

Mahmoud Darwish: "The Tale of the Tribe"

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Abstract:

In an attempt to develop his artistic bent, Darwish was moving from the lyricism of his early poetry to the dramatic effect of art, where the speaker disassociates himself from his subject and hides himself in language. One way of demonstrating this enterprise for Darwish is to let the tale tell the story of the tribe (the people of his homeland Palestine in exile) Coetzee, the renowned South African novelist once said: " I tell this not to solicit pity but to let you see what happens".It is as if Darwish re-echoes D.H. Lawrence's words "trust the tale not the teller." Or he may be remembering the words of his friend, Edward Said: "every Palestinian should tell his story". i.e. the story here is the tale of the tribe which should tell itself to the world.

Key words: Lyric, dramatic, image, identity, exile, persona.

Mahmoud Darwish: "The Tale of the Tribe"

Mahmoud Darwish has the great poet's gift. He is a genuine poet and an original one, with enormous learning and incredible ability to bring it to bear upon any observation about human nature. Mahmoud is a most passionate, a most enthusiastic and a most gifted poet I have ever known. For me personally, it was a privilege to know him, and my emotions were formidable every time the noisy opening door let me in to his tiny-sitting room with the elegant library in the background. Fate had placed me in that room for almost three hours just before his fateful journey to Houston, on his last stay in Amman. That night he talked about all sorts of things, but what impressed me most is his ability to articulate the Palestinian odyssey at an important turning point of its history in 1982 in a compressed short narrative. Immediately I felt I was in front of a fictitious character in a movie. I remembered Kurtz's celebrated utterance "the horror, the horror". You know, Mahmoud, I shall make you a very big party, when you come back from Houston. I shall look forward to that, indeed, he said. He was in jolly good mood, and looked very optimistic. Yet I could never be certain whether the high morale he demonstrated was actually a façade, as he is known for his incredible power to control his emotions.

Most ironical is that he was supposed to be in Columbia giving the keynote speech on the fifth memorial of Edward Said. Mariam Said and myself went to his flat early this year with the invitation extended to him by the president of Columbia University, and all was set: arrival on 20 of September, speech on 23 (for logistic reason it moved to 28), departure on 25. I vividly remember his suggestion that the memorial occasion should not be gloomy. Let us cherish his memory and make this occasion as he thought his friend's own memorial ought to be. He never likes to parade his sorrow in public, and the power of reticence he could exercise over the negation of reality is remarkable. Yet on rare occasions he seems to find little comfort in releasing the pressure of torturing reticence, but only in front of friends. Once he alluded to a mediocre poet who claimed that some of his [Mahmoud's] poetry is plagiarized from his own. Of course, nobody will believe such nonsense, but somehow Mahmoud himself would be tortured by such false claim and spent sleepless nights, not of self-pity, but rather of pity for those people whose erring he finds irredeemable. He had no intention to make people acknowledge him superior to all other modern Arab poets, but at least to avoid taking him a target out of sheer jealousy and envy, so that they will not urge him to pity erring mankind. Unfortunately there has been a few second or third rate Arab poets who, have been viciously attacking Mahmoud with the hope of securing some place or space in the ladder of Mahmoud's great reputation!

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In his early career, Mahmoud Darwish wrote very fine lyrics which, to start with, won him great popularity. A most popular one is "Identity Card" a very simple straightforward poem, memorized by Arabs all over the Arab world, as if it were a national anthem. Its refrain "Write down/ I am an Arab" has become a memorable stock in Arabic culture. The occasion of the poem, as Mahmoud himself recounted, is related to the status of Palestinian Arabs where every member of the Arab family at eighteen had to go to an Israeli office to get his identity card. Despite the fact that Arabs are Israeli citizens, they are treated as different nationality. His elder brother, Ahmad, had assured me, few days ago, of the details related to the writing of the poem, and that the eighteen-year old Mahmoud wrote it on his way back from Acre on an empty box of cigarettes to be read to an Arab audience in the evening.

