MAHMOUD DARWISH

Our Present Does Not Decide Either to Begin or to End

An interview with Liana Badr, Zakariyya Muhammad, and Mundher Jaber.

Translated from French by Amira El-Zein and Carolyn Forché

QUESTION: How do you live with the fact that you are a living legend?

MAHMOUD DARWISH: I am neither happy nor upset about it, but instead astonished. However, I am not responsible for the statues erected of poets. It seems that this tradition of our literary history is still very strong.

I do not aspire, of course, to be either a symbol or a legend. But I have no control over things, no means of modifying the perception that people have. And I recognize that my personal voice also carries collective dimensions, no matter what I do to give it a vital space. And even when I succeed in withdrawing into my own universe, people reserve to themselves the right to detect a public message in the autobiographical part of my work. This situation is embarrassing for me, because it could keep me from the possibility of exploring my interior world as I desire.

I used to complain about this in the past. I thought that the way my poetry was read was responsible. I constantly asked for an innocent reading of my poems. But it seems that this demand is illusory. Is there an innocent reading of any text? Certainly not. In reality, I was asking only for a less political reading of my poems.

All of this is to tell you that I failed and that I find myself burdened with a very tiring image, and heavy responsibilities — not only in what

concerns my own work, but also with all that pertains to my personal conduct and my opinions.

I see myself overburdened by symbolic signs that I can neither accept nor refuse as such. Hence, I must be up to the role and the responsibility that was entrusted to me. I do not have the right to deceive.

Q: However, at certain moments of your life, you were almost going to integrate the myth. But each time, you have escaped it. As, for example, when you decided to leave Palestine in 1970; when you had to leave Beirut in 1982; when you resigned from the Executive Committee of the PLO; when you chose to live in Paris. It is as if you hesitated to cross the threshold. Have you benefitted from this fact of being permanently in the limelight on personal and literary levels?

MD: It's true that I have tried, several times, to break the myth. For to dwell in a myth is to dwell in a prison, to forbid oneself any spontaneous blossoming, any intellectual enrichment. Take, for example, my exit from Palestine in 1970, and my insistence upon always maintaining a distance after that between my practice of poetry and the national question in the broadest sense. I have been fully conscious that I was putting into question my myth and that I was doing that because I was not comfortable. And I thought, at a certain moment, that I had succeeded in untying myself, assuring that no one would demand answers from me anymore to questions pertaining to public order.

For more than thirty years, I haven't lived in Palestine, but far from altering the myth, my distance, in fact, has nourished it. The reason for that is that people here remain convinced that I have not abandoned them and that, even if I have been away, my voice has remained theirs in all places. They began then to follow my voice from one country to the other, as if my wandering was spreading their voice over the earth. Thus, they have pardoned me "the mistake" that was my departure, and I even wonder if they ever perceived it as such. The welcome that has been accorded me upon my return shows that people never believed in the "prophecies" of the great priests of the literary press who had announced my death when I left. The critics — even before I have written a single verse in my new sojourn — categorically asserted that I was no longer a poet, and that my poetical inspiration depended,

in their eyes, on my physical adherence to a place. They condemned me to death even before recognizing what was going to be born from exile and distance.

The fidelity of a poet to his people is not made tangible by his direct political action but by the sincerity of his work. I'm very proud of the fact that my readers recognize my right to experimentation. My poetry has rebelled many times against what it had been. I permanently searched to renew myself, taking the risk, each time, of a rupture with my readers. But the confidence that they placed in my interior universe made them accept all the innovations. Thus, I have never found myself compelled to conform to the image that my first poems imprinted on the consciousness of people.

Q: To return to the "myth," do you think that it sharpened your feeling of exile?

