

Mahmoud Darwish 1941–2008

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The Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish died on Saturday 9 August 2008 of complications following heart surgery in Houston, Texas. News of his death quickly appeared on the front pages of all major newspapers in the Middle East. BBC World broadcast a substantial television news item and obituary on the weekend of his death, as did other major European television networks. Extensive international television coverage was provided by Al Jazeera on its many different language channels, as well as on social network sites such as YouTube. *Le Monde* carried a substantial obituary and eulogy by Pierre Assouline on the day of Darwish's death, on its 'la république des livres' blog. A lengthy obituary was quickly published in *The New York Times* (Monday 11 August), whose pages had often carried reports on the poet's activities and publications since 1978. *The Guardian* (Monday 11 August) published a detailed tribute by Peter Clark, the distinguished Arabist and editor; others to print substantial and timely accounts included *Haaretz* in Israel, and in the U.S.A. the *Los Angeles Times* and *The Boston Globe* among others (all on 10 August); *The Australian*, *The Independent*, and the *Seattle Times* published tributes on 11 August, as did *The Times* (14 August), and the *Economist* (21 August). The internet was flooded with emotional tributes, of which the South African activist Breyten Breytenbach's in *Pambazuka News* was typical ('Mahmoud is gone. The exile is over.'). John Lundberg, the Huffington Post blogger, wrote a sober piece on August 24th and attracted many comments; he noted that the great Egyptian novelist Ahdaf Soueif had said Darwish was the last poet who could fill a football stadium for a poetry reading.¹ This was literally true: 25,000 people filled a stadium in Beirut early in 2008 to listen to him; many more attended his funeral ceremonies in Amman and Ramallah. On August 14, *The Sydney Morning Herald* reported at length on his funeral in Ramallah ('Tens of thousands mourn Palestinian poet Darwish'). *Banipal*, the English language journal of contemporary Arab literature, published a special edition commemorating Darwish;² the many contributors included the Iraqi poet Saadi Yousef, Denys Johnson Davies the translator (for example of the Egyptian Nobel Prize-winning novelist Naguib Mahfouz), Nobel Prize winner Wole Soyinka, the former American Poet Laureate Mark Strand, the Spanish poet Clara Janès (sometimes known as Clara Janès Nadal), and the celebrated Bahraini poet Qassim Haddad.

¹ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/john-lundberg/why-you-should-read-mahmo_b_120470.html

² *Banipal – Magazine of Modern Arab Literature* No33, Autumn/Winter 2008.

In New Zealand, to the best of my knowledge, the only media reference to Mahmoud Darwish came about more or less in passing, towards the end of a somewhat uncharacteristic piece of junket journalism by Finlay Macdonald ('Book fest among the dunes') in the *Sunday Star Times*. Courtesy of Emirate Airlines, Finlay had attended a writers' festival in Dubai in March 2009, more than six months after Darwish's death, at which some tribute readings by six English poets in memory of the Palestinian poet took place. 'As we file out into the soft Dubai evening,' Finlay observed in closing, 'even the shopping mall, with its fake canal and faux Venetian bridges, looks almost authentic.'³ So that's all it takes.

Seldom can New Zealand have seemed more utterly disconnected from an event whose significance, on the evidence of my post death-notice browsing last August, registered almost everywhere else in the literate world within reach of contemporary news media. In New Zealand, I found a poem by David Howard, *A Mother's Story (for Mahmoud Darwish)* on the NZEPC website⁴ – but that was it. The Otago Daily Times website responded to my search with the name of an Egyptian hospital director, Emad Darwish, who had presided over the birth of septuplets to Ghazala Khamis and her husband Farag Mohammed Ali. At 27 August 2008, this Associated Press item plucked from syndication purgatory was only three days behind the Huffington Post, but in any case the ODT editorial team overseeing the selection of essential Middle Eastern news for its Otago readership had found a cheap fertility drug story more compelling – or 'authentic' – than the 'tens of thousands' of black-clad mourners holding aloft portraits of Mahmoud Darwish in Ramallah, whose streets had been draped with 5,000 flags printed with images of the poet and one word in Arabic: 'Farewell'.