The phenomenal success of the poem somehow irritated the poet himself who announced, time and again, his desire to distance himself from the poem, in an attempt to draw the attention of the reader to the more sophisticated poems the poet wrote afterwards, until the

end of his life. "Identity Card" continued, yet, to enjoy its tremendous appeal until the present day.

One speculation behind this phenomenon may be that the poem is not a typical romantic poem dominated by lyricism. It is not, for example, Wordsworth's "sad music of humanity", expressing the ultimate goal of romanticism. No matter how lyricism the poem has, and it actually has a lot, it is deeply rooted in the real life Palestinian Arabs undergo as underprivileged minority in their homeland. Its effect spontaneously extends to other Palestinians evicted from the same homeland.

The poem is better read with "The tale of the tribe" as a formula well exploited in the critique of modern poetry. In his book *The Tale of the Tribe: Ezra Pound And the Modern Verse*, Michael Bernstein refers to Kipling's phrase "the tale of the tribe" by which he means how the survival of society's shared values and its existence as a coherent society depends on the permanent record of the social groups achievements and deeds. Bernstein further comments on the phrase to show that the phrase means much more than Kipling intended it to mean, i.e., the magical power of language does not come from the words of the language or the stereotype of language called by Sartre "mots de la tribu", but rather by the purified language of the tribe. Bernstein is perceptive enough to demonstrate the whole issue as follows:

The most radical difference between the "tale of the tribe" and the "mots de la tribu" lies in the antithetic notions of language implied by each phrase. Although Kipling speaks of the "magical" power of words, their magic resides precisely in the power to crystallize history, to make actual events live again in the minds of future readers. Language is not an absolute, transcendent force, but rather the most enduring and powerful means of *representing* a specific occurrence in the world, an occurrence which, by itself, already contains a significant meaning. Far from being absolutely autonomous and divorced from daily reality, the "tale of the tribe" is intentionally directed towards the reality, and is expressly fashioned to enable readers to search the text for values which they can apply in the communal world. Such work is an artistic transcription of and meditation upon actions, and will, in turn, become a stimulus to future deeds. The ideal relationship between history and the tale, therefore is one of perfect interpenetration. As the experiences of the community give rise to a text, the text in turn becomes instrumental in shaping the world-view of succeeding ages, so that, in the words of the tale, past *exempla* and present needs find a continuous and unbroken meeting-ground. (Bernstein 1980, p 9)

It is true that Bernstein's concern is with the contemporary epic poetry and the "verse epic" as demonstrated by Pound's *Cantos*, and that Mahmoud Darwish's poetry is comparatively much simpler in structure and scope than Pound's complex modern "verse epic". But I would like to suggest that most of Mahmoud's poetry enjoys the spirit of epic; and reading a poem even a lyric like "Identity Card" makes us feel that it is an epic in miniature, at least for the presence of the tribal spokesman whose preoccupation with the specific subject integrated into the structure of the text is communal property. It is Mahmoud Darwish's brilliance at compressing the usual spatial time of the epic leaving us with the quintessence of the genre to freely expand in our mind outside the traditional boundaries of fixed reality. Here is how the spokesman of the tribe summons up the spirit of the epic poem of "Identity Card":

Therefore!
Write down on the top of the first page:
I do not hate people
Nor do I encroach
But if I become hungry
The usurper's flesh will be my food

Beware..

Beware..
Of my hunger
And my anger!

Instead of Hellen's face launching the thousands of ships (reference to Homer's epic) we have the perspective of angry crowds crossing the borders of those checking-points with new identity cards! One may read the conclusion and see in it an ideology (Marxism, for instance) transformed into poetry. The last word is particularly significant; it is "anger", the purified language of the tribe. Anger is crystallized from the "wooden" words of the tribe like rage and sentimentality. It is the poetic power of anger vs the prosaic rage and sentimentality which survives in the communal consciousness of generations and sets its continuance as the fresh rendering of "the tale of the tribe".

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Another phrase which I would like to suggest for reading "Identity Card" is by W.H. Auden. "Poets as sriptors of reality" is what Auden thought of poets should realize in their profession. Auden's phrase states the harsh conditions of life in the 1930s, that decade of depression in Europe. Can poets turn their back to public reality when it is so harsh and with all its effect on people's daily life, Auden seems to imply?