MD: Even if I returned tomorrow and lived in my first home, I would need to remain in retreat. We are dealing here with interior solitude, in the sense that I need to be able to look at my interior world and preserve my freedom of writing. The reader must not be the direct witness of writing. He should even be remote from it. I know, however, that he is always present, but this presence is veiled, indirect. Otherwise, the reader would become a policeman. I should add that exile is not strictly a distance from the homeland. Before my first voluntary departure from Palestine, I was a stranger in my homeland, an exile in my homeland, a prisoner in my homeland, and this did not affect for a single instant that which united us. I am somehow accustomed to these exercises of life, culture, and sentiments which the dialectical relationship between exile and land imposes. And I am convinced that exile is profoundly anchored in me, to the point that I cannot write without it. I will carry it wherever I go, and I will bring it back to my first home.

Q: Mahmoud Darwish has his eyes fixed on the Song of Songs and the Bible, and he would like to rewrite them. Is this proposition justified?

MD: I will not answer yes or no. Is it necessary to do so? Literature is a type of activity that does not recognize an end. It's an open experience through which one would like to reach maturity. The poet does

not abandon it except to become engaged in a new experience, and so forth. There are no definitive answers, either on the theoretical level or on the level of creation. It is only a succession of uninterrupted questionings, answers to interrogations by new interrogations.

The Song of Songs is universally consecrated as one of humanity's greatest songs of love, putting aside its context. Some assert that it is inspired by the chants of Pharaonic Egypt. Others argue for its Sumerian origins. It's simply a foundational text of love poetry. All poets of the world have meditated upon it and assimilated it.

On the other hand, as a Palestinian, I am a product of this land, and as such I consider myself as a depository of all cultures, of all the works that have come to light on this land, and the Bible is one of them.

However, every poet is obsessed with a desire to write of the beginning of things, the first manifestation of man, the first relations between the first man and the first earth. Every poet who has a poetic project ardently desires to write his own book of Genesis. Writing is a process of accumulation that never comes from nothingness. There is no degree zero in literature, and every writing has another writing beneath it.

If we take this into consideration, if we approach the question from the perspective of the relation to this land, things become clearer. And my claim to write my book of Genesis acquires a totally different dimension. In fact, it's a question of dialogue with all cultures in succession on the land of Palestine. This is one of the aspects of the intellectual debate which pertains to our presence, and the presence of the Other. In all cases, sacred texts are the property of all humanity. Henceforth, I have no discomfort at all with discussing them, contradicting them, or in superimposing upon them my own texts.

Q: Don't you think, however, that the Song is specific to the Mediterranean, which is one of the founding cultures of this part of the world?

MD: The eastern Mediterranean is the cradle of the great human civilizations, and Palestine is part of it. Three great "original" civilizations have blossomed there: the Egyptian, the Sumerian, and the Canaanite, despite the fact that this last has always been less visible, for reasons that you can guess. The eastern Mediterranean is somehow the garden of the world's childhood.

One can have any discussion one wishes on our contemporary identity, and pretend that Mediterranean identity cannot go hand in hand with our Arab identity, but nothing forbids us belonging culturally to the Mediterranean, and this does not imply the substitution of one identity for another. For Mediterranean identity is universal, and everyone in the world today has genealogical links with this sea. To assert one's belonging to this culture, to its creative tradition, to its cultural heritage, is not to deny our proper identity but to enrich it.

As for the Song, it was born close to the Mediterranean, with the Sumerians, before it sailed the sea in Greek ships.

Q: Your poems have a tendency toward the tragic, right up to the imposition of the recent political respite, which is perhaps temporary in any case. It is as if the conflict gives to your poetry its tragical charge. Could we consider your book *Why Have You Left The Horse Alone* as signaling a new direction?

