

Book Review

The Butterfly's Burden, Trans. Fādī Jūdah, 2007. Washington: Copper Canyon Press.

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The Butterfly's Burden (2007) comprises the translation of three poetry collections written by the renowned Palestinian poet, Maḥmūd Darwīsh (1941-2008), and published between 1999-2004. The translation is done by Fādī Jūdah, a Palestinian-American poet, translator, medical doctor, and field member of Doctors Without Borders. Jūdah is the recipient of a number of international prizes and awards for original poetry and translated literature. Cover art is done by Muḥammad J. 'Abusāll. The book was published in 2007, shortly before Darwīsh's death in August 2008. The three poetry collections included in the book are *Sarīr al-Gharībah* (The Stranger's Bed) 1999,¹ *Ḥalat Ḥiṣār* (A State of Siege) 2002, and *Lā Ta'tadhir 'Ammā Fa'alt* (Don't Apologize for What You've Done) 2004.² Many of the translated poems included in the book had individually been published in journals and periodicals in the USA prior to 2007 (a list of these poems appears in the Acknowledgments section). The book is designed as a monolingual edition, with individual Arabic and English pages juxtaposed. It also includes a translator's Preface and Notes.

The Butterfly's Burden features the translation of the first three volumes of poetry Darwīsh published after his return to Ramallah, Palestine in 1996. This was a significant stage in the poet's personal, political, and poetic journey. In 1987 Darwīsh had been elected to the PLO (Palestinian Liberation Organization) Executive Committee, on which he served for six eventful years, starting with the Declaration of Independence in 1988, and ending with the Oslo Accords (also known as the Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements) in 1993. In the wake of the signing of the Oslo Accords, Darwīsh resigned his position in the PLO Executive Committee, declaring that the accords did not promise "real peace, but [...] a breakup of the Palestinian society and its interests" (Darwīsh 1995a, 18). In addition to the rift with the PLO and the bitter disappointments with the Oslo Accords, this period also witnessed the disillusionment of return to a homeland that was still cut apart and occupied. During the second *'intifadhah* in 2002, the Israeli military raided Ramallah and other major Palestinian cities in the West Bank and imposed curfews and sieges on many areas there, including the residence of then President Yasser Arafat in Ramallah. In 2004, Darwīsh left Ramallah one more time, and embarked on a short phase of renewed exile in other Arab and world cities, which lasted until his death.

Between 1994 and 1998, I had the privilege of working on my PhD dissertation (which was published as a book in 2004) at Cairo University on the development of the conflict of voices in the poetry of Maḥmūd Darwīsh and the South African poet

of resistance, Dennis Brutus. My research involved a close examination of the emergence and withdrawal of the lyrical voice and its many guises in response to changes overcoming the poets' lives and political engagement. I traced Darwīsh's poetry starting with his 1964 collection, *'Awrāq az-Zāytūn* (Leaves of Olive Trees) (Darwīsh 1987), up to his 1995 collection *Limādhā Tarakta-l-Hiṣāna Waḥīdan?* (Why Did You Leave the Horse Alone?) (Darwīsh 1995b). My argument was, in short, that the lyrical voice, vibrant and unabashed, with which the poet started his career subsequently went through three stages characterised, respectively, by withdrawal, rupture, and transcendental re-emergence (Aboubakr 2004).

Poetry of resistance is especially influenced by various factors shaping the poet's experience, such as his/her relationship with the land, compatriots, national heritage and tradition, native language, and memory, among other elements constituting the poetic experience. Exile, as a physical and emotional ordeal, is also a highly transformative experience, which in Darwīsh's case strongly shapes the poetry collections featured in *The Butterfly's Burden*. In these three collections, the exiled poet has 'returned'; yet, it is a return beset with disappointment and disillusionment. As a result, exile turns into an internal state, especially when the land is not ultimately free, but rather threatened and besieged.

