow burn, however, when I learned that while I taught six days a week, my fellow professors were teaching four.

Although I began to teach on September 29, the chairman did not appear until two and a half weeks later. The third full-time Ph.D. member of the department did not arrive until November. The random appearance of the faculty members was paralleled by the students' attendance. Tishreen was an open university. Many students never attended classes because they held jobs, quite a few teaching in remote villages. Given eight years to pass the required courses, other students pursued a relaxed course of study. As in secondary schools, university education depended primarily upon rote learning. Class discussions, particularly

those discussions which raised ideas different from the professor's, were harshly discouraged. At the end of term, professors' lecture notes were mimeographed and sold for seventy-five cents a course. If a student memorized these, he had a good chance of passing. To some extent the notes took the place of assigned texts. The university did not have a bookstore; often local booksellers were not informed what texts were needed for courses until it was too late to order them. As a result, many students never had books, and one member of the department even suggested that books were an unnecessary expense. He proposed that all professors have their notes printed before the lectures started. That way, he explained, students would not have to buy books like *The Old Man and the Sea* or *The Penguin Book of English Verse*.

With new students appearing even on the last day of class, December 24, teaching was a tedious matter of repetition, careful enunciation, and slow speech. Although all my students were majoring in English, and this meant taking eight to ten courses in English a year, very few could actually speak much English. In most cases, secondary schools provided them with little background. Of the approximately two hundred and fifty people who taught English in the Latakia school province, fewer than a third were full-time teachers, and these taught other subjects as well. The rest were part-timers. Most of these part-timers were my students, usually poor boys and girls who knew almost no English and could not write a simple sentence.

Long and narrow, with one hundred and fifty students clustered on benches, my classroom was at the front of the building. Tractor trailers loaded with weapons from the Soviet Union or consumer goods from China thundered by at two-minute intervals. Teaching was impossible while a truck passed. Eventually I obtained a microphone. Unfortunately it was stuck together more with hope than tape and was usually broken. When it was repaired, either I couldn't use it because of static in the system or the electricity was off. As a result, I lectured by cupping my hands in front of my mouth and shouting. Throat sprays and pills quickly became more necessary to my teaching than paper and pencils.

The students themselves were a diverse group of boys and girls—rich and poor, religious and nonreligious, young and old. For many it was the first time they had attended class with members of the opposite sex. English was extremely popular; French was taught, but only fifty or sixty students each year majored in French in comparison to the three hundred and fifty or four hundred who majored in English. Enrollment numbers were never exact; faculty members never received a roll, and the president himself was not sure how many students were in the university.

All my students dreamed of going to America. Despite Syria's close military ties with the Soviet Union, Russian was not taught because stu-

dents simply refused to study it. If language is the greatest propaganda instrument in the world, then the West has won massive propaganda victories in the Middle East. Indeed, America's cultural hegemony over Syria is quite amazing. Although our trade with Syria is not large and ignorance of America is widespread, the Syrians equate America with modernity. Most students romanticize life in the United States as a paradise golden with coin and opportunity. Although Syrian secondary schools drum in the failings of America and capitalism, the message usually doesn't take—except, perhaps, with the Palestinians, who as a group are more sophisticated and thoughtful than others. True, much is made of our racial problems. On several occasions—and this must appear somewhere in a secondary school textbook—students asked me if it was true that a black man had to bow down whenever he met a white man on the street. Questions about race, however, seemed to come more from curiosity than from belief in racial equality. Students greeted interracial marriages with disgust, and blacks, I was told, had smaller brains than whites.

The abilities of first-year students varied, but at the beginning of the year most were at a second-grade level in English. They could not speak or write a sentence, and in first-term composition I taught primarily simple and compound sentences. During the second term I made students write three- to five-hundred-word essays, and I read and marked more than eighteen hundred of these. Much improvement was made, but I am certain that this coming year the deluge of rote learning will wash away all their experience in my classes.

