

Mahmoud Darwish. *If I Were Another: Poems*, tr. Fady Joudah. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2009. 240 pp. \$28

Mahmoud Darwish. *Almond Blossoms and Beyond*, tr. Mohammad Shaheen. Northampton, MA: Interlink Publishing, 2009. 95pp. \$25

The Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, who passed away in 2008, faced an especially conflicted version of the problem of creating a literary language. Growing up speaking both Arabic and Hebrew, Darwish took his poetic influences from literary traditions in both languages. In his early poetry and political writing, he was a militant voice against Israeli occupation, emphasizing Arabic as a mother tongue integral to his poetics and politics (in one poem he commands “Record: I am an Arab”). But in his late work, he shifted focus to the shared mythology and geography of Israeli and Palestinian cultures, turning to the idea of poetic language itself as a homeland. Two new English translations of Darwish’s late work reveal different aspects of this late style. Fady Joudah conveys Darwish as a poet’s poet, writing a language rich with lyrical turns, while Mohammad Shaheen takes a more literal, stripped-down approach to bring the ingenuity of Darwish’s dialogue form—two voices in a question/answer format—to the fore. Both translators’ representations are true in their way. Darwish’s late style is elusive, yet intent on the possibilities of poetic communication. This conundrum is at the center of the poetic vocation, as Darwish professes in “Exile”: “For who, if I don’t speak in poetry, / will understand me?”

Almond Blossoms and Beyond is a full translation of Darwish’s second to last collection of poetry, published in 2005. *If I Were Another* is a selection of works taken from the poet’s late middle period (*I See What I Want* [1990] and *Eleven Planets* [1992]) that includes two long, later poems: “Mural” (2000) and “Exile” (2005). Joudah’s title calls to mind a claim Darwish made in a late interview on Syrian television, that ignorance of others’ language means ignorance of others altogether. This claim explains why pushing the dialogue form to its limits is so important in this body of work. For Darwish, to speak in “simple” conversation resonates at the level of personal interaction but also at the more general level of cultural understanding.

The dialogue form allows Darwish to relish subtle transformations of speech. Through their exchanges, his speakers reveal the beauty in meaning gone slightly awry, and make abstractions more intricate through question and response. The poem represents negotiation in speech, an internal translation and retranslation, and in this sense, revolves around the ability for dialogue to be infinite in its iterations. Translated by Joudah as part

of the 1992 collection *Eleven Planets*, “Rita’s Winter” is a late meditation continuing the love story of “Rita w’al-Bundaqiya” (“Rita and the Rifle”). The original poem, made wildly popular across the Arabic world in the late 1960s by Marcel Khalife’s song version, uses forceful imagery to communicate its political message: “Between Rita and my eyes / There is a rifle”; and later, “Between us there are a million sparrows and images / And many a rendezvous / Fired at by a rifle.” The synecdoche verges on the literal in this telling. In the sequel poem “Rita’s Winter,” the failure of language itself to allow communication authors the separation, and Darwish stages the incommensurability of language, and the need to create or mimic a shared rhythm until the song picks up.

—What are you saying?
—Nothing, I mimic a horseman in a song
about the curse of a love besieged by mirrors...
—About me?
—And about two dreams on the pillow, they intersect and escape so one
draws out a dagger and another entrusts the commandments to the flute
—I don’t get the meaning
—Nor do I, my language is shrapnel

(Joudah)

The use of question and answer here, in which the answer only creates more questions, is not the typical I-thou address of lyric poetry—instead it offers an instance of the failure to mean together, though each voice has its lovely passages and promises. The conversation is a collaborative exploration of what is left over from war without finger- (or rifle-) pointing, and broaches the question of intermarriage and interfaith relations. The two speakers remain anonymous throughout the poem: they are like the two dreams that represent violence and peace, at times holding aggressive or conciliatory postures, but never clearly describing these possibilities in ways that attach them to concrete action. What happens when one “entrusts the commandments to the flute”? Is this act powerful or foolish? The juxtaposition of religious law and music evokes the ritualistic power of both in civic and spiritual life, contrasted with the disruptive violence of the dagger. However, the parallel synecdoches of the dagger and the flute point to a failing of social rituals. The final cipher of this passage is the ambiguity of language and ownership; “my language is shrapnel” is a warning but perhaps also an allusion to the Arabic language’s incendiary and uncomfortable status.

Despite the differences of circumstance and perspective that the dialogues foreground, the pronouns important to Darwish’s poetry—“I” and “he”—remain shared properties, potentially occupied by anyone. Darwish

foregrounds the linguistic conundrum of identity by using pronouns in the manner of mathematical variables. Anyone named by his first-person pronoun “I” will remain the equal of any other:

I am he, he walks ahead of me and I follow him.

[...]

I am he, he walks upon me and I ask him,
Do you remember anything here?

(Joudah)

And equally in Shaheen’s translation:

I asked...For how many years were you like me?
For how long have you been me?

I said, I do not remember.

He said, I do not remember that I remembered
anything but the road.

