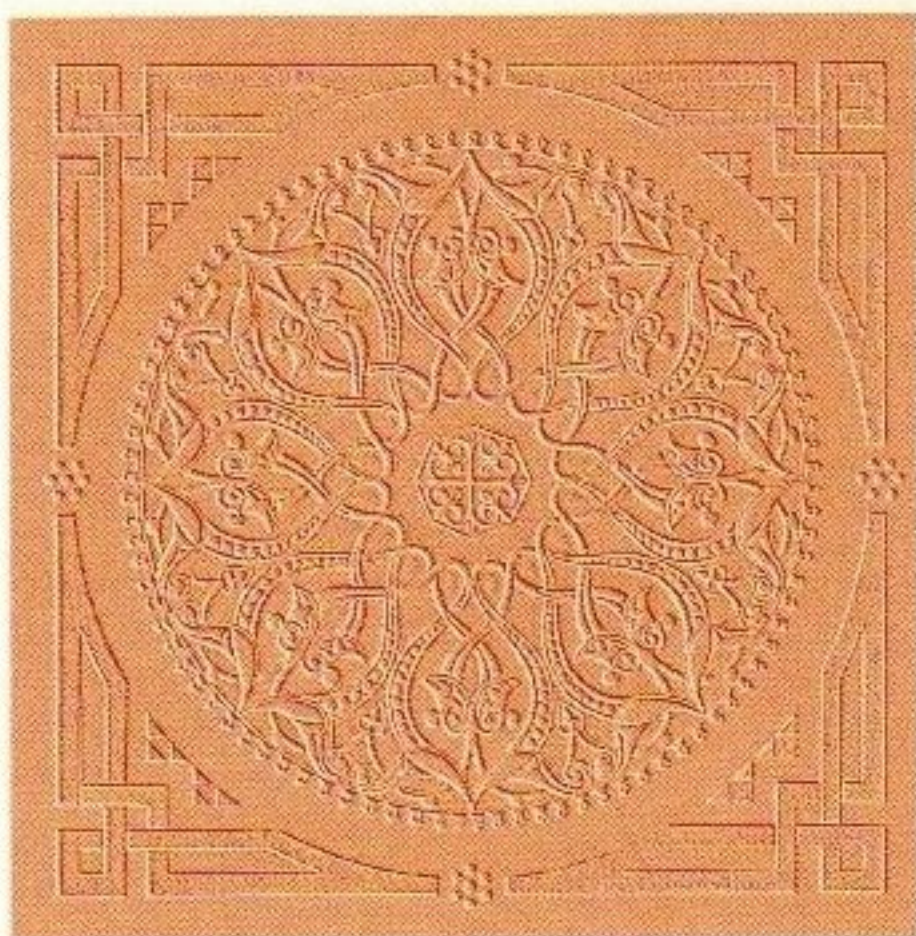


# PSALMS

*Poems by*  
**MAHMUD DARWISH**



*Translated from the Arabic  
and with an Introduction  
by*

**BEN BENNANI**



*Three Continents Press  
Colorado Springs*



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حز اُمیر



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*First English Language Edition*  
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*Paintbrush*, Psalm Three, Psalm Six, Psalm Eleven



# CONTENTS

*Introduction*

3

*Notes*

24

*Works Cited*

27

*Psalms*

31

*About the Translator*

69





## INTRODUCTION

**M**AHMUD DARWISH'S REPUTATION as a major contemporary poet has long been affirmed. His books, totalling more than a dozen, usually appear in several editions, while many of his poems have been translated from the Arabic into Russian, French, Spanish, German, Dutch, and other major languages.<sup>1</sup>

Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award winning poet Richard Eberhart states that although Darwish is known as "Poet of the Palestinian Resistance," a label of high potency to which Darwish himself objects (36), "Darwish's poems are not political poems. They are about love, pain, death—central beliefs and feelings of the poet concerned not so much with the quotidian as with permanent truths felt through immediate experience" (Bennani, back cover). One

must add, however, that Palestinian daily life is—and has been since the Crusades—predicated on the whimsy and cruelty of international, primarily Western, politics. Darwish's poetry is the tenor *par excellence* of a private life collectivized by politics.

No account of Darwish's life is more accurate and detailed than the one dramatized in his poetry. Even facts and dates are there, in poems such as "The Identity Card" and "The Passport," revealing a long, unhappy record of both pain and poetry. Ironically, it is doubtful if the latter could have existed without the former.

Mahmud Darwish was born in Birwa, a small Palestinian village in Galilee, in 1942. Six years later, his father, a farming peasant, was killed during an attack on the village. Darwish remembers that night well:

The bullets fired that evening of the summer of 1948 in the skies of a peaceful village, Birwa, did not discriminate against anyone. I found myself (I had turned six on that day) chased by them into the black olive groves and up the rough mountains, sometimes crawling on my belly. After a long night of blood, terror, and thirst, I found myself in a country called Lebanon. (al-Naqqash 108; Trans. Bennani)

Two years later, Darwish returned “home.” Here is his account:

One evening I was told: tonight we return to Palestine. We walked in the dark for many kilometers of rough and steep mountain paths—I, my uncle, and a guide who thanks to his expert knowledge of the area’s terrain earned a living. In the morning I came face to face with a steel wall of lost hope. I was finally inside promised Palestine. But where was it? No, this could not have been Palestine—that land of magic, the end of my terror and torment! It did not embrace me, as I had anticipated. And upon my return, after two years of waiting, I found myself a prisoner to the same fate of exile. The land was no longer mine. No longer mine! That truth has been, up till now, the strongest force to stir my feelings for the occupation and my attempts at writing poetry alike... I did not return to my home and village. It was painful for me to accept the fact that both were destroyed and burned. How could entire villages be destroyed? And why? And how are they built again? (al-Yaghi 15-17; Trans. Bennani)

For Darwish, a village is the microcosm of human existence itself, the nucleus that holds his emotional, social, and political life together. Darwish's village Birwa was one of many Palestinian villages to become targets of terrorism. On October 29, 1956, another village, Kafr Qassim, became the target of such terrorism. On that day, Israeli authorities imposed a military curfew on the people of the village, to be in effect from 5 p.m. to 6 a.m. People in the village were notified of the curfew at 4:45 p.m., fifteen minutes before the curfew went into effect, while those who worked in the fields and quarries outside the village never knew of the existing curfew. When they returned home after five, they were met by machine-gun fire.

