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A LOVE STORY BETWEEN AN ARAB POET AND HIS LAND

AN INTERVIEW WITH MAHMUD DARWISH

In November 2001, Mahmud Darwish, the “poetic voice of Palestine” and a leading cultural icon throughout the Arab world (see JPS 123), was awarded the prestigious Lannan Foundation Prize for Cultural Freedom. The prize was established by the Santa Fe-based foundation in 1999 to honor “people whose extraordinary and courageous work celebrates the human right to freedom of imagination, inquiry, and expression.” According to the foundation’s president, Darwish’s importance as a poet as well as his “courage in speaking out against injustice and oppression, while eloquently arguing for a peaceful and equitable coexistence between Palestinian Arabs and Israeli Jews, [are] what motivates Lannan Foundation to honor him.” Though his poetry has been translated into more than twenty languages, little of his work is available in English. For this reason, the Lannan Foundation, in addition to awarding the \$350,000 prize to Darwish, is supporting the publication of a translation of poems selected from Darwish’s some twenty collections (University of California Press, forthcoming 2002).

On the occasion of the award, Darwish was interviewed in Paris for the New York Times by the New York-based journalist Adam Shtatz, who wrote a profile of the poet that appeared on 22 December 2001. The full interview, conducted on 1 December, is being published here for the first time, with the kind permission of Mr. Shtatz.

Shtatz: So how does it feel to be back in Paris?

Darwish: Paris gives me a lot at the level of poetry. It was in Paris that I was able to establish a distance between myself and my subject and to put the question of my poetry at the center. I wrote a lot of poetry here, and I moved away from writing direct poems. My major books were all written here.

Shtatz: Let’s talk about the Lannan Foundation Prize for Cultural Freedom. What was your initial reaction?

Darwish: I was surprised, I have to say. I was in Amman. Mr. Patrick Lannan called and told me that he was the director of the Lannan Foundation and that they were giving me this award. I had never heard of it. I had to go online to find out about the organization. Once I found that it was very correct, very innocent, I was pleased to accept the award. And the award has other values, coming from the United States, where I’m not that well translated. I also read the prize at a political level, as perhaps indicating a better under-

standing of what I represent, of my social role in my country. I just hope it won't raise a storm in Washington.

Sbatz: Where do you live now, in Ramallah or Amman?

Darwish: I live mainly in Ramallah. But we are under siege now, so Amman is my port, my gate to the world since I can't fly from Tel Aviv. We live in cages in Ramallah. The situation is really tragic. So from time to time, I go to Amman to breathe. And each time I go, I need special permission from the Israelis. We are surrounded by borders, but these borders are flexible. The main difficulty now is we don't see any light at the end of the tunnel. The lack of hope is terrible, and the economic situation is getting worse and worse. We don't see an end to the bloody cycle.

Sbatz: You were in Beirut during the Israeli invasion of 1982, so in a sense this is the second time you have lived under the rule of Ariel Sharon.

Darwish: You might say that, yes. Sharon has ruled us twice. I think he's continuing his invasion of Beirut, and he wants revenge. But the question is not personal, finally. He wants to continue building settlements. He doesn't want to give any commitment to withdraw from territory or to our right of return. And at the same time he asks us for peace. When things are quiet, he provokes us to react.

Sbatz: You've said in many interviews that you find it difficult to write poetry in extreme situations. What's it like writing poetry in Ramallah today, amid the second intifada?

Darwish: I ask myself this question every day. Writing poetry requires a margin, a siesta. It needs time for thought, for pondering, for seeing beyond the present. So I try to continue my project as if I weren't there. But the situation doesn't give me this luxury. There is a tension between my aesthetic demands and my conscience as a citizen. I don't know what the outcome will be, though I think that poetry is always the product of a certain tension. By that I don't mean occupation; I am speaking about other tensions. To be under occupation, to be under fire every day, to see the same murders, is not a good inspiration for poetry. Still, I can't choose my reality. And this is the whole question of Palestinian literature, that we can't free ourselves of the historical moment.

