

Mahmoud Darwish: A Profile

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FULL TEXT

Mahmoud Darwish enjoyed listening to jokes and telling them. He had a refined sense of humor, supported by a magician's mastery of linguistic skills and irony. During the last days of his life, when he understood that time was running short and the end was drawing near, his sense of humor didn't betray him.

He began the last telephone conversation we had a few days before his departure for the United States for heart surgery by asking me about Nora. It is a typical question which dates back six years when I brought home, in Ramallah, a small kitten and named her Nora.

Mahmoud loved Nora and, when dining together, he always remembered that she needed her share as well by putting aside some pieces of meat. That was an indication of his love for cats. He didn't keep a cat at home, but used to feed stray cats living in his neighborhood when taking his daily evening walks. The cats of A-Tireh neighborhood in Ramallah didn't know they were being fed by the most prominent poet in the Arab world, but they kept an eye on him, waiting with high expectations outside the building where he lived.

Liking Fame but Cherishing Privacy

His admirers and fans in Palestine and the Arab world kept an eye on him as well. It would be difficult to say that he did not like being famous and loved by the people, but it is also safe to say that he tried to protect his privacy by all means. He was a very shy person, always at a loss for words in the presence of strangers and at social gatherings.

Last April in Amman, we went to a restaurant one evening; the moment we stepped in, many heads were turned and many eyes were focused on him. He was aware of that and a little bit irritated, but tried to behave as if he did not notice anything. A few minutes later, a man came and introduced himself and asked Mahmoud if he could spare a few minutes of his time. Even before getting an answer, he drew up a chair and began to explain that he headed a trade union in Jordan; they were organizing a special poetry reading event and expected him to be the guest of honor.

Every time Mahmoud managed to find an excuse, the man would come up with a counterargument. When he ran out of arguments, he quoted the German philosopher Hegel, in order to prolong the conversation and to convince Mahmoud that his participation in his organization's event was unavoidable. Mahmoud exploded angrily: "I am here to have dinner, not to discuss Hegel. Can you please leave me in peace?"

The Poet and His Audience

Having peace was not easy - even with himself. Poetry was the most important thing in his life. He was well established and recognized as a great poet in the Arab world and the world at large, yet, in spite of that, or perhaps because of that, facing an audience and reading his poetry in public was always a frightening experience for him, as if it were the first time in his life. He would spend days thinking about what to read, and would discuss with friends

which poems to read or ask for suggestions.

The first few moments of reading in front of an audience were always difficult. His habit was to concentrate on some familiar faces in front of him and to think that he was reading for them. Then, slowly, like a wave gaining strength, he would forget everything and let the words carry him.

Many years ago in Rabat, Morocco, he was supposed to read in the national theater. Usually thousands of people come to his poetry readings. He was planning to read his poem "Mural," the poem written after he underwent heart surgery two years before in Paris and the closest experience to death he had ever had.

That morning, he said he felt pain in his chest. I suggested that he cancel the reading and see a doctor. Mahmoud refused, saying: "Let us see how things develop in the evening." In the evening, we walked to the Rabat national theatre, not far from our hotel; the pain was still there, but he ignored it. My imagination was playing all kinds of tricks. I was afraid his heart would betray him. The theater was packed full; a few thousand of the less lucky ones who did not manage to get seats were standing outside, in order to hear his voice through loudspeakers installed around the entrance.

When he started reading, his voice was weak and trembling as though he was unsure of himself; a few minutes later, he dominated the place. The original plan was to read parts of the long poem, but he refused to stop and read the entire poem which lasted for two full hours.

How and from where did he get the strength?

Once, a journalist asked about his secret; Mahmoud answered that he did not have any secrets at all - which is true; all that it takes is to read his poetry in order to understand him.

Understanding Mahmoud the Poet

Then the question remains: Who and what is Mahmoud Darwish?

There are different answers for sure; I claim to have one. Mahmoud Darwish was and is a lover from Palestine. I'll always think of having known Mahmoud in person was a sign of good luck. Such knowledge, combined with many conversations and a careful reading of his poetry, created a lasting impression about the poet and his world.

I think one of the starting points for understanding him as a poet is to read his oeuvre as an extended autobiography, made up of several parts, written under different circumstances and influenced by personal growth and experience.

He was born into a world which was transformed almost beyond recognition seven years after his birth. He had to go through a double experience of exile: a refugee child in southern Lebanon and a present-absentee back in his homeland, not far from where he was born, a place that suddenly had become inaccessible.

This event, which was his personal share of the Nakba, was the formative experience in his life. By simply reading the titles of his poetry collections before he was 30, one can easily grasp the everlasting effects of this experience. His first collection was entitled *Birds without Wings*, followed by *Leaves of Olives* and *A Lover from Palestine*.

Then, as a poet, he was trying to find his own voice and sharpen his skills, but it was clear to him from the outset that poetry writing was not an innocent act of self-expression.

On many occasions, he recounted a funny event in the early 1950s when his school in the Galilee celebrated Independence Day and he read a poem of his own in which he criticized the military government and the injustice. The mukhtar of the village reprimanded him, and the next day, the representative of the military government in the village (not his birth place) interrogated him and threatened not to give his father a work permit.

His attempt to write an autobiography of a personal, almost private, experience of double exile had common elements shared by other Palestinians, and this fact transformed his poetry into a national narrative. After he left the Galilee in the 1970s and lived in Cairo and Beirut, Mahmoud discovered the literary and historical significance of writing the national narrative of the Palestinians.

This started with his collection of poems entitled Attempt Number 7. Until then, he was treated, recognized and accepted in Palestine and the Arab world as a poet of resistance, but he understood, to his credit, that a national narrative involved something more than resistance. For Palestine to fit in and to have a national narrative, it needs to be transformed into a universal metaphor.

From that moment on he started an experimental project in writing which lasted until the last day of his life. It is interesting to note in this context that the autobiographical elements in his writings increased and became more evident during the last period of his life. His last two books - *In the Presence of Absence* and *The Trace of the Butterfly*, in addition to an earlier book *Why Did You Leave the Horse Alone?* - represent autobiographical literature in a poetic form.

Seeing Beauty, Glorifying Life

Still, this doesn't fully explain the meaning of the lover from Palestine. Black humor is an integral part of every possible genuine tragedy. They can't be separated; only ideologues and second-rate creators of literature see them as separate. That is why, while transforming Palestine into a universal metaphor, Mahmoud didn't have much trust in the seriousness of history. History is mocking all of us; we and the enemy are in the same hole and quarrel over who will have the rope to climb out first.

Meanwhile, it is possible to see the beauty around, to glorify life and to enjoy the gifts of nature. No one among the Palestinians who contributed to the national narrative was able to pay attention to the nature of the country more than Mahmoud Darwish. In a poem written a few weeks before his departure, two things occupied his mind: the little boy dragging his feet going with his family into exile, and the beauty of nature around him as an adult, waiting for the end.

The lover was a brave man as well. Brave in his last moments, fully aware that for someone who transformed the double experience of exile into a national narrative and was transformed by his own people into an icon, it is necessary to leave with dignity and a refined sense of humor. No bitterness, no regrets, just watching the land, as a green apple, floating over light and water, and asking to be planted, carefully, by the hand of a mother, as a green seed. Now, he is there; green is his legacy and he will always be green.

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