For the Palestinian poet living in Israel, Kafr Qassim became a holy city, a symbol of protest and resistance. In Darwish's fifth book of poems, *'Asafir bila ajniba* (Acre, 1960), Kafr Qassim is dramatized in a sequence of poems entitled "Flowers of Blood." Of the six "flowers," two have become poignant documents of terror: "Victim # 18" and "Victim # 48."

In the introduction to his first collection of poetry, which he appropriately titled *Birds Without Wings*, Darwish talks about his early childhood following his escape to Lebanon—a childhood which from the beginning helped him understand the relationship between the personal and the public. He writes:



My childhood signalled the beginning of my own private tragedy which was born along with the beginning of the tragedy of an entire nation. That childhood was thrown into the fire of war, in the tent, in exile, all at once and without any extractable reason. All of a sudden, it found itself being treated as an adult, an adult who had the strength to endure. (Darwish; Trans. Bennani)

For Darwish, childhood had lost its unique character. The child, denied the “things” as well as the language that set children apart from grown-ups, quickly realized that he did not differ from adults. Both his mind and soul were introduced to adult words: “boundaries,” “refugees,” “occupation,” “Red Cross,” “Relief Agency,” “return,” and so on. Although he did not always understand the meaning of such words, he did understand they were unavoidable. “Refugee” and “return” were most poignant. Childhood became a place to which “return” would eventually take him and thus rid him of the epithet “refugee.” His whole being became a prisoner to the word “return.” For two long years, Darwish thought and dreamt of nothing but denial, torment, exile. He had forgotten how to play, climb a tree, pick a flower, or chase a butterfly (al-Yagi 14; Trans. Bennani). Instead he learned to defy, to delve into deep silence, and (perhaps most positively) to contemplate. The

ability to contemplate, Darwish concedes years later, led him to poetry. It is quite clear that childhood was not a pleasant state in Darwish's life. He was then, as he put it, a victim of aggression. His childhood was as tormented as his homeland; indeed, it was his homeland.

Such was the poet's "exiled childhood," an experience which he relives a thousand times over in his poetry and prose. Chronologically, it lasted only two years. Psychologically, however, it is alive in his every act and thought.

The vocabulary which Darwish had to learn as a refugee also remained with him after his return to Palestine. There, as in Lebanon, he was a refugee, if no longer in a foreign country, worse yet in his own homeland. Darwish explains:

In exile I had time to wait... I felt that the tragedy was temporary; there was time for hope. Enduring the torture of exile was justifiable, while dreaming about home was matter of fact. Being a refugee at home, however, cannot be justified... It is unfathomable for the mind of a child or a young boy... I felt sad and oppressed even in my sweetest dreams... My reactions to the bitter reality showed all over my face like secret signs or intimations of doom. I felt as if I were borrowed from an ancient book which I could not read. Luckily, however, the night-

mare did not continue in this fashion. The Palestinian refugee in Palestine was not left “free” in his misery. That meant two things: first, more pain and sorrow; secondly, defiance and consequently resistance. (al-Naqqash III; Trans. Bennani)

In 1950 a group of Yemeni Jews settled in what used to be Birwa and started the Kibbutz Moshaff. Darwish had already moved to Haifa to attend school, but could not continue beyond the secondary level. Following his graduation in 1960, he went to work in literary journalism which he pursues to this day.<sup>2</sup> In Haifa, Darwish worked for both *al-Ittihad* and *al-Jadid*, newspapers published in Arabic by the Israeli Communist Party, Rakkah.

The sixties were Darwish’s most difficult, though most productive years. The income he derived from writing in Arabic papers published in Israel was extremely modest, so modest that he could not afford to rent his own apartment. For a long time he remained a “guest” of the Palestinian writer Emile T’uma, occupying a room in T’uma’s house on ‘Abbass Street in Carmel, a suburb of Haifa. Carmel is the setting for Darwish’s biographical novel *Yawmiyyat al-huzn al-‘adi* (Diary of an Ordinary Sorrow, 1973).

In addition to living under constant house arrest, Darwish was imprisoned several times: in 1961, 1965, and 1967. The crime was always the same: not having a travel

permit. In 1965 Jerusalem had a poetry festival. Darwish made sure he did not miss it, even though the authorities had refused to issue him a travel permit.

On another trying occasion—a Muslim feast on which Darwish wished to visit his mother who lived an hour's drive away from Haifa—Darwish failed not only to obtain a permit, but also to leave his quarters. He tells it this way:

My family lives in a small village an hour's drive from where I live. I had not seen them for several months. Because my family regards holy days with emotion, I send a carefully worded letter to the police department. I write: "I should like to draw your attention to some purely humanitarian reasons, which, I hope, will not clash with your strong regard for the security of the State and the safety and interests of the public. By kindly granting my request for a permit to visit my parents during the holidays, you would prove that the security of the State is not contradictory to your appreciation of people's feelings." My friends leave the city and I am left behind by myself. All the families will meet tomorrow, and I have no right to be with mine. I remain alone. (Haydar 192-193)

That same evening, when Darwish returned to his apartment, he found his mother waiting outside. First, he had to report to the police station to prove that he had not left town. His mother had brought the feast to him.

Darwish's emergence as a poet was not sudden. Nor was his poetry of resistance without precedence. Both Darwish and his fellow poets have always had strong ties with Palestine's liberation movement and its literature. As we look into the history of Arabic literature in Palestine, we clearly see that Palestinian poetry of resistance began as early as 1936.<sup>3</sup> In late April of that year, the Palestinian revolutionary war broke out. It started with a general strike in which various labor, professional, and political organizations participated on a wide scale. Soon, fighting broke out in many Palestinian cities between Arab Palestinians and British soldiers. Before the general strike went into effect, the Palestinians had disclosed their demands to the British mandatory authorities. They aimed at stopping Jewish migrations into Palestine and at establishing a law which would prevent land from falling into Jewish hands either through sales made to Jews or through British mandatory agents (who subsequently relinquished the land to the Jews). The third and most sensitive demand called for the formation and institution of an Arab national government in Palestine.