Sbatz: You first rose to prominence in the mid-1960s with a poem called "Identity Card." Arab critics and readers hailed you as the founder of resistance poetry. Since then, your work has evolved, growing more elusive and complex, less directly political. Have you faced resistance from Palestinian readers?

Darwish: The relationship between me and my readers is very interesting. My readers always complain that my new work is not as clear, not easily understood. When I move closer to what one could call pure poetry, they want me to go back to what I was. But I have learned from experience that I

can take my readers with me if they trust me. I feel I'm very lucky to have that trust. I can make my modernity, I can play games if I am sincere, because if I am sincere my readers will follow me. And who is the reader, anyway? Every day you lose an old reader and gain a new one.

Shatz: You are often described as the national poet of Palestine. Do you find this to be a burden?

Darwish: It is a burden, yes. What we call the Palestinian cause has lasted for years, and it becomes a burden if the poet doesn't know how to develop its meaning, how to see its humanitarian meaning. There are really only two subjects in literature: the human being and freedom. So if you know how to break through the present moment to a sort of absolute, to fuse reality with the imagination, you can prevent your poem from falling into mere actuality. The hardest thing of all is to avoid being a captive of the present, because the present is very quick. As soon as you say present, it's already past.

Shatz: You have often remarked that readers, especially Palestinians, are too quick to interpret your work in allegorical terms. I'm thinking of the poem you wrote about your mother bringing you coffee and bread in prison. Your mother in the poem is your mother, you were relating a true story, and yet many readers assumed that the mother was a symbol for Palestine.

Darwish: I suffer from such interpretation. Sometimes I feel as if I am read before I write. My readers expect something from me, but I write as a poet, and in my poetry a woman is a woman, a mother is a mother, and the sea is the sea. But many readers have made this link, as if everything I write is symbolic. So when I write love poetry, they think it's about Palestine. That's nice, but it's just one aspect of my work.

Shatz: You have referred to your work as "epic lyricism." What does this mean?

Darwish: There is a debate in the Arab world about lyricism. Many Arab critics think that lyricism is a bad concept. They don't see the difference between a lyric poem and a song, and they confuse lyricism with romantic poetry. So I always insist that I write lyrical poetry, but with an aspect of epic because there is a sense of voyage, a human voyage between cultures and peoples. The epic expresses the voice of immigrants and voyagers—it has a collective voice, not simply an individual one. It was actually the Greek poet Yannis Ritsos, who I believe is the greatest poet of the century, who called my work epic lyricism.

Shatz: You are referring, I assume, to the voyage of the Palestinian people.

Darwish: Yes, I speak about the voyage of the people in my society. It's an extremely plural society. All cultures, all civilizations in history have come to Palestine, and I believe I have the right to this whole inheritance. My work has been influenced by many sources. This is what I like most in the poetry

of Derek Walcott, and of Allen Ginsberg. I consider Ginsberg's "Kaddish" to be one of the major poems of the century. I also like some of the poems of Seamus Heaney, and I love the Polish poets Wislawa Szymborska and Czeslaw Milosz.

Sbatz: Your poetry is extraordinarily musical. You have said you listen to music while writing. What do you listen to?

Darwish: I listen to classical music, chamber music—not opera, piano, or soft guitar. I like to set words to music. It helps to raise or cool my temperature. When you write poetry you should never be too hot or too cool. I can't say anything good about my poetry, but I am not shy about saying this: I am one of the most musical poets in the Arab world, and I am proud of this aspect of my work. I am not a supporter of prose poetry, which is very much the new wave among young Arab poets today.

Sbatz: You write, in Memory for Forgetfulness, that "Poetry is the scandal of my life, and my life is the scandal of my poetry." What do you mean by this?