There are good reasons for Jūdah's choice to include the translation of these three poetry collections in one book. In the Preface, he explains that the three poetry collections were the most recent Darwīsh had published to-date.³ Moreover, as pointed out above, the three books were written after Darwīsh's return to Palestine and, therefore, represent a unique stage in the poet's search for homeland. Jūdah also makes it clear in the Preface that he was interested in tracing the impact of exile and the predicament of estrangement from the PLO commandment on Darwīsh's poetry, particularly in terms of the nuances of the lyrical voice. The representations of exile and homecoming reflected in the three collections make *The Butterfly's Burden* an important book among existing translations of Darwīsh's poetry, in addition to highlighting the book's relevance today, in the context of a renewed and violent displacement of the Palestinians in, and from, Gaza.

The first of the three collections, *The Stranger's Bed* (Sarīr al-Gharībah) (Darwīsh 1999), comprises poems written in Ramallah between 1996 and 1997. It captures the predicament of the returning exile primarily in terms of a relationship between two lovers. Needless to say, love has always been a major theme and motif in Darwīsh's poetry across different stages. However, what characterises the relationship between the two lovers in *The Stranger's Bed* is that it is presented as momentary encounters between two strangers, and the title of the collection is not the only case in point. As a result of the sense of estrangement in one's own land, everyone seems to become a "stranger", who is also portrayed at times as the speaker's own alter ego. And as a result of the speaker's inability to find himself in the 'new' home, the stranger's bed becomes his homeland. A quest for wholeness is tentatively ventured (ص, 75),⁴ but often culminates in nothing more than a vanished wish.

The uncertainties and apprehensions besetting the self are reflected in other themes and motifs in the collection, such as the tension between memory and forgetfulness which is a recurrent motif in Darwīsh's poetry and is here reflected in the oscillations between past, present, and future. Since the present is unsettled and unsettling, the speaker is exceedingly unable to feel anchored in time or place. Even though he can certainly remember and obviously relive a past, and is at times even able to envisage a future, the present remains blurred and incomprehensible (17, 105). And whereas memory can be liberating (63), the present is certainly not. Being trapped in a no-place has also obviously resulted in an entrapment in no-time, which prompts the speaker to depart yet once again towards an unknown destination (5). The impending wandering is pre-emptively enacted in a series of poems about travelling in time and place, where the speaker crosses into Damascus, Samarkand, Andalusia, Rome, and Carthage, journeys from which he returns "neither alive nor dead" (117).

In this collection, Darwīsh continues his experimentation with the prose poem, and creates music in remarkably subtler ways than in his other strongly lyrical poetry. The rhythms contribute to the creation of the elegiac, plaintive tones of most of the poems, which in its turn reflects the absence of the 'deliberativeness' of poetry in exile as opposed to "the spontaneity of prose" (33). Musical vivacity is indeed absent throughout most of the collection, even when Darwīsh uses markedly metrical forms such as the sonnet and the five-line stanza.

The next collection featured in *The Butterfly's Burden* is *A State of Siege* (Ḥalat Ḥiṣār) (Darwīsh 2002), a long poem written in Ramallah during the 2002 prolonged siege of the city outlined in some detail above. As we follow the tragic developments in Gaza today, this collection certainly resonates with lines like these:

The martyr besieges me: I only changed my position
And my impoverished furniture,
I placed a gazelle in my bedroom
and a crescent on my finger
to ease my pain (163)

In terms of voice and tone, this long poem widely differs from *The Stranger's Bed* in that it grapples with physical concrete details in a colloquial and conversational, at times flippant, language. The second person address which acquires prominence in *The Stranger's Bed* here gives way here to first person musings in the plural "we". Moreover, unlike the abstract and subtle metaphorical language of the 1999 collection, the imagery here is mostly direct and sober, prompted by the urgency of the situation. Nevertheless, the speaker maintains an optimistic, at times even propagandistic tone (121, 143). All the topics dealt with in this collection are dictated by the speaker's response to the siege. This varies between a stubborn defiance (127), a celebration of the departing martyrs (160), and a potential of peace lurking far off

(171). The siege, in its turn, is a paradox of the return, as the homeland has become a place of exile and is caught in a state of stasis by virtue of the indefinite waiting (143).