MD: A hasty reading of this book would give this impression. But if we approach it as a unity, a tragic breath comes from it indisputably. I prefer to speak of a new mode of construction in this book. It is founded on an intermittent lyricism that deepens itself in a distant geography and history, attempting the fusion of three narratives: an autobiography, a biography of place and its history, and the history of a poetic culture. This perhaps explains the variety of forms of expression in this book. It's enough to read it, then, as a suite of sequences which gradually reach a crescendo, to perceive that it does not abandon the tragic dimension that is found in my previous books. It's true that this book is not constructed in the same quasi-epic mode. But does the poet always have to follow the same paths? Doesn't he have to renew and multiply his forms without ever losing the thread of his fundamental choices?

I'm against the concept of poet-prophet. The heroes in my poems are simple people who look within themselves to create a private space, marginal beings who wonder about their existence, without having a warrior spirit and without great lyricism or great enthusiasm. However, I think that there is no place today for the epic in its classical form. The modern epic is a quest to formulate existential interrogations, but with a poetic expression of modesty and without redundancy. In this, the epic is today a quest for the individual, which has nothing to do with the representative function of the poet. The

poet does not represent either a cause or a people or a group; he represents only himself.

As for the relation of this book to the actual [political] detente, which could manifest itself as a new breath of intellectual and cultural debate, I wish that this respite would allow literature to devote itself to the defense of its relation to its own past, both personal and collective. Memory must become more fertile, to be transformed in its identity as a witness of history.

Q: You are very silent when it comes to the other Palestinian poets. In fact, you have never given the least public statement with regard to any of them.

MD: I have not yet attained the rank of sage or judge who dispenses points and decorations. The concept of "the greatest poet" is outmoded. There is no first poet, and no second-place either. There are only voices that join together and dwell together. Life includes enough poetry for a multitude of poets to tell their story and articulate their humanity. That's why when I'm asked what I think of this person or that person, I invariably respond Excellent!

I must also confess that this attitude protects me from gossip. It avoids having people discussing the price of my shirts, following very closely my love life, and observing my personal affairs. I only ask that I be forgotten.

My generation has transmitted to the next a great aesthetic treasure. Our young poets are no longer asked to be devoted to the cause or to defend the historical legitimacy of our national claims, for we have already done this, and perhaps more than we needed to. Poets can now explore their own universes, tell of their lives; tell of their concerns, without having to submit to patriotic pressure. We have sacrificed much in order that our young poets might journey toward their own voices. We have exhausted our strength to bestow patriotic legitimacy to poetical action. The young don't have to examine the whole of history and geography; they have at their disposal a heritage that they can present to anyone. They have only to live in beautiful houses of poetry.

Q: Isn't it for this reason that your poems have always been approached through the prism of the political? You haven't had your due, and very few critics have studied your work for itself.

MD: That's true. But what I have just said does not mean that all my poetry is devoted to the defense of our national legitimacy. I have simply given this kind of service at some stages, without ceasing, nonetheless, to be attentive to the fact that poetry must preserve its status from everything foreign to it, and especially the heroic breath. I am obsessed by the necessity to liberate my poetry from the constraints of current events, to breathe into it the elements of life which allow it to live and to continue beyond its historical moment.

Because of the symbolic power that has surrounded my person and my work, the critique has turned away from the aesthetical aspect of my poetry and has only been interested in its national or political registers. Having said that, I cannot complain about my critics. They often limit themselves to reproducing what they have heard in the universities. And as my poetry is not taught, the specialists limit themselves to four or five poets called "avant-garde."[1]

But a generation has arrived, liberated from academic fetters and university stereotypes, aware of the evolution of the Western literary critique, sometimes more innovative than the works it is studying. And I'm very happy that the critics are interested in my work these past few years, as was the case recently in Cairo, during a seminar which gathered together twenty-seven critics. The principal problem of our "classic critics" comes from the fact that their means are archaic and that they stopped reading and keeping up with developments in their own domain. I'm not the only one to complain about this situation. The entire poetic production of the past two decades was not critically approached in a modern way. Finally, with regard to myself, I complain less of the critique as such than of the stubbornness of some in "classifying" me systematically in "the Palestinian cause."