The students were my joy. We had no adult friends aside from our landlord and his wife, neither of whom spoke English; the French couple; random American visitors; and one teacher who lived an hour and a half away. The faculty at Tishreen was not sophisticated enough to realize that the only Americans in Latakia were just a teacher and his wife. Two members of the faculty told us they had been warned to avoid us because we might be CIA. When the Cultural Affairs Officer from the embassy delivered our air freight, he visited the assistant dean. As soon as he left, the dean asked me if he was a spy. From that date in early October until mid-February, the assistant dean avoided me and we did not speak.

I soon had a huge following among the students and, like a bitch in heat, was not always sure I enjoyed it. After classes every day, students walked uptown with me to talk and practice their English. In the mornings they would wait to catch me on the way to the university. My wife and I rarely went shopping without running into students. During the break between terms we went to Jordan and Egypt. Unable to find us, students left notes at the stores we frequented. When we returned in

February, a bookseller gave me the following letter: "I havn't ability to express about my feelings. is it correct that a man need to see his brother again? if you have, or if you would like. When you catch this letter, said to my friend, who is the owner of library. when I can see you Because I need to see you. I am eager to see you. Your effectionate friend."

Many students invited us to their villages, and the days we spent visiting were the happiest and also the most tiring—because no one spoke English well—that we spent in Syria. At the beginning of the year when they could not speak English, students communicated by notes which they labored over like sculptors. A girl who had worked on her simple sentences invited us to her village, writing: "I live in a Beutiful town. It is called Jable. I want you to visit it with your waif. In jable my family will BE happy when you and your waif visits us. my mother also want me to calld us. Then if you came Y feel too happy. I writ theses composition Becaus Y respect you. And Y admir very much of your waif. It is a gentil and Beautiful woman. what you said, yes, or no. A simple sentences."

Early in the year a teacher warned me that professors did not talk to students outside the classroom or office. I paid no attention to the warning and must have been a disturbing influence. Vague cultural assumptions support the Fulbright scholar program. Generally it is assumed that academic exchanges build bridges between peoples and cultures and, in the case of American grantees, broaden their horizons. What the Council for International Exchange of Scholars does not say, but what the State Department correctly assumes, is that the Fulbright program is a propaganda effort. In Syria the State Department seems interested in establishing links with, and presenting a favorable picture of, America to people who have or will have influence. Emphasis is not on the masses but on the elite, and with Syrian-American relations at an ebb, the cultural branch of the embassy avoids disturbing the sensibilities of those who have power. In contrast, the Fulbright program, as it developed in my case, was educationally revolutionary. American simplicity and democracy go counter to the Syrian educational system. By encouraging class discussion and original thought, and by treating the students seriously, I implicitly criticized the methods of other professors. But fresh educational air is not necessarily pleasant educational air, and instead of attracting the educational elites, I put them off. Although the nation is ostensibly socialist, people in Syria are not equal. Money and position shape castes, and tribal, village, and religious ties often determine success in the university and outside it. As propaganda I think my year was successful, but perhaps not in the way it was intended to be. Since returning to the United States I have received several letters from students. These students are comparatively poor and will never become

cabinet ministers or Ph.D.'s, but will instead be housewives and village schoolmasters. None will ever be singled out for cultivation by our State Department. Perhaps the Fulbright program, instead of building cultural bridges with the people who politically or educationally matter in the Third World, prevents such bridges from being built.

Syria exhausted me emotionally. Syrian students, with their society in transition from a conservative rural Moslem culture to a modified urban Western culture, face confusing problems. Rarely do they express their confusion or frustration publicly because they believe it will be interpreted as political disenchantment and they themselves will disappear. In private, they ask for personal advice and voice their disgust with the state of the nation. Private revenge, although discouraged by sophisticated urbanites, still exists in villages. One boy, for example, after recounting a harsh tale to me, asked if I thought he should kill the villain of the piece. Some people in his village thought he should, he said, but he wondered what a Westerner would do.