Darwish: What I meant, I think, is that poetry doesn't hide your inner personality. It offers full disclosure, a full confession, so if you have any secrets they can't be concealed. Now why is the life a scandal? Because when I write poems, I have to go according to what I have written before. . . . [*He trails off, not sure. He returns to the subject later.*]

Sbatz: You write about the sea a great deal in your poetry, and it seems to refer to various things: the voyage of Palestinians in the diaspora, the painful sense of separation from home, exile, death, the passage of time. And yet you write that in your work, the sea is the sea.

Darwish: Yes, it's not a metaphor. I was astonished to meet young people in Lebanon who asked me what the sea means in my poetry. I told them, the sea is the sea. As you may know, the word in Arabic for poetic rhythm is the same as the word for sea. The French poet Saint John Perse once said that rhythm in poetry comes from the sound of the sea, from the sound of the waves. But yes, the sea also stands for the voyage, the continuation of Ulysses's voyage, the sense that we have no shore, no port, that we travel from one place to another without being allowed to stay in any one place for long. The story I tell is about wandering, about the experience of exile.

Sbatz: Your poetry has sparked two major controversies in Israel. The first was in 1988, when you wrote a poem called "Passing through Fleeting Words" that many Israelis interpreted as a call for them to pack up and leave. The second happened last year, when Yossi Sarid proposed the inclusion of some of your poems in the Israeli curriculum and Barak said Israel wasn't ready for your poems. Why do you think Israelis react so emotionally to your work?

Darwish: The Israelis are extremely sensitive about giving any room to the Other. They want to maintain a monopoly over the memory of the land. This

is how I explain the storm when Yossi Sarid tried to include some of my poems. The Israelis don't want to teach students that there is a love story between an Arab poet and this land. They are afraid that when pupils realize there's another people with deep roots, they will discover that the whole story of Zionism is false, and that Zangwill's slogan "a land without a people for a people without a land" simply isn't correct. But I am well translated into Hebrew, and my books are read by Israelis. Israeli society is not monolithic. There are many tendencies. But this moment is very bad. I just wish they'd read me to enjoy my poetry, not as a representative of the enemy.

The Israelis are extremely sensitive about giving any room to the Other. They want to maintain a monopoly over the memory of the land.

Sbatz: You wrote "Fleeting Words" in 1988, at the beginning of the first intifada.

Darwish: Yes. And I said what any human being living under occupation would say: Get out of my land. I was living in Paris at the time, and I was horrified by the images of Israeli soldiers breaking the bones of young Palestinians. The poem was an expression of protest and anger. I don't consider it a good poem, and I have never included it in my collections for that reason. It was a sort of stone thrown at Israeli soldiers. But you know, sometimes a poet has concerns other than poetry. Many poets have written political poetry.

Sbatz: And bad political poetry, one might add.

Darwish: Yes. Ginsberg's poems about Vietnam were not his best.

Sbatz: Let's talk about the life of Mahmud Darwish. You were born in a Galilee village called Birweh, which was destroyed in the war of 1948.

Darwish: It was a small village, close to Acre. There was a small hill in front, and there were open fields with olive trees. It was a very quiet place. I was born there in 1942. My father was a farmer, with a small plot of land, very petit bourgeois, middle class.

Sbatz: What were the circumstances of your flight into Lebanon?

Darwish: We were sleeping, and my parents woke me up. They were very panicked. We left through the forest. I didn't understand anything. I'll never forget the moon that night. It was a full moon, and it showed the path of the mountains and the valleys. We left everything in our home, because we expected to come back. The other villagers staged a counterattack and liberated the village. We were told that the village drank the tea of the Israeli soldiers. The village was then bombarded and destroyed completely. When we returned the next year, we found that it had been razed, and replaced by two colonies, one for Yemeni Jews, the other for Europeans. We were in Lebanon for a year. We had gone as tourists—my grandfather thought it was

for a short trip. When we came back, it was in clandestine fashion, to another village in Galilee.

Sbatz: Your mother, who was illiterate, was your first influence. She sang at funerals.