The revolution of 1936 was fierce and widespread. That revolution undoubtedly created a new generation of



Palestinian Arabs with a special outlook on the political problems facing their country—an outlook which can be characterized by three words: fierce, indignant, and pugnacious. Victory was possible, or so it seemed at the time. Optimism, understandably enough, was widespread; so was the belief that the only way out was through force. The cry "Resist!" was heard everywhere—in every corner of the land, in every phase of life, in politics as well as poetry. The educated elite, among whom were many poets, led the way. They shared common political goals, but it was their artistic and humanitarian visions and beliefs that united them most strongly.

Among the early poets of the resistance, three are especially worth mentioning: Ibrahim Tuqan, 'Abd al-Rahim Mahmud, and Abu Salma ('Abd al-Karim al-Karmi'). By and large, their poetry was modeled after the traditional or classical *qasida*.<sup>4</sup> The political turmoil of the period did not allow these poets any time for artistic innovation or personal renewal. The fires at home were pernicious and consumed most of their imagination. Elsewhere, most notably in Egypt, and ironically for more or less opposite reasons, poets were not that innovative either. Unlike Palestine, Egypt was in relative calm in 1936. No significant changes took place there.

Whatever the case may be, the *qasida* remained the ideal poetic form in Palestine. Owing to the severe and repeated threats against their Arabness as well as against the Arab

identity of Palestine. Tuqan, Mahmud, Abu Salma, and other Palestinian poets naturally chose the *qasida* to preserve a culture and a literary heritage that were purely Arabic. Furthermore, the form's monorhyme and monometer made it easy for millions of people to learn by heart and to chant at feasts, political rallies, strikes, and even at the front. In 1936 and after, the *qasida* form became a political discourse aimed at the entire population, not just at a few educated individuals; it was heard in the crowded streets and on the battlefields, not just in literary circles. It had to be direct, musical, and impassioned. Jabra Ibrahim Jabra underscores its effectiveness as a medium of political resistance in Palestine:

...[The *qasida*] might be condemned as too weak a toy against guns, but in actual fact it was often as good as dynamite. It gave point to a whole nation's suffering and wrath. It crystallized political positions in telling lines which, memorized by old and young, stiffened popular resistance and provided rallying slogans. (Jabra 20)

The revolution of 1936 lasted for almost twelve years. On November 29, 1947, the United Nations divided Palestine into two separate states, one Arab, the other Jewish. The latter, with only 20 percent of the total

population, received 55 percent of the land. Naturally, the Partition Plan was ill-received by the Palestinian Arabs who tried to negotiate away the obvious discrepancy but failed.

The year 1948 was a very bad year for Arabs in general and for Palestinians in particular. The voices of the previous decade literally died out. In 1941, Tuqan died at the early age of 36; Mahmud fell in battle at 35; while Abu Salma went into obscure self-exile. The literary vacuum created by their disappearance engendered a new kind of poetry—one dominated by despair and defeatism, appropriately called poetry of the Palestinian tragedy.

As Edmund Ghareeb points out, this poetry, written largely by poets living in the West Bank and other Arab countries, "was sentimental and melancholy—the expression of a bewildered people unable to comprehend the forces shaping its destiny. Their literature conveyed the people's grief and longing for the land from which they had been forcibly evicted" (xxvii). This kind of poetry reflected and dominated the Palestinian mood for several years.

The wave of helplessness, despair, and defeatism which had spread all over the Arab world and not just in Palestine began to abate slowly, checked by a series of political events. The starting point was, without doubt, the Egyptian revolution of July 23, 1952. It resuscitated hope in the Palestinian poets, liberating them from the shackles imposed by the crushing defeat of 1948.

In 1958, Syria and Egypt united and emerged as the

United Arab Republic. Although the union was short-lived, it did add momentum to the tidal wave of hope and optimism that was spreading throughout the Arab world. The first signs of the new spirit in poetry emanated from within the occupied land. The feeling was revolutionary, optimistic, and powerful. The September separation between Syria and Egypt could not destroy it. On the contrary, the separation merely strengthened the emotions in the same way subsequent setbacks, such as the war of 1967, did. Speaking of the '67 war, Darwish explains:

Literarily... the June war did not turn me inside out. Nor did it destroy my values as it did destroy the values of many others outside my country. I was not living in the clouds then, and had no need of such a pernicious proof to bring me back to reality. Nevertheless, it was a painful experience... Poetry is neither a perishable good, nor a game. (al-Naqqash 105-106)

Mahmud Darwish is at once the son and father of this new kind of poetry in Palestine. The following few lines exemplify it:

I have lost a sweet dream  
I have lost the touch of tulips

And my night has been long  
Upon the fences of gardens  
But I have not lost my way.

In an interview published by the Lebanese literary magazine *al-Tariq*, Darwish talks about his literary beginnings:

I cannot recall when exactly I started writing poetry. Nor can I recall the incentive that led me to write the first poem. I do remember, however, that at an early age I did try to write a long poem about my return to the motherland, in which I followed the *qasida* form. It brought ridicule from the old, and surprise from the young. (Dakrub 61)

Darwish's early literary endeavors, then, were clearly imitations of classical Arabic poetry, more specifically the oldest genre, the *qasida*. Such imitations belonged to an unavoidable stage in his literary development, a stage from which he soon was to emerge as a mature, highly talented poet.

Although classical poetry's hypnotic hold on Darwish was relatively short-lived, some of its more positive effects are still present in his poetry. Classical Arabic poetry afforded Darwish a thorough understanding of the lan-



guage and a rich, vast vocabulary. As a result, Darwish usually has no difficulty finding *le mot juste*. Nor does he fabricate any spurious etymologies. His visions and experiences, always as large as life, are never too large for his verbal ability.

