

Impressions 'I am the stranger'

The legacy of Mahmoud Darwish

Present absentee

Asmaa Azeizah, a Palestinian poet from Haifa, describes how her relationship to Darwish can be divided in different periods. 'Part of my poetic identity developed in the period when I started to know his work, when I was 17 years old. This was in the pre-internet period. Books from so-called 'enemy countries', were forbidden at that time. For the Arab world Cairo was the main window to the world. People who travelled there, did not bring back books from Mahmoud Darwish. Furthermore, for the Israeli curriculum, his work is considered a bomb. So I grew up without knowing him.'

Holding people in the palm of his hand

The South-African writer Breyten Breytenbach met Mahmoud Darwish for the first time at the Rotterdam poetry festival. 'There was a session on engaged poetry in which Mahmoud participated. The audience was enchanted. Later I had the luck to listen to him while reading to his readers in Ramallah. The last time I met him was in the amphitheater in Arles. The sun was setting and he was holding people in the palm of his hand. Mahmoud was not an easy person to get to know as he was shy and reserved. It is a quality one picks up when getting to know other poets. We never spoke about poetry, yet every single encounter was deeply colored by poetry. He was not a propagandist. He was also critical and told his people: 'Let us not get carried away, let us not be prejudiced, we will be a people if ...' and he would carry on from there.'

Transgressing borders

Sinan Antoon, an Iraqi writer and translator of Darwish's poetry, confirms that Darwish's poetry is timeless. 'I grew up in a household where there were a couple of Darwish's books. He is a giant, part of the oxygen of the Arab world. As an aspiring writer, there was no escape from his legacy. Later, as a student of literature, I was going deeply into his poetry. It was a huge challenge to render his work into English. He had the ability to reinvent himself. He was constantly in search of new forms of expressing himself. Darwish created a poetic mythology for the Palestinian people. Yet, he did not fall in the trap of nationalistic poets. Later he deconstructed his own poetry and challenged others to write about Palestine differently.'

Timeless legacy

There was no establishment to give Darwish directions, states Breyten Breytenbach. 'He was questioning the international environment with an enormous dignity. He was involved in a struggle but never became a didactic poet. He addressed hopes and aspirations of a people, that was recognized by people in other parts of the world.' When Breyten Breytenbach learnt that Darwish has passed away, he was in Senegal, Isle Goré, preparing to travel to Friesland. 'During the trip Darwish was on my mind the whole time. I engaged in a conversation with him. I wrote 'Voice Over', it was a matter of crafting what I felt, as if my voice was mixed with that of Darwish. I wanted to retain that warmth. I believe that Darwish did not disappear, he is more present now.'

Building a country of words

Language can save people, confirms Sinan Antoon. 'The Iraqi writer Samir Naqqash insisted on writing in Arabic when he moved to Palestine/Israel. This was the language of his being. The same for Sargon Boulos who kept writing in Arabic. When entire countries like Iraq are being destroyed, also the memories of those living abroad, in exile, are affected. In a way, so much of what we know of our countries is destroyed.' Asmaa acknowledges the importance of language but underlines that it cannot be an alternative for a lost homeland. 'Mahmoud Darwish's village al-Birweh was destroyed. Even if my village was not destroyed, I feel that I am not the owner of the place. I am a stranger, yet I want to be free from fear and poetry cannot free us. Poetry can change moods or hearts.'

The living imagination

Poetry is the oldest form of human expression. 'It does not change not from one epoch to another', states Breyten Breytenbach. 'Essentially poetry can be seen as a container passed on from hand to another. It is the living imagination of people, you pass it on; you share it. Furthermore, poetry has not changed over time, it is still there.'