Darwish: Yes, she never went to weddings, only funerals. I think she was crying for herself, I think she was expressing a hidden sadness. But she also had a very sharp tongue, and could be very sarcastic. She still lives in Galilee, with my brothers. She visits me in the West Bank.

Sbatz: What was it like for you, growing up in a Jewish state after the war?

Darwish: The first shock was realizing I was a refugee. The boys in Lebanon called me a refugee and made fun of me. So did the boys in Galilee. We were defined and rejected as refugees. This gave me a very strong bitterness, and I don't know that I'm free of it today. The second shock was realizing I was a stranger in my homeland. We lived under the military government with its emergency regulations, and this only stopped in 1965. We weren't able to travel from our village without military permission. I felt as if I was living in a prison. So we realized we were not real citizens, we were residents. There is democracy in Israel, but for Jews only.

Sbatz: You were jailed on several occasions and placed under house arrest before you fled Israel. What were you charged with?

Darwish: They never told me why I was jailed. They had the right to put me in jail without giving any reasons. I was given a reason only once. I was invited to speak at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, and I applied for permission. I never received a reply, so I assumed that meant I could go. I went. The next day, I was arrested in Haifa and sent to prison for two months.

Sbatz: You joined the Communist party at a young age. What was the attraction of Communism for you?

Darwish: It wasn't an ideological choice. The Communist party was the only party that defended the rights of the Arabs and called for coexistence between Arabs and Jews.

*Sbatz: Did you know Emile Habiby [a renowned Palestinian novelist and communist, author of *The Pessoptimist*, and the only Arab to receive the Jerusalem Prize]?*

Darwish: Yes, of course. And thanks to Emile Habiby, I was able to visit Galilee five years ago for the first time since I left Israel. There's an interesting story here. An Israeli filmmaker was preparing a film, and Habiby wanted to interview me to discuss our differences and common points. He suggested that we have our conversation in the house where I had lived in Haifa. Some artists were living there at the time. So we set the date, and I got permission to be there for three days. When I arrived, I was overwhelmed with emotion. And then I was told that Emile Habiby had died the night before. His family asked me to give the eulogy. I could barely hold on to my

feelings. I wept. I went to the funeral in Nazareth, and I said maybe history is very ironic, maybe there's no place for both of us. I said his absence gave me the possibility to be present. But I don't know who is absent now, me or him. Emile was very sarcastic, so I said he was leaving the stage and cracking his last joke.

Sbatz: In school, you read Neruda, Lorca, Nazim Hikmet, and also a number of Israeli poets. You have spoken very highly of Yehudi Amichai and of his influence on your work.

Darwish: I think Yehudi Amichai is the greatest Hebrew poet. I met him twice, once in Tel Aviv in 1969, and once in New York at a PEN conference in 1985. In 1969, a group of Israeli poets came to meet a group of Arab poets in Haifa, and then they called to meet us again in Tel Aviv. With Moshe Dayan's permission, I was able to go. Mr. Amichai was very polite, very human. He behaved as a friend. He didn't tell me what he thought of my work directly, but in interviews he said kind things about me, which enraged other Israeli poets, who were very jealous. Amichai is greatly admired among the Palestinian elite and among the Arab elite. They read him in English, though there are some Arabic translations. Once I said in Paris that I liked the conflict between me and Amichai. We compete over who is more in love with this country, who writes about it more beautifully. I hope the conflict will continue in this manner. When I read him, I read myself. I love the way he explores the everyday, the ordinary.

Sbatz: You had a love affair, in Israel, with a Jewish woman called Shulamit, whom you call the beautiful woman of Sodom in one of your poems. Who was she?

Darwish: We met after the 1967 war, and she was my last love in the country. I shouldn't say who she is, because she's still alive, and there is no returning to the past. Things and human beings have changed.

Sbatz: In your poem "A Soldier Dreams of White Lilies," you write of an Israeli soldier who was apparently a friend of yours. He had grown tired of his country, disillusioned by politics, and he was preparing to leave.