For women, Western feminist concerns about equal job opportunity are beside the point. In Syria women are not equal to men. The birth of a girl is often an occasion for unhappiness rather than celebration. "I was the second girl in my family," a student wrote; "my father went out for three days when I was born in spite of he already had a son." Because I was the representative of a progressive society, students frequently believed that I could solve problems which involved a conflict between conservative family or community traditions and modern individualism. Traditionally, a girl's father chose her husband for her. "But the great wish is to meet my love and to live with him forever," a girl wrote in an essay; "I pray for him. And I implore God to gather us one day. I Love person sinc when my age was six years. . . . Each of can't live without the other. But the great problem is my family. They did not agree to marry him . . . and there is another problem takes place now. A lawer came to my hous. And he became friend of my family. He want to engage me. All my family agree with him. But I refuse. Because I want to marry my childhood friend whom I love. I hate that Lawer. I wish I did not see him. But he always comes to our house. This is my problem. So I ask professor pickering to advice me. But not at the class. And God bless you."

Until they came to know me, I was a cartoon figure to many students. Their perception of me, like the Third World's perception of America and Americans, had in great part been shaped by television advertising, pop music, and B-grade films. If Westerners are not thought immoral, they are certainly believed to be enlightened, and this led to embarrassing moments. Having received many invitations, I suspected nothing when a female student invited me to a cake party after class one Thurs-

day in the school cafeteria. When Thursday afternoon arrived, the girl told me that the authorities would not let her have the party at school; consequently, she had changed its location and said her cousin would drive us there. A white Mercedes picked us up at the front gate. As we roared through Latakia at what seemed fifty miles an hour, the girl added that sadly none of her friends had been able to come to the party, and she hoped I would understand. Perspiration and understanding broke out simultaneously. Resembling a set from an Egyptian film, the apartment was furnished in "Louis Farouk," gaudy and expensive gold and silver. Between two sofas in the living room was a low table. On it were several kinds of luncheon meats, trays of nuts, assorted cheeses, oranges, apples, lemons, chocolates, two types of imported beer, a bottle of Johnnie Walker, two bowls of pink and white carnations, and a three-layered cake covered with whipped cream. When I sat on a couch, the girl sat next to me. The cousin started to sit opposite, but then he looked at his watch, said he had an important appointment, apologized, and left.

When I am nervous, I talk. For an hour I talked incessantly while the girl stared into my eyes. When I slowly slid to the end of the couch, she followed, serving me cake and urging me to drink. When half my backside hung over the edge of the couch and I was in danger of falling on the floor and undergoing I knew not what, I stood up and asked to see the apartment. Politely I complimented the bathroom; my hostess responded by turning on the water and asking if I would like a bath. An imitation tiger-skin blanket covered the double bed in the bedroom. If ever I wanted, she said, I could spend the night there. This was Arab hospitality carried to an extreme. Finally, after I had inspected all the rooms, I felt unable to face the couch again. I thanked my hostess and cut and ran—not, however, without presents for my wife: the carnations and the remains of the cake.

Although it may seem obvious, I was never certain what the girl wanted. Rich and living alone—something unique among the students—I suspect she may have fallen prey to the cinematic depiction of Westerners. Maybe she simply wanted a high grade. Perhaps, however, this was an attempt to compromise me. As the only Americans in Latakia, my wife and I suffered from a kind of paranoia: "minority-itis." People stared at us wherever we went and we could not fade into a crowd. By December we began to think we were watched. Our mail had been routinely opened; often letters did not arrive, and occasionally odd things happened. When my wife's parents opened one of her letters, they found a snapshot inside. They assumed it was our landlord's family. It wasn't; the people were strangers. The person reading the mail probably had several letters open on the desk, and when he resealed them he mistakenly put the picture into my wife's letter.

According to rumor, there were nineteen secret police organizations in Syria. I knew of five in Latakia, two having their local headquarters on streets immediately behind our apartment building. In the spring, an acquaintance who had a friend in one branch of the secret police obtained copies of reports on me. In all university classes there were spies—students paid to report on professors to branches of the secret police. Although this process did not bother me, because I was a foreigner and able to leave the country, it frightened and inhibited Syrian teachers. Only one aspect of the reports about me was interesting. It was alleged that I favored girls in my classes. Supposedly I cultivated their friendship, not for “sexual relations,” but because I wanted to discuss politics with them. While at the “party” in the girl’s apartment, I had asked her many questions about the problems in Latakia in order to keep us talking. Showing little interest in sex, I must have shown an immoderate concern about politics. Perhaps she was the source of the reports. Most probably she was not, but it is rather nice to think she might have been.