Auden's phrase is obliquely a call reminding the poet to be aware of his public responsibility as "a spokesman of the tribe". This brings us to the question of politics in Mahmoud Darwish's poetry. Every now and then Darwish is referred to as "the poet of resistance" and his response to this is always negative, in the sense that he does not want his poetry to be reduced in its stature to crude politics. The fact that he has strong political emotions does not mean that he is a flat political voice. The realm of poetry is too big to be limited by or to public affairs, no matter how directly effective they are in daily life. Darwish will be in full agreement with Auden concerning the need for the poet to be aware of the public life element on poetry, but without allowing poetry to become a social, historical or political thesis. Neither Auden nor Darwish would like to see the esthetics of poetry dominated by social reality the poet is urged to be its sriptor.

The following two poems are exemplary ones: one by Auden (which I have come across by chance), the other by Darwish. They are intended to demonstrate the subject under discussion. Interestingly enough they seem to share a common topic and treatment which is presumably a coincidence:

Refugee Blues
W.H. Auden (1907-1973)

Say this city has ten million souls,
Some are living in mansions, some are living in holes:
Yet there's no place for us, my dear, yet there's no place for us.

Once we had a country and we thought it fair,
Look in the atlas and you'll find it there:
We cannot go there now, my dear, we cannot go there now.

In the village churchyard there grows an old yew,
Every spring it blossoms anew:
Old passports can't do that, my dear, old passports can't do that.

The consul banged the table and said,
"If you've got no passport you're officially dead":
But we are still alive, my dear, but we are still alive.

Went to a committee; they offered me a chair;
Asked me politely to return next year:
But where shall we go to-day, my dear, but where shall we go today?

Came to a public meeting; the speaker got up and said;
"If we let them in, they will steal our daily bread":
He was talking of you and me, my dear, he was talking of you and me.

Thought I heard the thunder rumbling in the sky;
It was Hitler over Europe, saying, "They must die":
O we were in his mind, my dear, O we were in his mind.

Saw a poodle in a jacket fastened with a pin,
Saw a door opened and a cat let in:
But they weren't German Jews, my dear, but they weren't German Jews.

Went down the harbour and stood upon the quay,
Saw the fish swimming as if they were free:
Only ten feet away, my dear, only ten feet away.

Walked through a wood, saw the birds in the trees;
They had no politicians and sang at their ease:
They weren't the human race, my dear, they weren't the human race.

Dreamed I saw a building with a thousand floors,
A thousand windows and a thousand doors:
Not one of them was ours, my dear, not one of them was ours.

Stood on a great plain in the falling snow;
Ten thousand soldiers marched to and fro:
Looking for you and me, my dear, looking for you and me.

Mahmoud Darwish

I Speak at Length

I speak at length about women and trees,
About the fascination of earth, about a country which stamps no passport,
And I ask, "Ladies and gentlemen, does the earth belong to men, to all
men.
As you claim? Well, then, Where is my little hut? Where am I?" The
conference hall applauds me.
Three whole minutes, three whole minutes of freedom and recognition-
the conference agreed
On our rights to return, like any hen, like any horse, to the stones we see
in dreams.
I shake their hands, one by one, and bow... I resume my journey.
To another land, to speak about difference between mirage and rain.
To ask "Ladies and Gentlemen, does the earth belong to man, to all men?"

The two poems have the common theme of being or becoming a refugee: Auden's
refugee is a Jew, Darwish's is a Palestinian. When I read Auden's poem, I was tempted to ask
Mahmoud whether he ever read the poem in concern, and his answer was no, though he was
familiar with Auden. Politics in the two poems was sensed but not stated. This perhaps how
Darwish wants politics to be in poetry when he rejects the label of "resistance poet" given to
him. "I am a poet", he reiterated, "no labels for me". I heard Darwish more than once say "how
to humanize social reality" is not only the task of the poet, but also the main challenge he meets.

Poetry, for Darwish, and for Auden as well, is then the purified language of the
statesman; it is politics crystallized in a finer tone. It is also politics humanized. This is
Darwish's project of poetry which is particularly made more concrete in his later poetry.