Darwish: His first name was Yossi, his last name I don't recall. I knew him from the Communist party. This is what was so positive about the Communist party: Arabs and Jews mixed with one another, they knew one another. A few months after the war, he came to my apartment in Haifa and told me about the war. He said he had decided to leave the country. Last year in Paris, a friend of mine told me he had greetings for me from the soldier who dreams of white lilies. He's a professor of history in Israel now. At the time the poem set off a debate in the Politburo of the Israeli Communist party. The secretary general asked: How come Darwish wrote such a poem—Is he asking us to leave the country to become peace lovers? Meanwhile, Arabs said: How dare you humanize the Israeli soldier? You asked me earlier why

my life is a scandal. This is the scandal of my life. Just now, we found the answer.

Sbatz: You left Israel in 1970, first to go to the Soviet Union and later to settle in Cairo. Why did you leave?

Darwish: I decided to study political economy in the Soviet Union. I knew I was leaving the country for good, though I told nobody about it. I was harshly criticized when I left: Look! The poet of resistance leaves his homeland. Because by that time I was already a symbol. My decision to leave wasn't really a free choice. I had been placed under conditions that were no longer bearable. I had not been allowed to leave Haifa for eight years, and I had been under house arrest for three years without being told why. I felt my horizons were narrow, and I was very ambitious. I wanted to fly. I didn't want to be in jail, and I didn't want to write about being in jail. There was a new world outside. I learned about the realities of the Arab world, which weren't so rosy. We had thought that because everything was black here, everything would be white there. That wasn't the case. My big shock was in Lebanon. I arrived there in 1973. Two years later the civil war started. In Lebanon, I realized exile exists everywhere.

Sbatz: You joined the PLO in Lebanon. What were your responsibilities?

Darwish: I worked as an expert on Israeli affairs at the Palestine Research Center and edited the journal *Palestinian Affairs*. But I had my independence. I wasn't engaged in the bad sense of the term. I could write what I wanted to write. There was democracy in the PLO.

Sbatz: When did you first meet Arafat?

Darwish: I met Arafat in Cairo in 1971, when I was invited to speak at the PNC [Palestine National Council]. He embraced me. He was very warm. He said, "I can smell the fragrance of the homeland on you." We became close friends in Beirut.

Sbatz: Beirut was a meeting place, in those years, for poets and writers throughout the Arab world. What was the ambiance like at the time?

Darwish: Beirut was the capital of Arabic modernity. It was a platform for debates, for democracy, all cultures met there. It was extremely dynamic. I played backgammon with Khalil Hawi [a Lebanese poet who shot himself during the Israeli invasion of Beirut]. I met Iraqis and Syrians, I became friends with Faiz Ahmed Faiz [one of Pakistan's greatest poets, who died in 1984]. Lebanon was also a bridge between East and West. . . . Everyone could create their own Beirut, which was part of the problem. Beirut gives every visitor the impression that it is his. Culturally speaking, it was the center of things. . . . But because of the civil war it was difficult for me to write. I wrote less, and I wrote worse. I'm not satisfied with the writing I did in Beirut.

Shatz: Did you know Ghassan Kanafani [novelist and spokesman for the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, assassinated by Mossad in 1972]?

Darwish: Yes, I knew Kanafani. He was very dynamic, very anxious, very fluent in his writing. I remember sitting at a meeting with him where he took out sheets of paper and wrote an article in a half hour. His body was too narrow for his spirit. I was waiting for him at my office at the [Palestine] Research Center the day he was killed. We were supposed to have lunch at 2:00 P.M. He was late. We thought, that's Ghassan, he's always late. Then we found out he had been killed. He was bombed in his car with the daughter of his sister.

Shatz: Did you ever fear, during the Israeli invasion of June 1982, that this might be the end for the Palestinian movement?