A student whose parents forced her to attend university described in an essay her dislike of studying. “I always,” she wrote, “asked our God to rest me from this calamity. I want to sleep without any think of the studies.” This Fulbright lecturer in a Third World country seldom thought of studies. Grading compositions at home took much time, but class preparations were minimal. Day after day I repeated lessons in composition, trying to teach my students basic grammar rules and how to write simple and compound sentences. In prose I taught *The Old Man and the Sea* and the first forty pages of George Orwell’s *Coming Up for Air*, this latter being a terrible choice for first-year students whose reading was frequently at the primer level. In composition I spent most of my time explaining idioms and defining simple words like green or blue, living room or dining room. Rarely was I able to venture very far into thematic topics; when I did, two-thirds of the class was lost. Similarly, my colleagues and I never discussed literature. The university and Syria itself did not provide the kind of atmosphere in which serious thought could flourish. Good books in English could not be bought in Latakia, and since I was not an Arabist the possibility of research did not exist. Consequently every night I went to sleep as my student wished, “without any think of the studies.”

For the Fulbrighter in Syria and perhaps in the Third World in general, what happens outside class influences the academic experience more than what happens in class. During the first weeks, thoughts abdominal replace thoughts intellectual; the anatomy changes and one becomes more bowel and less brain. Once things internal are acclimated, however, then external events and conditions determine the quality of

the experience. Although my wife and I saw much of Syria, and although many nights in Latakia were filled with the sound of music—the *1812 Overture* with mortar and kalishnikov effects—we were usually bored. The cinemas showed either broad Egyptian comedies or gory Italian and American gangster films. There was only one good restaurant in town, and it was frequently closed because of the troubles. To survive we bought a radio, listened to the BBC's Middle East service, and planned vacations. We had a television set, and once a week saw "The Virginian." Sometimes "Switch" appeared. Those were evenings to be savored.

When the Iranians first took the embassy personnel in Tehran hostage, and the State Department conducted a token evacuation of Americans from eleven Moslem countries, our feelings of isolation and vulnerability grew. We were out on a limb far from Damascus and communication was difficult. Our landlord had a telephone, but the link between Latakia and Damascus was often disrupted. In class, students who were nervous because I might leave Syria assured me that my wife and I had nothing to fear. "We Moslems love you," students said, and promised to take us to their villages if danger developed. One acquaintance, whose brother-in-law was a general, declared he would transport us to his village in a tank if necessary. The first time I heard such things, they made me more comfortable. But after I had been reassured some forty times, nagging worries and feelings of vulnerability began to grow. Where there was so much smoke, or concern, there must be a little flame.

The only member of the English department whom I considered a friend indirectly fanned our worries. A Syrian and a brilliant student, he had completed his Ph.D. in Britain, published essays in good academic journals, and returned to Syria to teach. Apolitical and perhaps the most honest man I have ever met—and in Syria to be completely honest is practically impossible, and even dangerous—he suffered from the accidental disability of being an Alawite. He had taught at the University of Damascus but had left, among other reasons, because he feared for his life. Now as assassinations spread to Latakia—two streets behind our apartment a man was murdered—my friend became convinced that an attempt would be made on his life. Although he lived an hour and a half from Latakia, he spent two nights a week in the city. In the afternoons he would visit and confide his fears to us. His was the only literate conversation we enjoyed in English, but since his fears were all-consuming, our subject matter was limited. In our isolation—feeling under siege because of Iran, hearing America violently attacked on television as President Assad tried to blame Syria's internal troubles on external forces, and talking with our friend about little except his fears—we began to get the wind up. With no one to help us put our foolish anxieties into reasonable

perspective, we retreated more into our apartment and marked off on the calendar the days until term break. Eventually, the embassy called us to Damascus to inform us about the state of affairs in Syria and Iran and to reassure us, but it is in the nature of a diplomat's existence, in Syria at least, that form and circumstance separate him from what is happening in the country. He reads scores of informative reports, but these are no substitute for being able to move about freely. Knowing that we felt isolated, the ambassador suggested that we move to the University of Damascus or the University of Aleppo. Aleppo, he said, was a particularly appealing city. Because I felt responsible for my students at Tishreen and because of a perhaps adolescent dislike of appearing a quitter, we remained in Latakia. This was fortunate; two months later disturbances shattered Aleppo's appeal, and the university, to all intents and purposes, closed for the year.