It's not just because I have an interest in Mahmoud Darwish that I find this distressing and indeed shameful. Nor do I expect the literary culture in which I participate here in New Zealand to behave towards poetry as its audiences do in Arab cultures, or within Bengali Baul culture, for example. Those audiences are huge and poetry is central to the social, political and cultural lives of millions of people. We esteem poetry differently, and on a different scale; for us, its significance as public discourse is slight; nor are we entirely comfortable when it becomes manifestly 'popular' through song, slogan, or political rhetoric, rather than merely 'accessible' to a minority readership. What is therefore distressing in the first instance is that we seemed, on the occasion of Darwish's death, to measure his significance by our own glum standards and find it minor as well as foreign. And not just foreign, perhaps (though now I am moving beyond the evidence), but alarming: it was Darwish, after all, who wrote Yasser Arafat's famous 1974 speech to the United Nations ('Today I have come bearing a freedom fighter's gun and an olive branch.'). How much more palatable a story about a

³ Finlay Macdonald, 'Book fest among the dunes', *Sunday Star Times*, 15 March 2009.

⁴ <http://www.nzepc.auckland.ac.nz/>

poor, benighted Egyptian fellaheen family so desperate for a male child that the mother of three daughters resorted to fertility drugs and consequently became newsworthy in Otago as the bearer of septuplets; than one about a poet at once a member of an international cadre of Arab intellectuals including Edward Said, and the spokesman for an impoverished Palestinian diaspora whose refugees learned his poems by heart from radio broadcasts.

Darwish's significance as the voice of a dispossessed people – his political and rhetorical importance, if you like – was indeed major, but not to the exclusion of other modalities in his poetry. Indeed, in 1971 there was an outcry among Palestinians when it became known that the poet, with the intention of going to study in Moscow, had fled Haifa where he was under house arrest and sought sanctuary in Cairo under the protection of the newspaper *Al-Ahram*. This was regarded in some quarters, and especially among the poor of the refugee camps, as a desertion or betrayal: how could Darwish articulate the plight of Palestinians suffering exile in refugee camps in Jordan and Lebanon, or the 'internal exile' of life in occupied territories or in Israel, when he was living the life of a metropolitan intellectual without restriction on his movements? Darwish's poetry did continue to be significant as the voice of Palestinian resistance, but he himself was clear about his right to extend its reach; while never repudiating his political role, he made it clear that he would not be confined by it.

Nor does his poetry contain a marked divide between those popular outcries of resistance and the metaphysical poems, love poems and poems about history that he also wrote. One of the clear signs of the continuum within which he wrote was that its cultural extent and continuities were recognised by a sophisticated metropolitan elite as well as by the mass of dispossessed. These continuities included his use of recognisable motifs and forms from the classical Arabic repertoire, and his use of the 'classical Arabic' lingua franca of public discourse. The poems were also earthy and simple in ways that made them distinctly modern; they spoke directly to a pan-Arab audience, but in particular to exiled Palestinians. The great Egyptian diva Oum Kalsoum (1904-1975) transposed Darwish's poems into songs whose many intricate variations and reprises often lasted up to an hour; performed to huge, delirious audiences, they recalled the intricately linked rubaiyat of classical Arabic poetry, the high-coloured rhetoric of political harangue, and the sounds of the prayer-caller or imam (Oum Kalsoum's father was the imam of a Nile Delta mosque; as a child, his daughter was disguised as a boy in order to be able to sing religious texts).