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Decades after the experience of "Identity Card" the same person, but with a different
persona, finds himself standing in front of the Israeli office for a passport (or identity card) stamp
of departure or entrance. It is the checking point in Jerico, sometimes called by its historical
name: Allenby Bridge. Had Darwish been still eighteen years old, he would have, for example,
written a lyrical poem reminiscent of "Identity Card" such as:

Write down
I am an Arab
And my Israeli Identity Card
Is waiting for you to bestow a look at
and call my name from the queue in the hot passage

outside your air-conditioned closed office
so that I shall not wait longer
in terrible heat and boredom
listening to you from behind the glass window
humming all the time
Is it my sorrow, or yours, or both
That you are humming
I wonder!
Beware of my waiting
in the burning sun of Jerico.

Here is the poem in concern in full:

"Identity Card":

Write down!

I am an Arab

And my identity card number is fifty thousand

I have eight children

And the ninth will come after a summer

Will you be angry?

Write down!

I am an Arab

Employed with fellow workers at a quarry

I have eight children

I get them bread

Garments and books

from the rocks..

I do not supplicate charity at your doors

Nor do I belittle myself at the footsteps of your chamber

So will you be angry?

Write down!

I am an Arab

I have a name without a title

Patient in a country

Where people are enraged

My roots

Were entrenched before the birth of time

And before the opening of the eras

Before the pines, and the olive trees

And before the grass grew

My father.. descends from the family of the plow

Not from a privileged class

And my grandfather..was a farmer

Neither well-bred, nor well-born!

Teaches me the pride of the sun

Before teaching me how to read

And my house is like a watchman's hut

Made of branches and cane

Are you satisfied with my status?

I have a name without a title!

Write down!

I am an Arab

You have stolen the orchards of my ancestors

And the land which I cultivated

Along with my children

And you left nothing for us

Except for these rocks..

So will the State take them

As it has been said?!

Therefore!

Write down on the top of the first page:

I do not hate people

Nor do I encroach

But if I become hungry

The usurper's flesh will be my food

Beware..

Beware..

Of my hunger

And my anger!

But the poet's sensibility has undergone a crucial change and made him outgrow the free candid expression of early lyricism. "On the Bridge", a poem published in his last volume of poetry *Almond Blossoms and Beyond* demonstrates Darwish's development in poetic technique seen in the various aspects of ambiguities engulfing the poem from beginning to end.

I have no intention here to discuss the poem in any detail, but rather to give the account of its translation and publication in *Virginia Quarterly Review* (Summer 2008). One day Mahmoud passed over to me a letter from the journal, asking for a contribution to a perspective collection of Arabic poetry to be published in their journal.

After I had sent "On the Bridge" as a contribution on behalf of Mahmoud, I discussed with him an alternative title, with the justification that the poem in translation is written for a different audience. "The Bridge", for example, has a clear denotation for Palestinians and presumably the rest of the Arab World. Only for a non-Arab tourist the Bridge is known as the

checking point under the Israeli control. I suggested to Mahmoud two alternative titles: one is "Jerico Bridge" the other "Allenby Bridge", on an attempt to offer the reader a clue of what is the poem about, or, to be more specific, to locate the time and space of the poem for the non-Arab reader. Mahmoud found both titles unappealing on the ground that they might suggest, right from the beginning, the kind of limitation bought about by locality and current politics or even the sentimentality of the lyric- all of which he had already outgrown, and decided to move away from to a higher state of consciousness. Eventually, I came up with a title whose form is actually derived from the great tradition of poetry, i.e., to use the first line of the poem. Hence the English version of the title: "With the fog so dense on the bridge" instead of the original title in Arabic "On the Bridge" which Mahmoud found quite satisfactory.