In addition, Darwish inherited much of the music we hear in his poetry. The traditional Arabic ode overflows with external music, or heard music; its main sources being rhyme, resonance, and nunnation.<sup>5</sup> This one characteristic of the form has received so much negative criticism in modern times that many poets have consciously eschewed it altogether, thereby writing poetry with little or no music at all, moving to a "free verse" common in the West since the early 1900s. Instead of eschewing external music altogether, Darwish toned it down, balancing it with internal music—the kind felt by the spirit. As a result, his poems are neither clanging nor prosaic.

Following the early and natural period of imitation, Darwish's growth as a poet moved through several different stages. The first is the lyrical stage at which Darwish talks about himself and his personal experiences. This form of direct and immediate expression is noticeable in the old and new poems alike. His first book of poems (and to a large extent his second, *Awraq al-zaytun*, 1964) abounds with the personal lyric. "The Identity Card" typifies this stage which eventually evolved into a second stage at which Darwish falls under the influence of the *mahjar* (or emigrant) poets

(Badawi 179) whose strong romantic attitudes shaped not only Darwish's poetry but also that of his contemporaries throughout the Arab world.

Rhetoric and declamation gave way to a more delicate, less direct, and generally quieter kind of poetry. Darwish calls this stage of his literary life the stage of "the dreaming revolutionary" (al-Naqqash 127), for indeed even his denunciations of the political and social conditions in his occupied country are enveloped in a bittersweet, nostalgic, and dreamlike aura. Like the *mahjar* poets who suffered from exile and a feeling of loss, Darwish, too, felt that he lived in exile (even within his homeland) and felt the need to return.

The third stage in Darwish's literary growth is the longest and most mature. Here the poet finally emerges as an innovative craftsman, knowledgeable of and sensitive to not only Arabic poetry but also the poetry of other nations, with a penchant for symbol and myth. The year is 1967, and the title of his new book is *Akhir al-layl*, (The End of Night). Darwish chooses suggestion over direct address, narration over discourse, and persona over the personal "I."

At this stage, Darwish has definitely felt the influence of several leading Arab modernists, particularly Badr Shakir al-Sayyab whose poetry Darwish read voraciously.<sup>6</sup> In spite of his proclivity for symbol and myth, he preserves clarity of expression and universality of vision in his poetry, thereby insuring effective communication with his fellow

countrymen, which obscure poetry would have destroyed. Speaking of symbol, Darwish says:

In my poetry, symbol, as I see it, is not obscure. It is quickly understood. Basically, it is a substitute for direct expression. (al-Naqqash 127)

Certainly, symbol, as a figure of speech, enabled Darwish to write highly impassioned and "charged" poetry with minimal censorship from the Israeli government. Symbol becomes, as Darwish himself puts it, a form of artistic trickery. "The Arab writer," points out Najwa Farah in her review of a collection of poems in the Israeli journal *New Outlook*, "has to beat around the bush hiding the greatest part of his story, depending as it were on the intelligence and comprehension of the reader" (48-49).

Another remarkable feature of Darwish's new poetry is the dialogue and the natural ease with which it is constructed and presented. In poems such as "A Soldier Dreaming of White Lilies" and "The Prison Cell," Darwish becomes both poet and dramatist. He once said, "I would so much like to try my hand at writing a verse play" (al-Naqqash 133). Closely related to dialogue is the use of two or more voices expressly in the absence of dialogue. The voices are always heard in a lifelike setting which dominates much of Darwish's poetry.

It is an essential element of Darwish's overall design to present as well as preserve his Arab and Palestinian identity in what has become for him an imposing and largely non-Arab presence. Darwish does so with linguistic and stylistic strength and charm, without succumbing to racial and chauvinistic overtones.

Though multifaceted and basically philosophical, this complex attitude is most clearly and forcefully illustrated in "The Identity Card," a dramatic monologue in which the speaker, an Arab quarry worker, expresses his pride and defiance in simple, direct, and convincing language:

Write down:  
I'm an Arab  
I work as a stone cutter  
I cut bread  
And clothes and books  
For my eight children  
And never beg at your door  
And never belittle myself  
At your doorstep

Although Darwish's poetry abounds in examples of suffering and pain, such suffering and pain are always the outcome of firsthand experience, rarely yielding to defeatism and despair. The poetry is always hopeful and defiant; indeed, defiance solidifies hope for Darwish. The last

stanza of "A Lover from Palestine" eloquently illustrates the above:

In your name I shouted at the enemy:  
"Worms, feed on my flesh if I sleep.  
The eggs of ants do not hatch eagles,  
And the shell of an adder's egg  
Conceals a snake.  
I know the Romans' horses,  
But I also know  
That I am the fire of youth and  
The knight of knights!"

Darwish derives further strength from a number of natural, mythical, and spiritual symbols. The natural symbol (rock, mountain, tree, sea) is undeniably indigenous; it is, therefore, Darwish's direct link with the land he lost but still loves—a land which is at once his bed of love and sepulcher:

You are my virginal garden  
Felled by neither wind nor woodman's axe  
Your braids have been spared  
By beasts of desert and woods

and:



My father once said:  
He who has no homeland  
Has no sepulcher on this earth.

The mythical and spiritual symbols have numerous sources both local and distant, modern and ancient. They include past and present figures and events in Arab, Muslim, and Christian history. The most prominent figure is Christ; the most dominant and recurrent event is the crucifixion. To a non-Christian like Darwish, the crucifixion is "religious" only insofar as it is recognized as an unjust, painful, and unavoidably immoral act. Furthermore, to the Muslim Darwish, Christ is Palestine personified. In "A Naive Song on the Red Cross," the speaker in the first half of the poem is a motherless child who beseeches his negligent father to reclaim him from the "embrace" of the Red Cross:

I ask a million questions  
But see in your eyes only the silence of stones  
Answer me, father! Aren't you my father  
Or have I become son of the Red Cross?

In "My Beloved Rises from Her Sleep," Darwish tells us that the cross also carries him "in the circle of light" and teaches him "the language of nails" as well. In these two lines alone, Darwish underlines the essence of resistance poetry: hope and defiance.