This complex public role clearly distinguishes what Darwish's audiences expected of him from the expectations of the small, literary audience that reads poetry in New Zealand. My interest in him arose from encountering this difference in Jordan in 1969 and 1970, when I lived and worked there. In 1985, after researching a bi-lingual anthology of New Zealand poetry, I encountered, in the arguments that broke out over the inclusion of Māori texts in the *Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse*, a

comparable disjunction between poetry as public rhetoric and the conventions of a primarily literary, salon culture. What seemed interesting to me and my co-editor Harvey McQueen was that there were, indeed, different modalities involved: it was the differences between the English-language and the Māori that made their inclusion together in a book worthwhile, not any similar claims they might have had to be included in such an anthology, such as the hegemonising agency of a shared definition of ‘poetry’. No more fluent in Māori than I had been in the Arabic with which Darwish spoke to radio-listeners in the souk in Amman, I could still figure out that the modes of address and reception for a composition by Ngoi Pēwhairangi before a large kapa haka audience at the Tomoana showgrounds in Hastings were more like those I encountered in Amman than, even, the modest theatrics of young poets (plus James K Baxter) reading to enlarged audiences for poetry during the 1970s. I raise these issues not in order to placard my own knows-better experience, or to take the moral high ground, but because I have been lucky to have had encounters that have allowed me to measure the distance between the expectations of my own literary culture, and other, different ones.

We do not have to leave home to encounter difference – but doing so may reinforce that knowledge. In 2005 I spent a month in Bangladesh looking for traces of my childhood there between 1954 and 1958. I was also interested in the Baul poets of Bengal, whose compositions transcend the political and religious divide between East and West – India and Bangladesh, Hindu and Moslem. The national anthem of Bangladesh is based on lyrics by Rabindranath Tagore, a Hindu, and a melody by the Bangladeshi Baul poet, Lalon Shah (Tagore also wrote the national anthem of India). Bangladeshi nationalism is deeply rooted in language – Bangla – and the founding moment of Bangladeshi independence from Pakistan was the student revolt of 21 February 1952 during which five ‘language martyrs’ were killed by police near the Dhaka Medical College hospital. The students were demonstrating against the decree by the Central Pakistan Government that minority Urdu would be the official language of both East and West Pakistan; and against Section 144 banning all meetings in public. I attended Martyr’s Day at the Shaheed Minar in Dhaka on 21 February 2005, during which a couple of bombs concealed in empty potato chip packets went off; these did not deter the enormous crowd that brought flowers to the monument, or quell its enthusiasm for the poets who became the voices of the people in the lead-up to the war of liberation in 1971: Rabindranath Tagore, Kazi Nazrul Islam, and Mohammed Iqbal. Each of these came to represent a political faction, less because of their own beliefs than because without poets and the legitimisation of their language no political leader could expect to win credibility. Fluent in Urdu, Persian and English as well as Bangla, Nazrul wrote well in all four languages; but it was his Bangla poem *Rebel* that became the anthem of the Marxist arm of the liberation movement. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, leader of the secular Awami League that drove the war of liberation against Pakistan in 1971, frequently quoted Tagore in order to appeal to pan-Bengali sentiment and Brahmo intellectual liberals; but it was through Nazrul that he spoke to the masses and to radical students. As the Bangladeshi historian Rafiuddin Ahmed put it, Bangladesh

never believes anything until there is a poet to articulate it. An analogous claim can be made for the roles of Arab poets such as Mahmoud Darwish.

These are somewhat general statements and no doubt a more stringently researched and theoretical analysis of the distinctions between poetry as public or salon discourse would be productive. But I think the point is clear enough: the media's silence in New Zealand on the occasion of Mahmoud Darwish's death can hardly be put down to its not being newsworthy, since it was widely reported and discussed by most major international newspapers, television channels and internet sites. Rather, it's as though Darwish, by vastly exceeding the scope of our own modestly situated and scaled expectations of poetry, excluded himself from the definition 'poet'. Or rather, being a poet, he was already minor news (compared to an Egyptian mother-of-seven); but being excessively a poet he lost even that claim to notice.

Let us hazard a guess that Mahmoud Darwish was not 'studiously minor' enough to fit the salon profile of the poet with which we are comfortable – but was, rather, incomprehensibly popular at large gatherings, fluent in several languages, a political leader and spokesman in spite of himself, his work known to a broad cross-section of society and frequently transposed into public performance: somewhat like the poet Pita Sharples, known these days as Doctor Pita Sharples the co-leader of the Māori Party, who brought the house down that day in 1983 at the Tomoana Showgrounds, as did Prince Tui Teka performing work by Ngoi Pēwhairangi.