Reading *A State of Siege*, one necessarily recalls *Hiṣār Li-Madā'ih al-Baḥr* (To Besiege Sea Panegyrics) (Darwīsh 1984), another long poem Darwīsh wrote about another prolonged state of siege. The two-month siege of Beirut by the Israeli military in the summer of 1982 culminated in the invasion of the city, the expulsion of the PLO headquarters from Lebanon, and the tragic massacres in Sabra and Shatila refugee camps. Though the two books (written 20 years apart) are preoccupied with the experience of inescapable entrapment in place and time, a close examination reveals a lot about how Darwīsh's perspectives and poetry evolved in response to changed circumstances. Beirut, as a place of exile the speaker is forced to depart from in the 1984 collection is portrayed as a 'kinder' place of exile than the 'indifferent' homeland in this present collection. In Beirut, moreover, there seems to have been a little more time to reflect on the siege than there is available to the speaker in Ramallah. This might explain why, even though the elegy as a genre is employed in both collections, *To Besiege Sea Panegyrics* is characterized by slow-paced prosaic meditations, while *A State of Siege* is primarily made up of short, richly musical, and haiku-like reflections. This shift in rhythm and tone also appears in the shift from plaintive meditations on the death of friends in the former, to flippant remarks on the speaker's own death in the latter.

The third and last collection featured in this book is *Don't Apologise for What You've Done* (Lā Ta'tadhīr 'Ammā Fa'alt) (Darwīsh 2004). If, in very general terms, we can describe *The Stranger's Bed* as primarily preoccupied with love and *A State of Siege* with the siege, *Don't Apologise for What You've Done* is mainly about death, though it already handles the topics of love and the siege, as well as other themes, such as memory, forgetfulness, language, and link with the natural world. Most of the topics dealt with in this collection are cast in the shadow of an impending death the speaker cannot escape, so much so that the whole collection can indeed be read as a long elegy. The speaker writes his own elegy along with that of many departed poets: Badr Shākir al-Saiyyāb, 'Amal Dunqul, Pablo Neruda, and Salīm Barakāt. The focus in these elegies is invariably on the rupture with the homeland. A major thematic concern of the elegies is also the question of what will happen after death. The "I" is not only subject to forgetfulness (٢١٧, ٢٣٥), but can also acquire mythic dimensions enabling it to see what lies beyond death. There, it will, in all likelihood, receive an appropriate apology (301).

It is interesting to observe how *Don't Apologise for What You've Done* develops the motifs and techniques employed in the other two collections featured in *The Butterfly's Burden*. An antidote to the loss of the memory of place is still the restless wandering dominating *The Stranger's Bed*, which here takes the speaker to Tunis, Beirut, Damascus, Egypt, and Iraq. There are antidotes to defeat, too, such as a stronger reconnection with the native language (319), which was also reflected in *A State of Siege*, and with nature (231). The "I", however, is still fissured (189), and

the estrangement from the self informs an estrangement from the beloved. It is only with a stranger that the “I” can find momentary wholeness. As already pointed out, Darwīsh is known as a fine love poet in just as much as he is known as a poet of the Palestinian nation. In fact, he first established his position as a poet of Palestine by merging imagery of the beloved with that of the land in ways that have become unique to him. In those early stages, however, the speaker was the lover and the land his beloved, a simile that continued to echo throughout the poetry for quite some time. However, in his later poetry, exemplified by the three collections featured in *The Butterfly's Burden*, the land is not the beloved as much as the beloved is the land. The difference lies in that, in the former simile, the land has precedence and is the dream sought after, while in the latter, the beloved occupies centre-stage and the land shrinks into a place of exile hosting a perpetual siege and an impossible love.