To read Darwish's poetry along purely political and ideological lines would undermine its excellence and elegance. However, there is no denying that Darwish was familiar with and influenced by both communist and socialist writers.

The fact remains that for Darwish oppression, suffering, resistance, freedom and the like were not abstractions: they were truths and everyday realities to which he responded with poetic experiences that demanded and shaped their own forms. His poems are experiential and biographical. In form, they range from the classical ode, *qasida*, to free verse, *sh'ir hurr*. (Moreh 159-288).

In the final analysis, however, Darwish's poetry refuses categorization. It is at once classical and modern, formal and colloquial, universal and personal, experiential as well as experimental as the next seventeen psalms amply illustrate. Though primarily "motivated" or "inspired" by political and military circumstances, the poems rise from their sources—like the phoenix—to celebrate what is at once personal and mythical, local and global, in language that is both simple and textured, natural and studied, culminating in both magic and rapture.

Ben Bennani

*Bellagio, Italy*  
November 1991

## NOTES

1. Raja' al-Naqqash, Egyptian critic, essayist and editor-in-chief of the monthly book series *Kitab al-hilal*, calls Darwish "one of the most brilliant contemporary Arab poets." 'Abd al-Rahman al-Yaghi of the Jordanian University of Amman devotes six chapters (ca. 300 pages) of his *Studies in Poetry of the Occupied Land: Dirasat fi shi'r al-ard al-mubtalla*; Amman: M'ahad al-buhuth wa al-dirasat al-'arabiyya, 1969, pp.55-346) to a thematic study of Darwish's poetry from 1960 to 1967.

2. Today Darwish lives in Paris and edits the Palestinian literary review *al-Karmel*.

3. Actually, Palestinian literature of resistance dates back to the days of the Crusades, but it was not until modern times that it became so sophisticated and complex.

4. The form dates back to pre-Islamic days, and therefore, is one of the oldest known forms in Arabic. The root of the word is the Arabic *qa sa da*, meaning "to aim." Traditionally, the *qasida* consists

of three parts: *nasil*, a bittersweet section in which the poet visits a deserted camp site in hopes of meeting the woman he loves; *rabil*, the poet's journey to find his loved one, followed by sensuous descriptions of the natural life and beauty of the desert; and *madih*, the main part of the *qasida*, in which the poet praises his tribe and/or a wealthy patron. In addition to the *madih* (panegyric), the aim of the poem is also *hija'*, loosely translated by some into "satire"—a tidal flood of abuse and insult. For a detailed description of the major parts of the *qasida*, see the *Encyclopedia of Islam* (Vol. I, 2nd ed., 1960); H.A.R. Gibb, *Arabic Literature* (London, 1926); and R. A. Nicholson, *A Literary History of the Arabs* (Cambridge, 1953).

The *qasida* can be anywhere from 30 to 120 lines long. Each line ends in the same rhyme and is divided into two hemistichs. Only in the opening line of the poem do the two hemistichs rhyme together. Furthermore, the same meter is used throughout. M.M. Badawi characterizes the *qasida* as "an imposing verbal edifice, seeking to produce its effect by sheer rhetoric, of which the resounding phrase contributes a vital element." [*An Anthology of Modern Arabic Verse* (Beirut: Dar al-nahar, 1970) p.xii].

5. (Arabic gram.) the addition of a final *nun*, the letter "n," to a noun.

6. Badr Shakir al-Sayyab (1924-1964) was born in the village Jaykur in Iraq. He studied Arabic and English literature at the Teacher's Training College in Baghdad, then worked as a school teacher for a while but got fired because of his political beliefs; he started as a romantic, then became a communist, but was disenchanted with communism after the political massacres of 1957. Al-Sayyab is credited with freeing Arabic poetry of its traditional forms.

## *Introduction*

while his own symbolist poetry betrays the influence of T. S. Eliot and Edith Sitwell.

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PSALMS

حز اھیر



- ١ -

أحبك ، أو لا أحبك\_

أذهب ، أترك خلفي عناوين

قابلة للضياع . وأنتظر العائدين ، وهم

يعرفون مواعيد موتي و يأتون . أنت التي

لا أحبك حين أحبك ، أسوار بابل ضيقة في النهار ،

وعيناك واسعتان ، ووجهك منتشر في الشعاع .

## *Psalm One*

To love you, or not to love you—

I go away, leaving behind me addresses susceptible to loss and wait for those who will return; they know the visiting hours of my death, so they come. You are the one I don't love when I love you. The walls of Babylon shrink in the day; your eyes enlarge; and your face incandesces in the glare.

One would think you were not born yet; we had not been separated before; you had not felled me. On the terraces of the storm every word is beautiful; every meeting a farewell.

Nothing between us except this encounter; nothing except this farewell.

To love you, or not to love you—

My forehead flees from me; I sense that you are

nothing or everything, that you are susceptible to loss.

To want you, or not to want you—

The murmur of streams sears in my blood. The day I see you I go away.

I tried to recover the friendship of lost things—  
Done!

I tried to boast of eyes capable of containing every fall—  
Tried to carve around your waste a name suitable for an olive but it begot a star.

I want you when I say I don't want you..

My face falls.

A distant river dissolves my body. And in the marketplace they sell my blood like canned soup.

I want you when I say I want you—

Woman who has placed the shores of the Mediterranean in her lap, the gardens of Asia on her shoulders, and all the chains in her heart.

To want you, or not to want you—

The murmur of streams, the rustle of pines, the surge of oceans, and the feathers of nightingales all sear in my blood.

The day I see you, I go away.

To sing you, or not to sing you—

I hush. I cry. There is no special time for crying  
or hushing. You are my sole crying. You are my single  
silence.

My skin constricts around my throat; under my  
window the wind marches in uniform; darkness waxes  
without warning. When the soldiers abandon the palms  
of my hands

I will write something..

When the soldiers desert my feet

I will walk a little..

When the soldiers relinquish my vision

I will see you and discover myself again.

To sing you, or not to sing you

You are the sole song; you sing me if I hush.