Mahmoud Darwish was born on 13 March 1941 at Birwa, a village in Galilee near Acre. He was the second of eight children in a modest land-owning peasant family. In 1948 Israeli forces occupied the village and the family fled to Lebanon. Returning clandestinely the following year, they found their village obliterated and two settlements erected on their land. They lived in Deir al-Assad under the protection of families there. Darwish's father worked without a residence permit in a quarry; both the permit and the quarry would become symbols of oppression in his son's poems. Darwish himself had to pretend he was a temporary visitor in order to attend school. His first contact with poetry was through an itinerant singer on the run from Israeli security forces; clandestine song and poetry meetings were held in private homes. His elder brother encouraged him to write. He later spoke of poetry as a refuge, a 'homeland in language' within a physical homeland experienced as a place of exile, a homeland 'at once present and absent'.⁵

⁵ Quoted by Subhi Hadidi, 'Note Bio-bibliographique', Mahmoud Darwish, *Mahmoud Darwish: La terre nous est étroite et autre poems 1966-1999*, translated from Arabic by Elias Sanbar. Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 2000, p.380. 'La refuge dans la poésie est, très tôt, la voie de Mahmoud Darwish en quête «d'une patrie dans la langue» pour l'alléger la dureté de l'exil dans cette patrie tout à la fois présente et absente.'

His relations with neighbouring Israelis varied. He remembered one Israeli teacher with affection. He became literate in Hebrew and much of his reading of poetry outside Palestine, for example the work of Lorca and Neruda, was through Hebrew translations. He also read Hebrew literature, from the Torah to modern Hebrew poets such as Yehuda Amichai.

His first volumes published in Israel established him as a poet of Palestinian resistance. *Leaves of the Olive Tree* (1964) included what became and has remained his best known poem throughout the Arab world, 'Identity Card'.

Write down
I am an Arab
And my I.D. card number is 50,000
And my children are eight in number⁶

Other volumes from this period included *A Lover from Palestine* (1966), and *End of the Night* (1967). He joined a cadre of poets including Tafiq Zayyâd, Samîh al-Qâsim, and the older Fadwa Tuqan, whom he addressed as 'sister' in his famous rubaiyat, 'Diary of a Palestinian Wound'. Tuqan was one of the first Palestinian poets living outside Israel to visit the country after June 1967; Darwish met her secretly in Haifa in March 1968. He was then a member of the Israeli Communist Party, Rakah, and worked with the Arabic edition of the party's newspaper, *Al-Ittihâd*, and a sister publication *Al-Jadîd*. He was imprisoned five times between 1961 and 1967, and was often under house arrest. Clandestine radio broadcasts of his poems were listened to by large audiences throughout the Arab world. Highly skilled in classical forms, he began in the mid-1960s to adapt his practice to a more direct, vernacular poetry.

The huge following these poems won him was also the site of widespread disappointment when, in 1971, he fled from Haifa and began a life of exile, eventually settling in Beirut where he worked with the Palestine Research Centre. He left in 1982 during the civil war and went with Yasser Arafat and the PLO to headquarters in Tunis. Moving between Tunis and Paris but largely resident in France, he became editor-in-chief of the literary review *Al-Karmel*. He was a member of the PLO executive committee and helped draft the Palestinian Declaration of Statehood. During his years in Paris, Darwish wrote substantial amounts of prose as well as poetry; *Memory for Forgetfulness* was his memoir of Beirut under the saturation Israeli bombing of 1982.

⁶ In *Mahmoud Darwish: Selected Poems*, trans. Fawwaz Tuqan and Ian Wedde, Cheadle: Carcanet Press, 1973, p.24.