Anyway Mahmoud was pleased with the publication of the poem in VQR as he told me on our last meeting in Amman, just before his departure to Houston, where he met his end. I assured him that he would be even more pleased with the word layout of the poem worked out by the editor and with the new title. Yet he would not be happy at all with the critical remark the editor put in his brief introduction to the collection of poems in the journal, as he wonders "Who is this women soldier appearing so abruptly, inexplicably for two stanzas after a dozen pages of oblique dialogue between two men?" (VQR, p.211) With all his admiration and appreciation for Mahmoud Darwish and his poetry, the editor somehow fails to see the poet's ambiguity and how Mahmoud develops in his later poetry. In his assessment, the editor misses the point that the woman soldier is in the poem right from the beginning; it is the absent-present notion (Mahmoud Darwish's title for his late prose book) he is preoccupied with. She simply appears at the end as an emphasis on the significant role given to her, and "her humming" juxtaposed by the mythical rose formulated properly to end the poem. The editor does well to dig up the origin of the mythical rose, but the interpretation he gives is only one of many interpretations already lying behind it, where past and present can be put in proportion. The editor, as a matter of fact, should read the poem backward to sense the presence of the woman soldier. He is evidently trapped by the absence of sequence we are used to in Darwish's early poetry, and lyrical poetry in general. Referring to *Almond Blossoms*, from which the poem is taken, a friend of mine who is a fan of Mahmoud told me that Mahmoud can no longer write charming poetry as he used to do in his early poetry. The answer is that Mahmoud has moved in his development from the early candid expression of sequence to a wide range of ambiguous varieties, making at the end a unified complex imagery.

Reading Mahmoud Darwish's later poetry making us realize how the poet's gift succeeds in super-posing histories, myths, ideas and the like on top of each other so that the poet moves freely between them, liberating himself from the limits of time and space, exploring the difference in similarities and unity in diverse elements. It is the diagramic method made popular in modern poetry, replacing the sequence of traditional practice.

Another technique which the editor failed to notice is the self-dramatization of the speaker in the poem. There is only one man, not two men on the bridge. It is the person and the persona technique Mahmoud, like Eliot, Mallarme and others, was very fond of, and it is so dominant in his later poetry. Its function may not be obvious at first hand, because we are not familiar with the different roles the self of the poet where one self observes, the other feels the privilege of observing, where one stands for the past, the other for the present, where conflict, or the dialogic element emerges out of difference in consciousness developed by time.

No matter how complex Mahmoud's technique has become in his later poetry, his practice is presumably a continuance of "The tale of the tribe", with a higher level of purified

language of the tribe, which seems to have made it not easily accessible to the common reader who used to feel at home with Mahmoud's early poetry and its lyricism. Mahmoud's later poetry demands an earnest reader, already aware of the poet's change of sensibility. Mahmoud's poetic development over the years seems to have brought with it a different level of readership in the sense that the poet's later achievement demands a kind of reader who is not merely "grasping" what he reads of Mahmoud's poetry but "regrasping" the complexity of the poet's development through becoming a participant in the highly purified language of "the tale of the tribe". This is what qualifies an earnest reader to mediate between the poetic text and the common reader. Only a poet like Ezra Pound reminds us of Mahmoud Darwish who, like Pound, is ushered into modernity. I am certain that Mahmoud Darwish was aware of the fact that lyricism cannot "make it new" [Pound's famous phrase], and Darwish's ambition in modernizing Arabic poetry is not much different from Pound's own or other great non-Arab poets.

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On this occasion of Mahmoud's departure, I would like to conclude by quoting an obituary J.R. Acherley wrote of Forster. Three years prior to his death, Acherley wrote his personal testimony of Forster whose words *the Observer* found in retrospect so appropriate to publish an obituary in 1970, the year Forster died. Only one word is changed. Darwish's first name "Mahmoud" replaces Forster's first name "Morgan". Here is the quote:

I would say that insofar as it is possible for any human being to be both wise and wordly wise, to be selfless in any material sense, to have no envy, jealousy, vanity, conceit, to contain no malice, no hatred (though he had anger), to be always reliable, considerate, generous, never cheap – [Mahmoud] came close to that as can be got.

This is actually Mahmoud as known by people who, with great privilege, came to know him personally or through his poetry. He is a most gracious spokesman of his tribe and a great "scripter of reality" at large. A memorable person with unforgettable persona.

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