You are the only silence.

## *Psalm Two*

Nowadays  
I find myself dry  
Like a tree in a book  
And the wind, a passing matter.  
To fight or not to fight?  
That is not the question;  
What's important is for my throat to be strong.  
To work or not to work?  
That is not the question;  
What's important is for me to rest eight days a week  
According to Palestinian Standard Time.  
Homeland reiterated in songs and massacres.  
Show me the source of death;  
Is it the dagger... or the lie?  
To remember I have a lost roof

I must sit out in the nude  
To remember my country's pure air  
I must inhale tubercular air  
To remember the gazelle swimming in whiteness  
I must be a prisoner of memories  
To remember that my mountains are high  
I must comb the storm from my brow  
And to safeguard ownership of my distant sky  
I must own not even my own skin.

Homeland reiterated in massacres and songs,  
Why do I smuggle you from airport to airport  
Like opium  
Like invisible ink  
Or a transmitter?

I want to draw your form,  
You who are scattered in files and surprises  
I want to draw your form,  
You who fly on shrapnel and wings of birds  
I want to draw your form  
But the sky steals my hand  
I want to draw your form,  
You who are beleaguered between wind and dagger  
I want to draw your form  
To find my shape in you  
Instead I'm accused of being abstract,

Of forging documents and photographs  
You, who are belaguered between dagger and wind.

Homeland recreated in songs and massacres,  
How you change to a dream and steal suddenness  
And leave me petrified.  
Maybe you're more beautiful as a dream  
Maybe you're more beautiful!

No name remains in Arab history  
For me to borrow,  
To climb with to your secret windows.  
All the cover names are confiscated  
In the air-conditioned recruitment offices  
Will you accept my name—  
My only cover name—  
Mahmud Darwish?  
As for my original name  
It's been stripped off my flesh  
By the whips of the Police and the pine cones of Carmel

Homeland repeated in massacres and songs,  
Show me the provenience of death  
Is it the dagger  
Or the lie?!

## *Psalm Three*

On the day when my words  
were earth...  
I was a friend to stalks of wheat.

On the day when my words  
were wrath  
I was a friend to chains.

On the day when my words  
were stones  
I was a friend to streams.

On the day when my words  
were a rebellion  
I was a friend to earthquakes.



On the day when my words  
were bitter apples  
I was a friend to the optimist.

But when my words became  
honey...  
flies covered  
my lips!..

## *Psalm Four*

I left my face on my mother's kerchief  
Hauled mountains in my memory  
And went away..  
The city destroyed its gates  
And stacked them on the decks of ships  
The way greenness is stacked in the receding fields..

I lean on the wind  
Unbreakable stature!  
Why do I vacillate.. when you are my rock?

The distance slaps me  
The way fresh death slaps the faces of lovers  
And the closer I get to the psalms  
The weaker I grow

Corridors clogged with emptiness!  
When do I arrive?..

Blessed is he who is wrapped in his own skin!  
Blessed is he who utters his true name without a mis-  
take!

Blessed is he who eats an apple  
And does not become a tree.  
Who drinks from the water of distant rivers  
And does not become a cloud!

Blessed is the rock that worships its bondage  
And does not covet the wind's freedom!..

## *Psalm Five*

Every time a cloud alights on a wall  
Must my brow fly to it like a broken window?  
Must I forget that I'm afflicted with oblivion  
And have lost my identity?

Like the hymen  
I'm susceptible to explosion...  
And how my eyes enlarge when they behold  
a plethora of prophets' faces?  
Follow me, Oceans  
(You despair of your own color)  
And I'll show you a different staff--  
Like the Levant  
I'm susceptible to wonders..  
I'm a condition which loses its condition

When it ceases to cry.  
Will you still call thunder “thunder”  
and lightning “lightning”  
If the voice petrifies and the color flees?

Whenever I leave my skin  
And the senility of place  
Shadows procreate and cover me.  
Whenever I blow in my ashes  
In search of a forgotten ember  
I find nothing but my old face  
Which I left on my mother’s kerchief.

Like a thunderbolt  
I’m susceptible to death.

## *Psalm Six*

The trees of my country are apprentices of greenness  
and I an apprentice of memory.  
The voice lost in the wilderness  
swerves toward the sky and genuflects:  
Cloud, will you return?

I'm not that sad  
However, he who doesn't know the trees  
doesn't love the birds.  
Whoever is accustomed to lying  
knows no wonderment.  
No, I'm not that sad  
yet he knows no fear  
whoever is unaccustomed to lying.  
I'm not that short!

It's the trees that are so tall.  
Ladies and gentlemen,  
I love the birds  
and know the trees  
I know wonderment  
for I've known no lie.  
I'm evident as the truth, manifest as the dagger.  
Therefore, I ask you:  
Fire at the birds  
that I may describe the trees.  
Stop the Nile  
that I may describe Cairo.  
Stop the Tigris or the Euphrates or both  
that I may describe Baghdad.  
Stop Barada  
that I may describe Damascus.  
And stop me from talking  
that I may describe myself..

## *Psalm Seven*

The shade of the palm trees, the last of the martyrs, and the radio transmits daily a sound picture of the situation of our loved ones. I love you in autumn and in winter.

—Haifa doesn't weep. You do. We won't forget the features of the city; it was woman and prophet.

The sea! No! The sea hasn't entered our houses in this fashion. Five windows drowned, but the roofs teem with dry grass and sky—

I said good-bye to my jailor. He was happy with the tawdry war. Land of carnations and revolvers, my mother was not with me. I left looking for you behind time and



radio. Your form splintered me, scattered me everywhere.

Speech was a sin and silence an exile. And martyrs were prisoners, praying for death in your valley. Death was the ticket of admission to your hands. You belittled our tears.

Sometimes memories are the identity cards of the exiles, but time has seduced memory and begot more refugees. The past now departs and leaves them without memories. Do you remember us?

What if you say: Yes! We remember everything about you! What if we say: Yes! There are in this world judges who defer to power.