Darwish resigned from the PLO executive committee in 1993 in protest at the Oslo Agreements between Israel and the PLO. In 1995 he was permitted to return to Israel to see his elderly mother; the dispensation was subsequently extended to the self-governing Palestinian territories of the West Bank. He spent his last years in Ramallah, and in Amman, Jordan, which became his gateway to the international world that frequently invited him to festivals and conferences. In 2000, the Israeli ministry of education wished to include his work in the school curriculum; the then prime minister, Ehud Barak, blocked the proposal, saying the country was not ready. Nonetheless, in 2007 Darwish read to an audience estimated at 2,000 in Haifa.

In his eulogy in *Banipal*, the Iraqi poet Sinan Antoon quoted Darwish's lines in which he addressed himself on the subject of his own death:

Let us go, you and I, on two paths: You, to a second life, promised to you by language in a reader who might survive the fall of a comet on earth. I, to a rendezvous I postponed more than once, with a death I promised a glass of red wine in a poem.⁷

To this, Antoon added a postscript: 'Let us bid the latter farewell the way he wanted, "with an entourage of Spanish violins", or with the music emanating from every poem he wrote. Let me also add the clouds he so loved, the neighing of cardamom in his morning coffee and the wind that travels freely.'⁸

In a preface 'The Place of the Universal' written in French for the 2000 Éditions Gallimard selection of his poems, Darwish recorded some of his pithiest and most epigrammatic statements.

On translation:

Every language possesses its system of signs, its style, its own structure. The translator does not pass on the sense of words but is the author of their web of new relations. He is not the illuminator of sense, but the night watchman of shadows and of what they suggest.

Also the translator of poetry finds himself in the position of a parallel poet, liberated from the original language; in submitting the poem to the welcome of another language, he

⁷ Mahmoud Darwish, in Sinan Antoon, 'An Entourage of Violins and Clouds', *Banipal: Magazine of Modern Arab Literature*, No 33 Autumn/Winter 2008, p.5.

⁸ Antoon (2008), p.5.

constructs a destiny for it that is identical to that which the author of the poem caused to be submitted to his own language.

It is in this space of liberation of the original work that the translator commits that beautiful and inevitable treason, which protects the language of the poet from the dullness of its nationality but also from dissolution in the language of translation. . . It is this duality that constitutes the particular charm of translated poetry.⁹

On writing:

Every poet has his habits. I am one of those who write their poems twice. The first time, I allow myself to be carried away by unthinking inspiration; for the second, I give priority to my perception of the requirements of construction. And not seldom, the second grinding of the coffee bears no resemblance to the first.

One of the tests to which I submit my poems consists of writing them and then forgetting them for a long time. And when I return to pay them a visit, my criterion of poetic judgement is their resemblance to me. If I recognise the poem, if I decide that it is imitating me or that I am imitating it, I abandon it. But if I get the feeling that the piece is the work of another poet, who has moved past the poet that I was, then I declare that this is about a new poem.¹⁰

A Rhyme for the Mu'allaqât

In 1995, the year he was permitted to visit his mother in Israel, Darwish wrote a short (for him) poem called *A Rhyme for the Mu'allaqât*.¹¹ The Mu'allaqât are seven long pre-Islamic poems or *qaṣā'id*; the name translates literally as 'the suspended' and they are usually known as 'the suspended odes'. The explanation given for this is that their eighth century Persian anthologist, Hammad ar-Rawiya (Hammad the Rhapsodist), alleged that these poems were hung on the Ka'aba at Mecca. This has been a durable and popular legend, given currency by the Spanish Arab, Ibn Abd Rabbih, who wrote that the Arabs had such an interest in poetry, and valued it so highly, that they took seven long pieces selected from the ancient poetry, wrote them in gold on pieces of Coptic linen folded up, and hung them up (*allaqat*) on the curtains which covered the Ka'aba.¹² However, this story is certainly

⁹ Mahmoud Darwish, 'Le lieu de l'universel', preface in *Mahmoud Darwish: La terre nous est étroite et autres poems 1966-1999* (2000), p.8. Translation Ian Wedde.