All articulation is already displacement, since saying “I” is a way of speaking of oneself in the third person; as Rimbaud said, “*je est un autre.*” This poetic act is lost somewhat in English translation: in Arabic, a simple placing side-by-side of the pronouns means unmediated equivalence, since there is no present tense of the verb “to be.” Then, the second line makes reference to “following” as a simple but unavoidable matter of word order in a sentence. These speech acts of self-questioning point to conditions for metaphor and metonym, and posit the universalism of pronouns even before they are deployed. In this poem, identity, with all of the political and social weight it carries in Darwish’s world, comes down to self-awareness.

Comparing these translations makes keenly evident the ethical burden with which Darwish challenges his readers. Joudah’s translations seek to emphasize the unique stylistic features of Darwish’s work by using elaborate diction. We can compare his rendering of a passage in “Exile” to the same passage done by Shaheen:

Light-footed I walk and look around me
hoping to see a simile between the adjectives of my self
and the willows of this space. But I discern
nothing that points to me.

(Joudah)

I walk lightly, lightly, looking about me.
Perhaps I will see a likeness between my self
and the willow tree in this place.
But I can make out nothing here that refers to me.

(Shaheen)

The most accurate translation of these lines may fall somewhere between the two. In the first line, Shaheen chooses a literal rendering by repeating the word for “lightly,” as Darwish does in the original. I am not sure that Joudah’s “light-footed” captures the rhythm of the line, since it glosses over this emphatic moment of repetition. Shaheen may be overly literal at times, but his imitative features properly present the staged narrative of the original and bring in some of Arabic poetry’s orality. However, their approaches have the reversed effect in the next line. Following the imagery of the original, Joudah foregrounds a metaphor of grammar (“a simile between the adjectives of my self”) that Shaheen locates in a visual similarity (“I will see a likeness between my self”). Joudah’s metapoetic reference to language is, I would argue, essential to the predominant focus on language and style in late Darwish. To have this focus subsumed into the visual as Shaheen has done is to reinterpret the ethical import of the idea of language into a much different scenario.

And indeed it is in the question of diction that the two different translation methods reveal by their contrast the striking clarity of the original. Joudah’s insistence on abstraction can give his translations a deceptively exotic scent; his versions can overwhelm the simple, concrete scenes of exchange between persons. There are numerous examples throughout the volume. Where Shaheen writes the simpler (and more accurate) phrase “devastating earthquake,” for example, Joudah writes “a destructive shake of earth.” Joudah amplifies the nuances of Arabic to make the English strange, and in so doing overabstracts a straightforward concept. Shaheen largely resists the temptation to transform Darwish’s language. But it is not just a question of accuracy for its own sake. These translators are facing up to language distinctive for its stark—and even opaque—simplicity. This work focuses on the ethical and political problems probed by the simplest speech acts. It is Darwish’s vision and foresight that make it hard for any translator to detract from moments where his diction thinks the complications of language and identity together:

Self, who are you? On the road
we are two, and in Resurrection one.
Take me to the light of vanishing to see
what becomes of me in my other image.

Who will I be after you? Is my body
ahead of you or behind you? Who am I?

(“Mural,” Joudah)

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Cole Swensen. *Greensward*. New York: Ugly Duckling Press, 2010.
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Over the last decade, Cole Swensen has consistently pursued answers to unexpected questions in equally unexpected places. Most recently, *Ours* (University of California Press, 2009) wanders through the history of seventeenth-century French formal gardens, eventually concentrating on one figure, the landscape architect André Le Nôtre, and his work on behalf of Louis XIV. In the process, Swensen exposes a troubling intimacy between the demands of monarchical tyranny and the aesthetic virtues of symmetry, clarity, and orderliness. She leaves readers wondering whether a genuinely democratic polity might best be supported by ungainly, murky, and entropic art. Swensen has chosen to stick with gardens in her new book, *Greensward*, which announces a new country for inspection on its first page: “The following takes place in 18th century England; the scene is the garden of a manor house.” Flipping through the volume, one will discover visuals that represent a new element in Swensen’s work: reproductions of etchings, engravings, sketches, pen-and-ink drawings, and watercolors, all depicting British gardens, real, planned, and imagined. There are overhead views, schematic representations, fragmentary outtakes, and isolated enlarged details. Especially striking are the before-and-after pages from Humphry Repton’s “red books,” which show “the current state of a property on a flap that, once lifted, reveal[s] the same view as it would appear once transformed by his improvements.” Swensen’s verse evidently mirrors these pictorial counterparts: she superimposes words over images, offers creative description and commentary, and in one instance arranges words into a grid in imitation of the rows of trees in an orchard.

However absorbing these visual experiments might be, what truly distinguishes *Greensward* from *Ours* and its other antecedents is its underlying argument that humans and animals not only take aesthetic pleasure in their surroundings but, under the right circumstances, can also share that pleasure with each other. The volume begins by asserting that “whatever aesthetics is, it can only be transmitted to other species—and it can be transmitted along with other higher cognitive functions—through gardening.” Swensen explains that a “garden is...an open link...a line