Q: Did your exile come to an end with your first return to the land? Are you nostalgic about your nostalgia? And do you think that a minimum of stability is necessary to create?

MD: The exile never ends, whether we are away from the country or not. In this context, I remind you of the marvelous texts of Abou Hayyan al-Tawhidi on the stranger. The levels, the aspects, the stages of the stranger's status are multiple. One can be exiled in language, in love, in one's attitude toward justice, and one can be exiled in one's view of life. As one could be exiled due to occupation or imprisonment. True

exile is the one we feel in our own land, interior exile. Certainly, the particular situation of Palestinians generates exile, but it's true also that the Arab, in general, is a "stranger of face, of hand, and of language," as the famous verse of Mutanabbi has it.

During my too short visit to Palestine, I naturally believed for a moment that my exile was over. But this was simply the transitory effect of overflowing joy. Now I don't have any illusions: to choose a place does not put an end to exile. After all, is not exile one of the sources of literary creation throughout history? The man who is in perfect harmony with his society, his culture, with himself, cannot be a creator. He needs a strong interior tension to transgress the rules, which is a necessary precondition for any creation. This would remain true even if our country were an Eden, even if we succeeded in making it an Eden. The vital disposition for renewal is the yeast of creation. And even if happiness, accomplishment, achieved ends, can engender positive ethics, they never give birth to a new literature.

Q: Anxiety is then indispensable for you. But if it becomes excessive, is there not a risk that it can bridle creativity?

MD: I need a balance between a certain degree of tension and another of serenity; and I can say, having been attentive for a long time to this interior alchemy, I can detect it whenever it presents itself.

But don't draw from my assertion a general principle. Every writer has his own habits, his manner of reacting to external reality. There are, for example, some writers who can write only during the night. I don't belong to this group. There are poets who, when they are in love, write love poems spontaneously. This isn't the case with me. Living my love, I don't feel any need to write its presence. I always viewed poetry as a trace of absence.

Q: You once asserted that history developed in you the faculty of irony. In this manner, you opened a passage from the particular to the general and have inscribed the national fact in the registry of the universal.

MD: Let's begin with irony. There are many visions of history. Does history have a purpose? Does it follow an orderly route toward progress? Does it advance inexorably? Is it essentially progressive? Is it, on the contrary, absurd?

Our intellectual education has convinced us that history advances as a spiral, but we have also been, these last fifty years, the privileged witnesses of the absurdity of history. Even when it progresses, history abounds with detours that man cannot endure unless he is armed with irony. History itself is ironic, and it advances without concern for the humanity of its actors or its victims. To approach history with irony, meaning to ironize its manners of acting, to ironize our own attitude toward it allows our oppressed souls to breathe. Irony is not solely made of despair. It is engaged in a kind of elegant duel with history. It allows you to confront it on its own terrain on equal footing. One needs a certain nihilism to bear the savagery of history, for it has never been fair nor elegant. That's how I learned to disengage myself lightly from the immediate actuality, to meditate on history in its general movement.

Our permanent literary problem, we Palestinians, is that we are condemned to be the children of the immediate moment; for our present has not been determined, neither to begin nor end. As if it engulfs the whole of history. The present is so difficult that it covers over its own historicity, its past and its future. Hence, it is terribly difficult for us to extricate ourselves from it, to reach the most secure and firm shores of the past, and observe history's behavior. This requires intelligence of thought but also of heart. It is a surpassing of oneself. For immediacy is also time, a whole that reproduces itself. The fixation on the historical moment prevents us from metaphysical inquiry. It does not authorize us to imagine that natural death exists. All our dead are martyrs. It is forbidden for the red rose not to bleed, and we are not allowed to contemplate things freely, without passing through the tragedy. Our poetry suffers from a metaphysical deficit. It is bending under the domination of the relative over the absolute.

