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Khaled Mattawa, *Mahmoud Darwish: The Poet's Art and His Nation*, Syracuse University Press, 2014, 196 pp., \$22.00 US (hbk), ISBN 9780815633617.

The publication of Khaled Mattawa's *Mahmoud Darwish: The Poet's Art and His Nation* follows the poet's death in 2008. In a manner of speaking, it offers a tribute to a singular experience of poetry, one at the heart of Palestinian culture and identity. It does so by charting a patient and much-needed literary history of Darwish's poetic career, from the early period of steadfast resistance to one of exile and of universal poetics. Mattawa analyzes key poems from landmark works and periods as he explores the poet's relation to his art and to the historical events shadowing his career. The book presents the poetic works that facilitated the introduction of Palestinian literature internationally, creating possibilities for dialogue and for self-representation. This is a fine book in its scholarship, as it analyzes carefully and insightfully the corpus of one of the most significant contemporary poets. It also examines some of the key works on the poet in English and in Arabic.

The book is structured so that it follows the evolution of the poet and his historical circumstances, tracing the different stages of Darwish's career. While Mattawa analyzes selected poems closely, the book is preoccupied more with the poet, with his place in Arabic poetry and Palestinian (literary) history, and with his relation to his own work. Mattawa argues that Darwish not only redefined the role of the poet in his poetry but also "helped shape the Palestinian national discourse" (13). The personal anecdotes draw the reader in, although our sense of the poet and his work is shown through a careful examination of his poetry. The book is divided into seven chapters and a postscript.

Chapter 1, "Perennial Tensions," serves as the introduction. In it, Mattawa establishes the framework for his study by explaining the tension that exists within Darwish's poetics from the onset of his career between the contingent (particular circumstances) and the universal (poetics) (12). Mattawa argues that while Darwish desired to compose more universal poems, unencumbered by particular circumstances, he recognized nonetheless how they emerged from different historical and personal contingencies (12). Thusly, Mattawa rightly identifies the poems Darwish wrote during the exile period (from Cairo to the Oslo Accord period) as his best due to their universal qualities. He notes that if Darwish "had written only those poems, he would easily be credited for composing a body of work that belongs among the twentieth century's best poetry" (xi). Returning to his earliest and most famous poems, Mattawa analyzes Darwish's engagement with his readers and shows how the poet's own anguish resonated with his audience; nevertheless, he always insisted on the

aesthetic qualities of his poems, being careful not to reduce them to mere expressions of his anger (11). In fact Mattawa reads Darwish's career as a quest for "poetic agency," where poetry is "a means toward agency, while operating within it" (12). He importantly questions Darwish's polarities, the sometimes stark divisions between "engagement and private contemplation, love and political struggle, the expedient and the enduring, the relative and the absolute," since Darwish's poetry itself shows their complex and dynamic interweaving (12).

In the second chapter, "The Poet and the National Literature," Mattawa builds on his earlier discussion in the introduction, emphasizing how Darwish, in an attempt to connect with his readers in his poems, and in linking his pain with that of his people, emerges as a voice for a collective predicament (23). To this end, he examines how Darwish's familiarity with Hebrew and Arabic prosody, as well as his marginalized position, impacted his poetic project, allowing him to also "reach out to his community's adversaries" (30). Mattawa characterizes the early Palestinian poetry of Darwish's generation inside Israel as "hybrid literature," drawing on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's theory of "minor literature" (26).

Chapter 3, "Poet Under Occupation, 1964-1971," argues for the uniqueness of Darwish's poetic vision, which sees him transition away from Arab tutelage toward more "tactile imagery" and an "erotic rendition" of the homeland (49). Mattawa highlights Darwish's committed stance for coexistence and pluralism, already evident in this early period but enduring throughout: he was "the first...to speak and foster a collective consciousness among Palestinians in Israel and elsewhere...to help shape an empowered Palestinian subjectivity...to demythologize the occupier and to communicate with him" (31). From early on then the role of the poet is intimately intertwined with his civic commitments (66). In his analysis of "A Soldier Dreams of White Lilies," for instance, Mattawa notes how the poem addresses Israeli, Palestinian, and Arab audiences. Darwish continuously expanded his audience in his poetry by "develop[ing] various poet-speakers and to shap[ing] internal readers who would challenge him, the real readership—the public—was becoming increasingly divided over his role as a poet of the nation and chronicler of its triumphs and travails" (70). Mattawa leaves us with this question: "What happens to the poet's process of writing when the circuit of poet/poem/reader is not completed" (68)?

