

Reviews

Mahmoud Darwish, *Why Did You Leave the Horse Alone?*, translated by Jeffrey Sacks (Archipelago Books, Consortium Book Sales and Distribution, New York, 2006), 197 pp.

The original Arabic of this bilingual collection of Mahmoud Darwish's poems was published in 1995. Among his twenty books of poetry that he has published so far, this one in particular reads like a single continuous poem, although the book is divided into an introductory poem followed by six separate parts of varying lengths, each of which has its own poems. The continuity arises from the fact that the whole collection represents a sort of autobiography of Mahmoud Darwish (born in al-Birweh in 1942), even as it is at the same time a painful record of the collective memory of the Palestinian people. Not that his other collections are less intimately personal or less hauntingly painful, but the poetry here flows from one poem into the next with an ease that is almost magical because of its spell-binding use of elegant language, passionate imagery, evocative thoughts and profound feeling for the homeland, Palestine, and for its people's affliction after the *nakba* of 1948.

The style is not narrative, nor is its manner analytical. The poetry here is simply a cry of the human soul faced with a people's tragedy which the world has not sympathetically recognized or even sufficiently fathomed. It succeeds in drawing a Palestinian national epic that will be indelible in the memories of the Palestinian victims of the 1948 catastrophe for generations to come and in the consciences of all those who have perpetrated it or stood by as silent witnesses of it and its abiding consequences.

In the highly charged political feelings that his poetry intimates, Mahmoud Darwish avoids explicit language and does not mention specific dates, events, places or actors in his personal life. He uses allusions and figurative language in order to effectively reach the emotional and spiritual depths of his readers when expressing himself. The question in this book's title, for example, is what six-year-old Mahmoud Darwish asked his father when he and his family were fleeing their village in Galilee on foot and going northward to take refuge in Lebanon across the border, as the Zionist forces were relentlessly advancing on Arab lands in Palestine in 1948 to form the state of Israel. "Why did you leave the horse alone?," he asked. His father answered:

To keep the house company, my son.

Houses die when their inhabitants are gone... (p. 30).

As is now known, the family returned to their beloved home in the Galilee clandestinely a year later, and Mahmoud Darwish grew up in Israel to become the poetic voice of his defeated and uprooted people, recount the injustices to which they have been subjected and keep alive their identity and their rootedness in Palestine and in Arab traditions and culture. Only in 1971 did he leave his homeland to flee from the Israeli restrictions on his public life and, after brief stays in other countries, he returned to another section of his homeland, the rump of Palestine called the West Bank, and now lives in Ramallah where he continues his mission.

Mahmoud Darwish's poems abound with cultural, historical and literary allusions as they paint with lyrical imagery the tragedy of modern Palestinians. His poem "From the Byzantine Odes of Abu Firas al-Hamdani" (pp. 114–117) recalls the plaintive odes of al-Hamdani (d. 968 A.D.) as a four-year captive of the Byzantines. These were the odes al-Hamdani sent to his cousin Sayf al-Dawla who ruled Aleppo, in which he appealed to him to redeem him from his captors. Mahmoud Darwish's allusive use of them is meant to refer to his own experience of Israeli prisons, to his life in Israel as a big prison and to his continuous poetic appeal to Arab cousin countries to redeem Palestine. Other allusions can be read in his poem "Bertolt Brecht's Testimony before a Military Court (1967)" (pp. 174–179), obliquely referring to situations in Mahmoud Darwish's life; in "A Non-linguistic Dispute with Imru' al-Qays" (pp. 180–184); and in other poems.

While the physical homeland and its people are at the heart of Mahmoud Darwish's poetry, the Arabic language as a symbol of Arab culture and the vehicle of its expression over the centuries holds an equally dear place in his heart. He is simply in love with the Arabic language and clearly exults in its use as it pliantly allows him to fashion his ideas and warmly permits him to live in it as an extension homeland. It is unfortunate to mention here that, on page 132 of this collection, translator Jeffery Sacks confuses the Arabic noun *'asa* (stick, rod, wand) with the Arabic verb *'asâ* (to disobey) and translates Mahmoud Darwish as saying: "This is my language and my miracle. My magic disobeys." The translation should rather read: "This is my language and my miracle. My magic wand." For the Arabic language in Mahmoud Darwish's hand is indeed a magic wand with which he transforms words into new images and novel ideas that become co-citizens of his virtual homeland of the free. In his "non-linguistic dispute" with Imru' al-Qays, he says to him (p. 184), objecting to those who have demeaned the language by using worn-out vocabulary describing freedom that didn't find its bread, "A bread/ without the salt of freedom":

... So go the way of
Caesar, behind the smoke that towers over
time, black. Go the way of

Caesar, alone, alone, alone
and leave us, here, your language!

Mahmoud Darwish here confirms that he accepts to live with the Arabic language, but only if it remains vibrant and vivid and ever-alive with notions of freedom and serves the continuing basic and indispensable requirements of life, only if it remains a bread *with* “the salt of freedom.” Only in this manner does the Arabic language remain his homeland; and his duty as a poet is to preserve it as such and to keep it alive and flourishing so that it can forever express his and his nation’s identity and continuity. In “Poetic Arrangements” (pp. 108–112), he says:

The poem is what lies between a between. It is able
to illuminate the night with the breasts of a young woman
It is able to illuminate, with an apple, two bodies
It is able to restore,
with the cry of a gardenia, a homeland!

“One’s land is inherited as one’s language,” Mahmoud Darwish said repeatedly in a 1989 long poem entitled *Ma’sat al-Narjis was Malhat al-Fidda* (The Tragedy of Narcissus and the Comedy of Silver). There can be no separation between Palestine and the Palestinians: their land and their Arab identity are forever indivisible.

In his several books of essays, Mahmoud Darwish has been more explicit than in his poetry in denouncing Israeli policies with regard to the Palestinians. But he has always maintained that mutual understanding between the Palestinians and the Israelis is possible, envisioning a time when the two nations can live in peace on the same land on the basis of reciprocal acknowledgement and recognition.

His poetry continues to project this hope of peace but, as poetry, it emphasizes the inner feelings of the Palestinians as it expresses his own and speaks to the hearts of his readers. By reading Mahmoud Darwish’s poetry, Israelis and other people can better understand the Palestinians as human beings deprived for decades now of many human rights, and more can be learned from reading his poetry about how they feel. Jeffrey Sacks is to be thanked for making available this collection of Mahmoud Darwish’s poetry to readers of English in a felicitous translation. His timely work serves not only the international expansion of literary knowledge, but also the very cause of world peace.

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