Like scholars, diplomats depend upon certain sources for their knowledge. Aside from us, the embassy had no sources in Latakia, and after we returned there, the embassy's assurances, which had sounded so good in Damascus, evaporated like rain on a hot sidewalk. On those days which my frightened colleague spent in Latakia he went to the university by different means and different ways. By mid-December I too varied my route to the university. The end of term brought great relief. Almost immediately my wife and I left for a month in Jordan and Egypt, where we would not stand out but would be just two more nondescript Westerners. There we could escape the shackling authentic experience and enjoy the comfortable tourist experience.

We returned to Latakia in late January, relaxed and ready for whatever came our way. I graded five hundred exams, and when classes began ten days late, on February 19, I was eager to start. I was also pleased because I had demanded and gotten a second-year course: Shakespeare. The chairman, a man with vast resources of low cunning, invited us to his home for tea and urged me to teach nineteen hours—prose, composition, and Shakespeare. I had learned my lesson for the first term and was not accommodating; composition and Shakespeare were enough. Once classes started, the term quickly became chaotic.

Although Syria suffers from a dearth of trained teachers, no exemptions—legal ones—are made for military service. University professors must serve like everyone else. Frequently, this is done after they finish their graduate education and are teaching at a university. Usually after they complete their basic training, they are seconded back to the university where they teach as second lieutenants, distinguishable from civilians only in that they receive military pay instead of the much higher university pay. Basic training begins in the fall and spring, not in the summer, so that universities are often left with half-taught courses on

their hands. In March my friend who had been frightened for his life left the university to begin his military training. At the same time, the chairman, who was also liable for military service, came down with an attack of diabetes and disappeared to Damascus for two or three weeks. In April one of our two demonstrators left Syria on an AID fellowship to work for his Ph.D. in the United States. The only persons left to teach courses were the assistant dean (recently demoted to an ordinary teacher), the second demonstrator, and I. Courses were piled on the demonstrator, and the assistant dean's wife taught part-time. The department muddled through the term. Many courses, however, went untaught for long periods and the students suffered.

Even more inhibiting to the students' progress than the absence of professors was the state of the nation. In February violence in Syria grew geometrically. By the end of the month Aleppo was a little Beirut, and the Fulbright lecturer at Aleppo University had left the country. Latakia was not so violent. Assassinations occasionally occurred in the daytime, but most trouble happened at night. Dynamite bombs exploded practically every evening. Counting them became exciting and addictive; in May, when a temporary calm descended, life seemed less intense and we were bored. Because they did not want to be on the streets at dusk, students avoided classes that met after four o'clock. My colleagues received notes and telephone calls threatening their lives. My teaching timetable changed radically. No one consulted me; I learned about the changes only when I went to class at the wrong time. Eventually a reason for the changing timetable became apparent as my morning classes became afternoon classes. A foreigner was safer on the streets late in the afternoon than was a Syrian professor. Guards armed with tommy guns had guarded the faculty of letters twenty-four hours a day throughout the year. Now there were more guards. And on some days when there had been much trouble the night before, guards seemed to outnumber students.

Gun battles began to occur at night between the Moslem Brothers and their sympathizers and the secret police. In Aleppo and elsewhere, Russians were murdered. This caused us some worry because many Latakians who had never seen Americans assumed we were Russians. People often said "Russians" in a derogatory tone when we passed them on the street. "My God, sir, my God," a nervous girl burst out in class, "you look so like a Russian." Acquaintances became worried, and one of them took matters into his own hands. Meeting us in town, he informed us he had done us a favor. He said he had discovered that many people thought we were Russians. To prevent a mistake, he said, he had spread the word to people who in turn would inform those behind the violence that we were not Russians but Americans. For such a favor I was not

grateful. Nobody gets things right in Syria; it is better for one to lie low and say nothing than to have attention called to one.