From every window I threw away memories like watermelon rind and clung to the twilight closest to the pine (the rain shines in a distant land; the girls gather ambiguous fears). And memories flash like lightning in my flesh and return me to you...Like memory, death too marches to you, you, a country dangling between all the daggers of the world and the waistline of the sky.

The shade of the palm trees, the last of the martyrs and the radio transmits daily a sound picture of the condition of our loved ones. I love you in autumn and in winter.

## *Psalm Eight*

Palestine, your names are known by whimsy  
The thongs of history know you  
Its prisons and places  
Of exile know you  
You've been a captive in all ages  
Why predicate your existence on such a venture?  
Why proclaim yourself  
Embryo of the world?  
Why are you beautiful to the point of suicide?  
And more than that:  
Why not renounce your claim to me  
That I may stop dying?

Palestine, you are cruel as stupor  
Say it once and for all:

Our love is over!  
That I may become capable of dying and departing.

I envy the winds that swerve  
Suddenly from the ashes of my forefathers  
I envy the thoughts buried in the memory of martyrs.  
And I envy your sky cached in children's eyes  
But I don't envy myself.  
You spread onto my body like sweat  
You spread into my body like desire  
You take over my memory like an invader  
And occupy my brain like light.  
Die, that I may mourn you  
Or be my wife that I may know betrayal  
Once and for all.

## *Psalm Nine*

You are a rose outside time and consciousness  
A kiss in the folds of winds...  
Surprise me with a single dream  
Spare yourself my madness!...

I distanced myself from you  
To be near you  
But I discovered eternity.

I came closer to you  
To get away from you  
But I discovered my senses.

Between distance and closeness  
A stone the size of a dream

Neither approaches  
Nor retreats  
But you are my country  
And I'm not a stone  
And that's why I neither soar the sky  
Nor walk the earth  
I remain a stranger...

## *Psalm Ten*

Interminable agony  
has brought me back to a street in the suburbs of my  
childhood  
Made me enter houses,  
hearts  
and blades of wheat  
Gave me an identity  
Turned me into a controversy  
this protracted agony.

It seemed to them  
that I was dead and crime was ransomed with songs  
    They passed by and did not pronounce my name.  
    They interred my corpse in files and coups d'etat  
and went away.

[The country I used to dream in remains the country  
I used to dream in].

It was a short life  
and a drawn-out death  
I rose for a second  
and wrote the name of my land on my corpse  
and on a gun  
I said: This one is my destination  
the other my guide  
to the coastal towns  
but the minute I moved  
they killed me.

They interred my corpse in files and coups d'etat  
and went away.

[The country I used to dream in  
will remain the country I used to dream in].

In my protracted pain  
I am the master of sorrow  
the tears of every Arab girl in love.  
Singers and proselytizers multiply around me  
and from my corpse sprout poetry and leaders  
All the panders of the popular tongue  
applaud  
and applaud

and applaud  
Long live  
this interminable suffering.

Interminable agony  
has brought me back to a street in the suburbs of my  
childhood  
Taken me into houses, hearts, and stalks of wheat  
Turned me into a controversy  
Bestowed upon me an identity  
and a legacy of chains.



## *Psalm Eleven*

Nothing left for me  
but to be a vagrant in your shadow which is my shadow  
Nothing left for me  
but to dwell in your voice which is my voice.

I rolled down from a cross that is spread out  
like a cloudless day against an unbiased horizon  
to the smallest mountain reached by vision  
but I did not find my wound and my freedom!  
Because I don't know your whereabouts  
and can't find my footsteps  
and because my back isn't nailed to you  
I've become increasingly humpbacked  
like your sky that befriends the windows of airplanes.  
Return to me the syllables of my name

that I may seek a verdict from the fibers of trees.  
Return to me the alphabet of my face  
that I may make an arbiter from the imminent storms  
Return to me the causes of my joy  
that I may appeal to an unjustifiable change of heart.  
Because my voice is dry as a flagpole  
and my hand empty as a national anthem  
and because my shadow is vast as a festival  
and the lines of my face go for a ride in an ambulance  
because of all of this  
I am a citizen in an unborn kingdom...

## *Psalm Twelve*

I've locked up my self inside myself  
because my self doesn't spy on myself.  
And the rain falls outside  
without a reason.

Blessed is he who knows the limits of my happiness!  
Blessed is the god who reads my freedom  
Blessed is the guard who chains my peace of mind  
in his vigilant eyes.  
Blessed is he who understands  
that I am at once the prisoner and the jailor.  
O windows that are distant like first love,  
I do not live in Babylon  
It is Babylon lives in the lines  
of my face wherever I go.

O windows that are distant like first love,  
I am not exiled  
for in my heart I banished all exiles and went away.

The rain falls outside  
without a reason.

And scarceness flourishes inside  
for many reasons.

So who will rearrange the seasons  
and change the order of the calendar?

Who will teach me the lamentations of Jeremiah  
on the roads of accursed Jerusalem,  
that I, for the first time,  
may disclose the date of my birth?  
Who?

## *Psalm Thirteen*

I am preparing to explode  
on the precipice of a dream  
the way dry wells prepare  
for flooding.

I am readying myself for departure  
on the precipice of a dream  
the way stones ready themselves  
in the bowels of derelict mines.  
I am gearing up for death  
on the precipice of a dream  
the way a martyr gears up for death  
a second time.

I am preparing for a cry  
on the precipice of truth  
the way a volcano prepares  
for eruption.

## *Psalm Fourteen*

The journeying is over.  
Who will cover my beloved?  
How did the disconcerting evening pass?  
How did it vanish  
in my lover's eyes?  
The journeying is over.

My friends go without me.  
My friends die suddenly.  
The wandering came to an end  
in the wings of a swallow;  
the wandering started  
when the prisoner fled .  
I was not lost  
in the clamor of chains;

like a house terrace  
my flesh was an offering  
to my enemies  
yet I was not lost  
in the clangor of chains.

My friends go without me.  
My friends die suddenly.



## *Psalm fifteen*

I flee from the frontiers that felled my friends  
but the frontiers run after me..  
draw closer and closer  
and touch my throat.

