



The Candle

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Abstract: This is a keynote statement by Winston Langley, Provost, Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs, and Professor of International Relations at UMass Boston, opening the special 2009 issue of *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge* dedicated to the memory and poetry of Mahmoud Darwish (1941–2008), the national poet of Palestine. In Provost Langley’s view this issue of the journal merits the qualifying expression “special,” because of the person it seeks to honor, the grounds that have invited that honor, the included voices of those who have sought to be part of this honoring, and the underlying spirit of the issue—one which is so closely tied to the burden of the honoree, Mahmoud Darwish. Provost Langley concludes that no one can read the poetry in this issue—those of Darwish and the contributors—without being moved—and moved to envision a tomorrow, toward which Darwish always looked. He wished he were a candle, in the darkness. He was and will be—for the Palestinians and all those who seek or espouse the cause of human dignity.

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Great poets are many things. First, they bring to our senses the genius of place—what it is, how it multiplies, proliferates, in adventures to tell us its stories, how it travels to and through our sights, smells, sounds, images, maxims, beliefs, and how it finds like and likeness. Darwish, uses

Palestine, his homeland, as his place of reference, a site of intense toil and travail, of doubt and loss, and of frustration and promise. He uses place to do much more, however, including that of teaching us that the light in which we see orders and regulates seeing. And his urging us to alter our circumstances is, in part, to help us to see and understand the self and other more profoundly.

The great poet, of course, helps to alter some of those circumstances, including the circumstances of our seeing. Despite his doubts respecting the poetry’s capacity to effect transformative change, Darwish’s work has in fact been ordering the way

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many have come to see Palestine and the world, and it has been transforming many, including other poets, as so clearly demonstrated by contributions to this issue.

This focus on place and on seeing has a bearing on what great poets seek to do in another area—that of finding and exposing the truth of things. In doing so, they do not—as is commonly supposed—pursue “truth for truth’s sake,” but to serve a major human need for the truth of things, to nurture this much-overlooked feature of the human personality that perhaps most demonstrably distinguishes human beings from non-human animals, and best uncovers, connects, and knits one to our common humanity.

Darwish, as with all great poets, affirms that the life of the mind, of emotions, of living and being, is part of the past (as experienced), the actual present, and the imagined or ideal of human habitats within natural settings of trees, fields, plants, fruits, deserts, seacoasts. The human-made, in the form of houses, streets, friendships, nations, hatreds, beliefs, images—especially as they interact with the natural settings—allows for the broadening of experiences that invite and command naming. Part of a poet’s calling is to name.

That naming encompasses the struggle against un- or non-belonging, for identity (individual and collective), and on behalf of our broader kinship, or selfsameness, one’s human identity. In this struggle for identity, in the face of displacement, alienation, exile, remembering and forgetting, sorrows too deep sometimes to share, we encounter the universal and liberating goal of human striving as a form of development, even in a climate of moral and socio-economic indifference.

Darwish confronts us with all the general themes just mentioned—themes found in language that has been inhabited, made more pliable—line by line—to yield poetry fused with revelatory images—

among which humans move—in feeling, desiring, crying, loving, knowing, supposing, preferring, yearning, suspecting, censoring, and affirming, in embracing and creating beauty, and in claiming their species membership and their dignity. It is to these themes that a group of distinguished contributors responds and does so in compelling form.

These contributors, using essays, comments, poetry (or a combination of all) focus on different aspects of Darwish’s work and the Palestinian pursuit of self-determination. Some look at the relationship—as Darwish did—between that pursuit and the struggle of other peoples to be self-determining; some focus on influences on the Palestinian liberation movement; and some look at the West and its implications in that movement. Others explore the linking of cultures and countries, loving disagreement with Darwish, and the struggle for memory. Still others emphasize resistance and compassion, touch on connection between “master morality” and the affirmation of life, or reach for the underlying meaning between Darwish and Palestine. One finds a focus on solidarity with the Palestinians, sisterhood between Jews and Arabs (including Palestinians), hope for both Israel and Palestine, and the ties between intimacy and poetry. Present, as well, are multiple points of emphasis such as the relationship between moments and movements, recognition and action (inaction), and how one may best read Darwish. The latter’s poems are generously represented in the volume.

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