The troubles came to a head in March. Elite commandos appeared in Latakia, and together with the secret police they attempted to crush the terrorists. From the balcony of our apartment I watched gun battles. For two weeks life in the university slowed almost to a halt. Students stayed away from class. Out of one hundred and fifty students in a class, two or three who lived nearby might show up. Walking to school was nerve-racking yet intoxicating. From behind sandbags, soldiers guarded street corners; often streets were completely empty or sealed off. In its disregard for truth, rumor waxed poetic. Although the violence subsided—it never died out—classes did not return to normal. It would have been abnormal if they had. Alawite students from the villages were frightened and in some cases embittered. Sunnis became more opposed to the government while Christians damning both sects withdrew into their own community. The only assurance that the future seemed to hold was that someday there would be more and worse violence.

During the period of the worst troubles, I taught *Hamlet* to those members of my second-year class who attended. The parallels between Hamlet's rotten Denmark and Assad's Syria were marked. Corruption from the head of state infected the nation. Many of the people resembled Hamlets or Rosencranzes and Guildensterns. Either, like Hamlet, they found their world and responsibilities bewildering, or like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern they were little spokes joined to a big wheel which if it broke would destroy them. Obliquely I drew comparisons between Denmark and Syria. Some understood and were knowingly silent; others studiously and carefully avoided understanding. The majority were not linguistically good enough to move beyond language to theme. If, however, most of my students did not see, or refused to acknowledge, the contemporary significance of *Hamlet*, I could not avoid it. During the first term I faced no important academic questions. Although I was teaching at a lower level than I had taught before, I knew that what I was doing was useful. English was the language of science, medicine, business, and diplomacy. Like a technician I was teaching a skill my students could use. In contrast, *Hamlet* forced me to confront the relevancy of literature to life, a subject which I had always avoided in the United States because it seemed beside the point. Was my teaching *Hamlet*, which universalized and indirectly examined the problems Syrians faced, one of the most meaningful things I had ever done in a classroom? Or was teaching literature and discussing Hamlet's inaction while people were dying on the streets one of the most meaningless things I ever did? I never decided.

Throughout the turmoil, my relationship with the students was constant. On Easter I received several cards. My Moslem students knew that

it was an occasion for a Christian feast, but most were not sure which one. One card read, "Merry Christmas to My Sincerely Teacher." When my wife became ill in late April, eight Moslem girls, all wrapped in scarves and long coats, came to our apartment with armfuls of flowers. On the last day of class, students asked me to autograph their books. There were tears, reluctant farewells, and assertions of lasting friendship. The year had been difficult; I made almost no adult friends. I had done no research. The seven hundred examinations I graded in July convinced me that half my students would never complete their studies and the bright dreams and hopes they shared with me would wither. No Fulbright lecturer would follow me to Latakia and most of what I had accomplished with even my best students would be swiftly erased.

I went to Syria when my professional career seemed at a crossroads. A university press had accepted my second book. My articles appeared in the better literary quarterlies, and journals were beginning to write me soliciting essays. When I was in Syria, my professional work had to be shunted aside; unseized opportunities passed on to other people. Was the year worth it? I am not sure, but when I left, a student presented a poem she had written to me. Although it was embarrassingly fulsome, its sentiment touched me and almost made me glad I had spent the year in Syria. "Like the effect of sunset," she wrote, "Like the gone of the moon, / Like shadwos spreading in space, / Like storms which destroy everything / Like all these things your leaving will be. / Your leaving will fill our hearts with sadness and dullness. / Your leaving will take the dynamic thing from our life. / Maybe my words is very big for the situation, / But that is really what I feel and the truth. / So you have the right by getting back home again, / But we havn't the right to possess whom we loved. / God bless you, our wonderful teacher. / God help you with your coming life. / God take care of you and your wife fore ever. / I want of you just to remember that there are / Students loves you and think of you forever."