The fourth chapter, "Poet of National Liberation, 1971-1986," addresses the Beirut period, which is one of personal exile as well as collective diaspora. Mattawa presents us with analyses of poems like "Ahmad al-Za'atar." In his poems, Darwish evokes the poet Rashid Hussein as emblematic of the increasingly complex experience of perpetual exile, of "disconnection and non-belonging": "This time is not my time/...this country is not my country./...this body is not my body" (75). During this period, poetry partakes of struggle (78). Commenting further on this period, Mattawa writes: "We cannot tell whether the poet is absorbing impressions of the world through his inner interlocutors and utilizing them for creative work or if he is directly responding to the dissonance penetrating his creative enclosure" (79).

The fifth chapter, "To Survive in the World: Writing the Deep Present and the Deep Past, 1986-1993," argues that Palestinian aesthetics took a global turn both when it comes to poetry and the Palestinian struggle. Mattawa interestingly sees two key texts heralding this new turn, namely Edward Said's *After the Last Sky*, which "provides what amounts to a national cultural agenda that Palestinian artists, within the homeland and without, have largely adhered to ever since" (95), and Darwish's *Wardun Aqall* (1986), which announces his poetic project as henceforth one of engaging poetry and history through formative myths: "Darwish's rewriting of myth depends on fissures in national myths, and it focuses on past

spaces of heterogeneity that have been erased. Expanding these spaces to include the present, as well as mythic and historical times..." (126). Again, Mattawa sees Darwish in this poetic endeavor as a visionary poet preparing both peoples for co-existence: "This focus on mythology, history, and the machinations of survival indicate that Darwish's imagination, even while in Beirut, was already refashioning the inner interlocutors of his creative process in preparation for launching a new era in Palestinian culture and the poetic articulation it would require" (93).

If in the previous chapter, Mattawa shows how from different experiences of exile Darwish delves into what he called the "deep present," or the continuing Palestinian predicament, and the "deep past" or myth and history "as fields of poetic action," in Chapter 6, "Whom Am I without Exile?: Anxieties of Renewal and a National Late Style, 1995-2008," he reveals another of Darwish's poetic departures—that of conscious poetic reflection and reassessment not only of his poetry but also of Palestinian literature (136). Mattawa emphasizes the "centrality" of Darwish in this regard with respect to Palestinian and Arabic poetry, since every poet since has had to contend with him.

Finally, the last chapter, "Parting Words: The Poet Appropriates Contingency," addresses Darwish's poetic output and response in the wake of the Second Intifada, where he returns, from existential reflections on poetry, death, and memory, to address military violence. Mattawa argues that Darwish still sought to "protect the project he had begun with *The Stranger's Bed*," situating specifically *State of Siege* (2002) within a period when the poet was focused on "absolute" concerns, and not "relative" ones. Reading *State of Siege*, Mattawa writes that it "transforms Palestine...into a place for continuous and rewarding contemplation of the human condition...[and] manages to make a national contingency, after recognizing its historical and traumatic specificity, into a matter from which transcendental lyric can be created...[where] only spiritual and intellectual strength will ensure his and his people's presence on their tenuous ground" (168).

An extremely interesting aspect of Mattawa's analysis is the evocation of the question of the national in Darwish's poetry, specifically in "Parting Words." Mattawa devotes a few pages to it, though one wishes such a discussion could have taken center stage. Mattawa demonstrates how for Darwish a "minimal nationalism" was necessary, one that would transcend chauvinistic nationalism because of the persistent threat facing the collective self and place (159). This reinforces further the role of Palestinian poets and writers in "protecting the essence' of a culture by providing conscientious responses to the suffering of the people around them and to whom they belong" (160). Mattawa importantly highlights Darwish's imbrication of individual belonging in the world with a national one, citing an interview from 1971 in which Darwish proclaims that, "national belonging is woven with our universal and human belonging" (63). Mattawa interprets this as Darwish's "belief that Palestinians must retain some 'defensive nationalism' that would preserve their collective memory" (159).

Aside from engaging theorists like Theodor Adorno, Félix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze (on minor literature) and Mikhail Bakhtin ("Discourse in Life and Discourse in Poetry"), the book stays close to the poetics of Darwish. Although one may have wished for a more extensive application of more recent theories of poetry, Darwish has sometimes been analysed solely in relation to Western philosophers without much consideration of the decades of criticism of his work in Arabic, and increasingly in other languages.

This is a groundbreaking contribution to the burgeoning scholarship on Mahmoud Darwish and on Palestinian poets. It provides a unique and much needed literary history in which to situate Darwish's rich and substantial oeuvre. I must also comment on the beautiful

translations of Darwish's verses rendered in this book. A poet and a translator of poetry himself, with several books of poetry published, and close to ten books of modern Arabic poetry translated, Mattawa's renditions of Darwish's poetry are simultaneously elegant, lyrical, and scholarly. His extensive knowledge of Arabic poetry is evident. Khaled Mattawa delves meaningfully and profoundly into Palestinian cultural and political history in his sensitive readings of Mahmoud Darwish's poetry.

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