Darwish: Yes, my feeling was this might be the end. The siege was so intense, death was so strong and so clear. The place became very narrow. We lived in two streets. I couldn't see any future. The planes and the tanks didn't allow me to. It was summer, and it was very hot. The end was clear from the beginning, and we agreed to leave. Mr. Arafat was asked by Uri Avnery [the Israeli peace activist and journalist], "Where will you go now?" Arafat gave a very strange answer. He said, "I'm going to Palestine." When the ships left, I stayed in Beirut. After maybe a week, I went to buy bread and saw a huge tank. I realized it was an Israeli tank, that they had occupied Beirut. Then came the massacre of Sabra and Shatila. I looked for a way out. With the help of the Libyan ambassador, who made arrangements with the Phalangists, I was able to get to Syria by car. When I arrived there, a cousin of mine threw a party for me. The Syrian ambassador to Washington was there. When I mentioned that I had gotten out with the help of the Libyan ambassador, he told me that Mr. Draper, the assistant to the U.S. mediator Philip Habib, had had a plan for me to leave. An American car was supposed to come to my house with a driver and an American flag. I would open the left door, and I shouldn't say good morning because the United States and the PLO didn't have a relationship. I would then be driven to Jounieh, north of Beirut, and a helicopter would be waiting to fly me to Cyprus. All expenses would be paid by the United States, except for the helicopter flight, which I would have to pay. But I didn't know about this plan, and they never found me. I wasn't living in my house, because the Israelis were looking for me.

Shatz: You wrote in your Beirut book, Memory for Forgetfulness, that a Palestinian defeat in Lebanon was the lesser evil and that victory would have been a catastrophe. Can you elaborate?

Darwish: If we had won we would have been occupying Lebanon, and this victory would have been worse than defeat. We're not supposed to be occupiers. I think we should have put more effort into avoiding involvement in this dirty civil war. The Palestinian leaders say they didn't choose to inter-

vene, that they were attacked by the Phalangists. Still, we crossed the red line by going to the mountains, the sacred place of the Phalangists.

Sbatz: You said that during the invasion the Arab world was more interested in soccer than in Lebanon.

Darwish: There was no Arab demonstration against the invasion. The only demonstration, a demonstration of 100,000, was in Tel Aviv.

Sbatz: Any thoughts on why there were no Arab demonstrations?

Darwish: Paralysis. And there is no democracy in the Arab world.

Sbatz: You authored the 1988 Algiers Declaration announcing a Palestinian state and implying the PLO's recognition of Israel.

Darwish: Yes. It was a shift in PLO policy away from the total liberation of all of Palestine. From the beginning, I believed a two-state solution was the only solution, because I knew the situation in Israel. I was always among the doves in the PLO.

Sbatz: In 1993, you resigned from the PLO Executive Committee, on which you had served since 1987, to protest the Oslo Accord. What were your objections?

Darwish: My conclusion was that I couldn't vote for the agreement. I couldn't vote against it, but I couldn't vote for it either. I thought it wouldn't lead to real peace. It was too ambiguous. There was no clear link between the interim period and the final status, and there was no clear commitment to withdraw from the occupied territories. And the word "occupation" wasn't even in the text. I felt Oslo would pave the way for escalation. I hoped I was wrong. And now I'm very sad that I was right.

Sbatz: Is it true that Arafat asked you to be the Palestinian minister of culture?

Darwish: He did, but I refused.

Sbatz: It's reported that he said you could be [André] Malraux to his [Charles] de Gaulle, and that you replied that he wasn't de Gaulle, and that even if Palestine one day achieved the grandeur of France, you'd prefer to be [Jean-Paul] Sartre.

Darwish: Yes, something like that.

Sbatz: You belong to a generation of Arab intellectuals who dedicated themselves to various forms of secular nationalism. More and more, young Palestinians are drawn to radical Islam, to groups like Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Does the Islamicization of Palestinian civil society concern you?

Darwish: Yes, it concerns me, because I believe in pluralism. I believe there is room for all religions in Palestine. I am against Zionism. At the same time, I think that if there is hope, the secularists will be stronger than the fundamentalists. In fact, the secular forces are stronger than the fundamentalists now.