We need to choose from our situation whatever allows us to evolve toward the human. We must disengage ourselves from the moment, which is made up of all the external political pressures, to contemplate the humane in us. The great majority of our Palestinian poetry deals with the Palestinian cause and remains mute with regard to the humanness of this people, in its existence and its questioning. In this poetry, the topic at hand is more important than the essence. A great cause, however, is formed of a multitude of small bits of humanity. And there will be no true liberation unless we succeed in extricating ourselves from the general theme [of Palestine] in order to explore

the human in this theme. Otherwise, our literature will only be a long political document.

For example, when we write after a massacre, we evoke the killing, the blood, liquidations, and the number of victims. But we don't tell the story of a single victim. We don't cite the name of a single one of them. The poem, however, is the name of the victim, its life, the description of the final gaze that she bestows on her killer. What was she thinking, what was she doing in the last minutes of her life? Did she look one more time toward the mountains? Did she look toward the sea? It is the concern of man that gives poetry its fire and guarantees permanency beyond the specific historical conditions.

Q: The Iraqi poet Saadi Youssef once said: "All the Palestinian poets have drawn their support from Palestine except for Mahmoud Darwish, for it is Palestine that takes support from him." Does this "support" exhaust you, cause you to suffer, or fill you with happiness?

MD: With all due respect to Saadi Youssef, and admiration that I have for his poetry—for Saadi is a great poet, and one that I prefer in the Arab poetical landscape—one should not take his appreciation literally. I'm grateful to him for this praise, but I think that he meant that I succeeded in disengaging my poetry from the fetters of engagement. Otherwise, I would have succeeded in elaborating an independent poetical language, which is not reduced to its thematic axis. Saadi speaks of this, and not of Palestine. Palestine as a human and cultural presence is greater than all of us. I also think that thus far it has not been treated in literature as it deserves to be treated. Saadi simply wanted to criticize every poetical approach which bases its legitimacy on a great cause.

It's true that I haven't drawn support from the Palestinian cause. But, if this is the case, it is because I am its child, its creature. I have not chosen it for a theme, it is my destiny; it is my human and aesthetic milieu. In this context, I am disconcerted by the absence of place, its genuine attributes, in a poetry which pretends to celebrate it. Palestine is much more beautiful than is nostalgia. I don't find, in Palestinian poetry, the flora and fauna, the topography, in a word, the real Palestine. For Palestine has been written from a distance exclusively through the prism of patriotism.

No, I haven't suffered from the conditions of departure. And I'm

aspiring to achieve legitimacy without having to pause forever before the supposed mission of poetry. It is up to the poem to establish its own legitimacy. As for the means to achieve it, they come from the interior of the poem itself, from the craft of the poet. Take, for example, one of my most accessible poems: "I Am Longing for My Mother's Bread." This poem has no link with any cause whatsoever, which did not prevent it from affecting, and from continuing to affect, millions of people. I speak only, however, of one particular mother and not of a country. But this mother succeeds, because of the poetical image, in being transformed into a multitude of other symbols, and this is what every poet involuntarily aspires to do. Here is a poem without history, without an epic breadth. A simple ritornello. A man sings of his mother, and his song succeeds in touching hearts. The function of the poem should appear only after the poem is achieved, for the need to write must be innocent, free of any ideological or symbolic burden.

Q: When your poetry was being transformed to carry multiple meanings, did you write voluntarily symbolic poems?

MD: No, I have always been alert to this issue. I think that I have had the courage to ask myself questions related to the success of such-and-such poem. This is the key to my disagreement with the partisans of my poem "Write Down: I Am an Arab." Some wanted to imprison me despite myself, and this text, in its content.

I must also do my own self-critique. At certain moments, national duty compelled me to write directly engaged poems. Take for example the poem "Transients Among Transient Words," or certain poems that I wrote in Lebanon, notably "The Poem of Beirut," which contains too many direct passages. The poet and the intellectual are sometimes faced with responsibilities on which they cannot turn their backs. They must, however, satisfy the social demand outside poetry: through a speech, an article, a demonstration. Our country has some claims on us, but these should not be imposed to poetry's disadvantage.