It is difficult for you to know  
where the legend ends  
and where my face begins  
because the frontiers are so near!  
The furrows in my forehead  
are not the fingerprints of years.  
And these blue bags under my eyes  
are not evidence of nights out with women;  
they are the frontiers—a labyrinth in my body.  
I am sentenced to defeat,

my finger which was wounded a thousand years before,  
made me sick!

And when I mourned the fall of Acre after forty days  
I burst out weeping for Granada  
And when the hangman's rope encircled my neck  
I felt such hatred for my enemies  
for having stolen my tie!

## *Psalm Sixteen*

I tease time  
the way a prince teases a horse.  
And I play with the days  
the way children play with colored marbles.

Today I celebrate  
the passing of a day on the previous one  
and tomorrow  
the passing of two days on yesterday  
and drink a toast to yesterday  
in memory of the coming day.  
Like this, I continue to live my life.

When I fell off my defiant horse  
and my arm broke

my finger which was wounded a thousand years before,  
made me sick!

And when I mourned the fall of Acre after forty days  
I burst out weeping for Granada  
And when the hangman's rope encircled my neck  
I felt such hatred for my enemies  
for having stolen my tie!

## *Psalm Seventeen*

Let's draw Jerusalem:

A god disrobes over a dark green line. Bird-like shapes depart.

A cross stands on a back street behind the bridges—a thing resembling prunes and wonderment.

An expanse extends from the genitals of a soldier to the history of a poet.

Let's write Jerusalem:

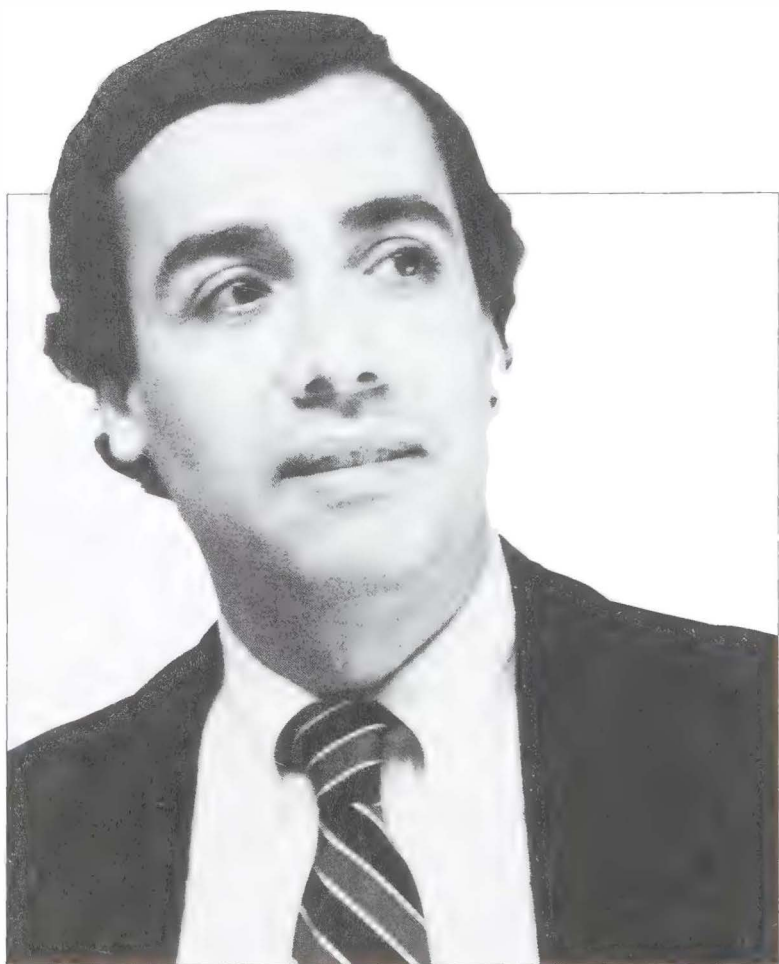
Capital city of false hopes, fleeing freedom fighters, and absent stars. Strange words crowd its narrow streets. Former kisses leave the lips of singers and street vendors. In it rises a new wall for a new year

Troy rejoins the captives while the eloquent rock utters no word to the contrary

Blessed is he who can abort the fire in a thunderbolt.

Let's sing Jerusalem:  
Children of Babylon,  
offspring of chains  
you will return to Jerusalem soon  
You will grow soon  
and reap wheat from the past's memory  
Tears will sprout into blades soon.

Children of Babylon,  
you will return to Jerusalem soon  
And you will grow soon  
And soon  
and soon  
and soon.. ..  
Hallelujah  
Hallelujah!



*Photo by Catherine Bennani*

## ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

Ben Bennani was born and raised in Lebanon to Moroccan parents, and was educated in classical and Islamic Arabic. He is an honors graduate of Dartmouth College and holds an M.F.A. in poetry writing and a Ph.D. in comparative literature, as well as a graduate certificate in literary translation. He has taught writing, translation, and literature at the University of Massachusetts, University of Wyoming, Binghamton University, Northeastern University, and Tufts University. In 1982-83 he was Visiting Fellow at Harvard University pursuing post-doctoral research, and in 1993-94 he was a Senior Fulbright Fellow in the United Arab Emirates. Currently he is Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Northeast Missouri State University where he also edits *Paintbrush*, an international journal of contemporary multicultural literature, and *Bestia*, yearbook



of the Beast Fable Society of which he is the founding president. For the next five years, Bennani will be working under contract on the definitive *Encyclopedia of Animals in World Literature*.

His poems, translations, and essays have appeared in literary magazines in the United States, England, Canada, and India, while his works of translation include *Splinters of Bone: Poems by Mahmud Darwish* (Greenfield Review Press, 1974) and *Bread, Hashish, and Moon: Four Modern Arab Poets* (Unicorn Press, 1982). Collections of his own poetry include *A Bowl of Sorrow* (1977), *Camel's Bite* (1980), and "Primal Sympathy" (in progress).

Ben Bennani lives in Kirksville, Missouri, with his wife Catherine and two children Mona-Maria and Ian.