But I think they will be even stronger when there is hope, and this is true for Israel, too.

Sbatz: You returned to Palestine six years ago, after a quarter century in exile. You said upon returning, "I returned and I didn't return." What did you mean?

Darwish: I wasn't born in the West Bank. I had never been there before. It's not my private homeland. If I were able to go back to Galilee, I'd feel as if I had returned. Home is a place where you have a memory; without memories you have no real relationship to a place. Also, it is impossible to return. Nobody crosses the same river twice. If I return, I will not find my childhood. There is no return, because history goes on. Return is just a visit to a place of memory, or to the memory of the place.

Sbatz: You have suggested that Palestinian literature, which has been nourished by exile, might enter a crisis once the dream of statehood is realized.

Darwish: There is no guarantee about the future of the text, though I do not wish to put freedom and the text in conflict. The importance of poetry is not measured, finally, by what the poet says, but by how he says it. The value of a poem is not measured by its theme, but by its aesthetic form. We still read Homer even though he wrote about a specific war in a specific time and a specific place. If CNN had existed during the Trojan War, could Homer have written the same poem? I doubt it. He describes details the camera would tell. The role of the poet as witness, as objective witness, has declined, because the camera is more accurate than the writer. I believe the poet today must write the unseen.

Sbatz: Do you still regard yourself as an exile?

Darwish: Exile is a part of my inner being. Exile exists not only in geographical terms. You can be an exile in your homeland, in your own house, in a room. Can I say I'm addicted to exile? Maybe. Exile is multicultural. It's a major theme in literature, not simply a Palestinian question.

Sbatz: When do you think exile will come to an end for you?

Darwish: I think in death. And maybe after death I'll face a new exile. For there is something even more difficult, and that is eternity. I can't imagine anything more frightening than eternity, can you?

Sbatz: Have you ever regretted your decision to leave?

Darwish: I always criticize myself about this decision. Was I right or wrong? I am nothing but my poetry. Did exile help my poetry? Maybe. My horizons became wider when I left as a young man, and I'm much better now as a poet. Whether this is because of exile or just the nature of things, I cannot say. But sometimes I feel shy and ashamed because I left. On a human level, I have regrets. I can't look at my fellow Palestinians without feeling a sense of shame. But my nature is solitary. I prefer to be far from crowds. I like isolation. I don't socialize much.

Sbatz: Are you often recognized on the street?

Darwish: Everybody knows me in the street, and it's a burden in my private life in all Arab countries. I don't allow myself to be seen in a café because everyone is pointing at me. People want to shake my hand, and there are always rumors. I prefer to live in the shadows, not in the light.

Sbatz: I imagine you have been the guest of Arab leaders . . .

Darwish: [A bit sheepish.] Yes. I met Asad, Mubarak, King Hussein, the presidents of Yemen, Tunisia, Algeria, Prince Hassan. . . . Four years ago, I gave a reading in Damascus before an audience of 20,000, and Asad met with me for four hours. He gave you the feeling that he was glad to be with you. He liked to break down the wall between you and him.

Sbatz: So they've met with you despite your often scathing criticisms of Arab regimes. I'm thinking of your remark that prisons are no condition for delivering justice for the Palestinians. . . .

Darwish: They didn't meet with me because they are democrats, but because they understand my special status in the Arab world, as a Palestinian and as a poet.

Sbatz: Days after the attacks of 11 September, you denounced terrorism in a Palestinian newspaper [see Doc. B2 in JPS 122]. What do you make of the American war in Afghanistan?

Darwish: My sympathies were with the victims of 11 September. I understand the American wound. But this doesn't justify the war, and I can't accept Mr. Bush's idea that you must either be with the United States or with terror. I am against U.S. foreign policy and against terror. I am against dividing the world into two camps, that of absolute good and absolute evil. This is not a clash of cultures, it's a political war. And it is time for America to ponder why it is hated. It's not because of envy of the American way of life. It's because of American double standards.