My Beirut period does not constitute the golden age of my poetical experience: precise descriptions, pressure of the war, of death, of crimes. All this muddied the aesthetic questioning, which appeared as a luxury. We were the object of a call exterior to poetry, a personal call, a call of the humane in us. I couldn't remain neutral before the death of this or that person. We were compelled by an innocent and spon-

taneous feeling, and we did not have the necessary latitude to write texts that give greater place to poetry. Sometimes I say that a grain of salt is enough to save a poem . . .

These judgments do not concern the totality of my poems written in Beirut. But I think, however, that our poetry responded to the call precipitously, and it's true that poetry reacts quicker than the novel. This does not exempt us, nevertheless, from a certain articulation of the constitutive elements of the poem.

Q: When you write a poem, do you follow your intuitions or, on the contrary, a process defined in advance?

MD: Every poem must appear as the first text you have ever written. Spontaneous, able to transform the inorganic into the organic like the tide that comes from the sea and settles on the beach and yet remains a tide. There is a predisposition to marvel. Otherwise everyone would be a poet. The university professors know much more about poetry than all the poets combined, and still they can't write poems. Because they lack this predisposition, which can be a divine grace!

We will not leave the trench
As long as the night hasn't elapsed
Beirut is destined to the absolute
And our eyes to the sand
In the beginning we were not born
In the beginning was the Word
And now in the trench
Appear the signs heralding gestations

Q: A prophecy of the poet, fifteen years ago. Did the birth occur? What is the relation between prophecy and poetry?

MD: This question is important. I have often asked myself this. As if certain poems announce the future. Thus, I told of our departure from Beirut long before it happened. I wrote of the Intifada in 1976. But it is not about prophecy that we are speaking here, even if prescience occupies an important place. In fact, it's about an ability to perceive the real without losing oneself in appearances. Thus, one did not need to be exceptionally intelligent to judge that our presence in Beirut would not last and that the respite that the Palestinians and their orga-

nization found there would be interrupted. Any attentive observer of this prosperity could not fail to deduce, from the moment the Lebanese civil war began, that it would end with a new expulsion. In this civil war, we couldn't be victorious or defeated. I think also that the defeat was a lesser evil. A victory would have been disastrous. What would it have meant for us to be victorious in Beirut? I did not understand, at that time, the enthusiasm and the triumphalist speeches in this context. And I must admit that up to this day I still do not understand. A Palestinian victory in Lebanon would have meant the end of the Palestinian quest.

You see that, in this precise case, what you define as prophecy is only a realistic reading of the events, approached in historical continuity. It is, however, true that this reading needs, a priori, a prescience which sheds light on the scene. Effectively, in this context, I think that I do not lack audacity, either in my reading of facts, or in my sketching of scenarios to come.

Take my poem "And the Land Is Transmitted like the Language." Written in 1987, this poem speaks of the Return of Palestinians to their land, as if it has been realized and as if the Palestinian cause, as perceived then, had already borne fruit. That's why I will not write any more on the Return, because I have already anticipated it. It is the Intifada which was the point of departure of my intuition, inasmuch as it signaled to me that the question of Palestine, after the interminable exile, recurs again on the land of Palestine. This led me to blend in my poem the concept of Return and the actual return. "Prophecy" is the ability to read the circulation of signs within reality. It naturally requires intuition, without which the poem will remain deprived of the imaginary.

Q: Does your political experience play a role? You have had a very rich political life.

MD: My political experience is shared with tens of thousands of other Palestinians, many more experienced than myself. But they haven't, however, had the same intuitions. The experience, associated with the poetical imaginary, shaped my vision of the future. The political, which is devoid of the cultural or poetical imaginary, remains conjectural.

NOTES

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[1] Since this time, his work has become the subject of academic studies.