



Poets

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In his tribute to Mahmoud Darwish, Uri Avnery relates an anecdote. After Anwar Sadat's historic visit to Israel, members of the first Israeli delegation to Egypt (of which Avnery was one) wanted to know how the Egyptians had surprised them in the October war of 1973. In answer an Egyptian general replied, "Instead of reading the intelligence reports, you should have read our poets." And in that terse observation the general put his finger on a growing gap between East and West.

The Middle East breeds and esteems poets. Mahmoud Darwish, the unofficial Palestinian poet laureate, was laid to rest in Ramallah in mid-August. It will be some time ere he will be succeeded. He was an icon, a model, a myth. But a whole troop of Palestinian poets worships at his grave. One or more will emerge as the voice of outrage, liberation and love; they will sustain and nurture the Palestinian soul for a long time to come. And Israel had better listen up!

I remember the shocking assassination of Ghassan Kanafani by Israeli agents in 1972. For his devotion to the Palestinian cause and for the power of his words the Israeli secret service blew him to smithereens on a street in Beirut. But his words themselves have power beyond death.

Kanafani and Darwish still speak to the Palestinian soul. And their legacies continue to be built upon. The new poets sustain the rhythms of outrage and anger, of hope and love upon which Palestinians feed. The poetry does not die. And men and women of power, prosaic and foolish though their souls may be, need to attend.

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Indeed, what does a poet do? The Greek root of the word is *poieo*, meaning to make or do or produce. The poet, therefore, is a maker, a doer. As I understand it, the poet takes the human soul and crystallizes it into a prism that breaks spiritual light into component parts, and welds and flares those parts into fresh spectra of meaning and aspiration. The poet ignites the core of what it means to be human and speaks to the soul, that element in our nature that transcends the mundane and makes of us what we were created to be — the time-bound and mortal image of God in creation, his vice-regents on earth.

And it is poetry that articulates this vocation most vividly because it takes language, the medium of our minds, and stretches it to its outer limits where perception turns into vision. That is why, particularly in conflict situations and in environments where poets are still held in honor, they can be very dangerous. They become the prophets of the people, the very voices of God. And God, the Poet *par excellence*, can be very dangerous indeed ... not to mention subversive.

That may be one reason why the Prophet Muhammad denied he was a poet even though the *Qur'ân*, the scripture he mediated, is very poetic. In Arabia of Muhammad's day a poet was thought to be one possessed by a *jinnî*, a familiar spirit. A tribe's poet was, to all intents and purposes, a weapon of war. The poet (*shâ'ir*) had power to make you aware, to fill experience with an almost tactile sense (*shu'ûr*) for the power of the poet's message ... on beyond the words. But Muhammad proclaimed he was inspired by God and not some rank *jinnî*, and the product of that inspiration (the *Qur'ân*) was inimitable precisely for that reason, its power was self-authenticating.

Given Muhammad's almost pathological antipathy to poets, there was an early and quite abortive effort to repress poetry among Muslims. It simply couldn't succeed because Arabic is the quintessential language of poetry (with all due apologies to Persian poets). Even within Muhammad's own entourage — not least of all 'Alî, his nephew, son-in-law and eventual successor — there were accomplished poets. In the succeeding centuries even theological treatises were composed in poetic stanzas, and prominent intellectuals, physicians and scientists were also known as to be very talented poets. It was almost a prerequisite. Poetry was recognized as the glue that held culture together even when everything else was falling apart. And in that respect nothing has changed in Arab culture down to the present day.

But we westerners are in danger. The danger lies not in overt physical acts of terror, the marching of armies, or the dire straits of economies. In a sense, those things are superficial and at best symptomatic. In our sound-bite western culture the poet has been increasingly pushed aside. *That's* the danger, don't you see. Our poets construct our conduit into the meaning beyond today's banalities. In their music and musings they take us forward into a whole new world. But we have to give them time. We have to linger with their 'makings' and with them reflect upon ourselves and upon our world. When we lose them, neglect them, despise or leave them in limbo we do a very stupid thing, and we find ourselves in serious danger therefore. Under the pummeling that our selves ... our souls ... receive in the brutal and barbaric dumbing-down of our culture into mere sound bites, they shrivel, cringing into dank corners and whimper. We lose them ... lose our selves.

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In 1963, having nearly flunked out of Hope College because I had spent virtually a whole year writing poetry, sleeping away the daylight hours, squelching through the morass of unfocused guilt, agonizing over the tempest in my glands and the vacuity of my goals, I finally *did* graduate (no little credit for which I attribute to the love of my bride, Nancy, who, much daring, married me on Thanksgiving Day, 1962). And, for the pains of that seemingly miss-spent year, I won the Eerdmans Prize for Poetry.

My Aunt Beth (Scudder) and Uncle Wells Thoms, fabled missionaries on furlough that year from Oman, attended my graduation *in loco parentis*. They took Nancy and me out to a nice dinner after the event and did all the needful. But I will never forget my uncle's declaiming over lunch upon the fact that, had I graduated in an Arab country, the audience would have demanded that I recite at least one of my poems. As it was, with a

fifty-dollar check in my sweaty paws and a flaccid handshake from Irwin Lubbers (who had endured far more grief from me than he needed to have done), I galumphed across the Civic Center stage to anemic applause.

Uncle Wells' words have stayed with me, though. The muse has struck with a fair degree of insistence time and again (although less raucously of late). I remain a closet poet, but a poet nonetheless. As a case in point, somewhat inspired by Darwish and Kanafani but also by events on the ground, some years ago now I wrote ...

Recollections of June 5, 1967

I heard a people,
a chant, a curse.
I heard a child
and he playing
and someone
not thinking
put a bullet
through his soul
and he grew up
under night.

A listener
heard them come
upon the land,
an unusual few,
ancient child land,
lovely barren spot:

In dull glow dawn
sleep curls dreams,
rich colors burn
rife with dance,
ecstatic shepherd
whoops alone
unbounded voice,
the land a vision.

But they came
seized by hunger
and a thirst for
others' blood.
Hands clutching,
soil smelling,
they all devoured
and claimed the rest
and took it.

Who sought no blood

now claims the right to it,
who caressed a flute
intones now death
upon the nay,
who honors sons,
and sick of rage,
pities his predator,
seeks him in caves,
makes white breath
in the cold dusks
now inflicts death.

And I heard a people,
a chant, a curse.
And I have heard a child
and he playing
and someone
not thinking
put a bullet
through his soul
and he grew up
under night.

It's not Darwish or Kanafani, but it may be worth thinking about.

And I greet you from the Lands of the Morning.