¹⁰ Ibid pp. 13 & 14. Translation Ian Wedde.

¹¹ Ibid pp. 350-352

¹² Ibn `Abd Rabbih, *The Unique Necklace: Al-'iqd Al-farīd* Vol.1. Trans. Issa J Boullata. Reading: Garnet Publishing & Ithaca Press in association with The Centre for Muslim Contribution to Civilisation, 2006.

apocryphal. What is clear from contemporary accounts is that the poems were brought together to represent the best in Arabic poetry and to increase appreciation of it. They were also shrewdly selected to appease warring tribes whose often bloody competition was not limited to poetry contests. What this exemplary anthology also reveals is the role of the rhapsodists, who not only learned the works of individual poets by heart (and often at great length) but were also employed by poets to recite them. They were thus the recordists, the performers and, in some cases, the scholars and critics of the poems of their patrons.

Several of these themes appear in Darwish's poem: its appeal to history and the continuities of language, to reconciliation and solidarity (he correctly predicted that the Oslo Agreements would split Palestinians into warring factions), and not least to the role of the radio listeners who had become his *rawi* or rhapsodists – the unofficial memorisers, transcribers and interpreters of his poems. Above all, he asks his *rawi* to consider his divided nature as an exile on the territory of his home, able to exist primarily in language.

This version is translated from the French of Elias Sanbar.

No one guided me towards myself
I am the guide, I am the guide
Towards myself, between the sea and the desert
Of my language, I was born on the route from the Indies
At the breast of two small tribes
Living under the moon of ancient religions and of impossible peace
Constrained to understand the astrology of Persian neighbours and the grand obsession of
the Byzantines so that the gravity of the times
Might again be lifted from the Arab tent
Who am I? This is the question that others ask
And it has no answer
Me? I, I am my language
And I am one, two, ten suspended poems
Here is my language
I am my language. And I am
What the words have said
Be our body, and I became a body for their timbre
I am whatever I have said to words
Be the confluence between my body and desert eternity
Be, so that I may be what I speak

No earth above the earth that carries me
Since my words carry me
Bird issued from me, which builds the nest of its voyage before me, in my debris
In the debris of the marvellous, around me
On the wind, I am pitched like a tent. And my long night is interminable to me
Here is my language, necklaces of stars on the throats of those I love
They have gone
They have taken place away
Have taken away time
Have effaced their odours from earthenware jars and from miserly grass. Gone
They have taken away the words. And their bruised heart has also gone. The echo, that echo
Does it contain the white, sonorous mirage of a name, whose hoarseness fills the unknown
And whose departure fills with divinity?
The sky places a window upon me. I look
I see no other than myself
I find myself in my apartness. Equal to myself
And my visions do not distance themselves from the desert
My footprints are of wind and sand
And my universe is my body and whatever possesses my hands
I am the traveller and the road
Gods appear to me and are gone, and of them we say nothing more about what may come
to pass
No tomorrow in this desert other than the one we saw yesterday
It is for me to wield my *mu'allaqa*, that the cyclical times may break
And the fine days arrive
All that past which comes out of itself tomorrow
I have left my being to itself. Full of its present
And the departure has emptied me of temples
Heaven has its people and its wars
As for me, I have the gazelle for mate, I have the palm trees
Poems hung in the book of sand
Of the past, what I see
Man possesses the kingdom of dust and a crown
It is for my language to prevail over the unfortunate century
Over my lineage
Over me, over my father and over an end that does not end
Here is my language and my miracle. The wand of my fairy-tale

The gardens of my Babylon, my obelisk, my first identity
My polished metal, and
The rites of the Arab in the desert
Who adores what flows
From rhymes, stars on his cloak
And adores what he speaks

What is needed then is a prose
A divine prose, that the Prophet may triumph.

Note: In 1969 and 1970, and subsequently in November 1971, in Amman, Jordan, Ian Wedde worked with the Palestinian scholar Fawwaz Tuqan, nephew of the poet Fadwa Tuqan, on translations of a selection of the poems of Mahmoud Darwish.