In this collection, Darwīsh goes back to the abstract language which characterised *The Stranger's Bed*, and which the temporary siege in between the two collections interrupted. And whereas the lyrical “I” in *The Stranger's Bed* was split into two (speaker and addressee or lover and beloved), it is here fissured into various voices and masks. This gives the poet the chance to go into and out of different personae, and to create marked varieties of forms and musical arrangements. The tone is a mixture of meditative and conversational, and this contributes to the creation of variations on the meditative pace that dominated *The Stranger's Bed* and the often jittery rhythms of *A State of Siege*. Perhaps it is the myriad possibilities Darwīsh envisages for what will happen after death that give *Don't Apologize for What You've Done* its versatile musical character.

In *The Butterfly's Burden*, Jūdah achieves a remarkable feat by undertaking the translation of three poetry collections considerably varying in tone, style, and register. In most cases, the translation captures the emotional resonance of the poetry and is able to communicate that very well in English. In the Preface, Jūdah states that he conceives of translation as an act of endowing the target language with “new vastness” (xv), and this is certainly reflected in the English translation at hand which brims with depth and poignance.

The Preface also contextualizes the three collections. It begins with a brief background on Maḥmūd Darwīsh's life and career, with particular focus on his poetry in exile, the fate of the lyrical voice, and the variety of forms the poetry employs. Jūdah then moves to describing the main features of the three collections comprising *The Butterfly's Burden*. He briefly comments on the dialectic of I/we, or what he terms “the metaphysics of identity” (xiv), in *The Stranger's Bed*. Then he briefly reviews the oscillation between the lyric and the journal in *A State of Siege*, and the re-emergence of lyrical tones and styles in *Don't Apologize for What You've Done*.

In the remaining part of the Preface, Jūdah outlines his translation strategies. However, his comments are too brief, to give readers sufficient insights into his translation philosophy. What he makes clear about his translation strategy, however,

is that he opts for adhering to the original text as much as possible, a strategy he refers to as “‘physical’ mimesis” (xvi). This, he explains, is done with the purpose of providing the English-speaking reader with as close an experience of the Arabic poem as possible. This seems to be a sound decision for another reason. Had Jūdah, a poet in his own right writing in English, given himself free reign to produce a creative re-writing of the Arabic poems, he might have widely departed from the essence of the poetry he seems so eager to present to English-speaking readers.

Jūdah lists adherence to “structure” (xvi) as one of the manifestations of “‘physical’ mimesis”. Though it is not immediately very clear what he means by ‘structure’ here, it soon unravels that it, in part, refers to the physical appearance of the poem on the page, which includes elements such as line breaks, enjambment, punctuation, and indentation. In this respect, Jūdah states that he has tried to “redistribute the lines and stanzas as [he] saw fit for the English poem” (xvi), while giving “the English reader the same ‘view’ an Arabic reader has of the page” (xvi). However, he does not elaborate on the notion of the distribution of lines and stanzas befitting and English poem. There is also room to wonder if such a notion can actually be upheld, especially that Jūdah sticks extremely closely to the physical appearance of the Arabic poem in his translation.

Jūdah’s subsequent elaboration on the idea of reproducing ‘structure’ reveals that he also conceives of it as syntax. In that respect, he states that he “furthered [his] focus on syntax” so that the English reader can meet “the curvature of the phrase in the Darwish poem” (xvi). This is, in fact, an extremely difficult task to accomplish in a translation between two languages so far apart in their syntactic constructions as Arabic and English. However, Jūdah’s translation actually *does* try to do just that, albeit in a manner that sometimes results in awkward semantic problems in the English sentence. For instance, the translation of the last sentence of the following extract from “Say What You Want” verges on the incomprehensible:

ضَعَّ الكلامَ على المجاز. ضَعَّ المجازَ على
الخيال. ضَعَّ الخيالَ على تَلَفُّتِهِ البعيد. (٢٥٦)

Put speech on metaphor. Metaphor on
Imagination. *And imagination on its looking around the far.* (257; emphasis
added)

The attempt to re-produce Arabic syntax at all costs also leads at times to the production of referents in the English sentences which are not present in the Arabic. For instance, in the poem “In My Mother’s House”, the speaker, contemplating a photo of his younger self hung on the wall, exclaims:

قلت: يا هذا، أنا هُوَ أنت (١٨٦)

and the line is translated as:

I said: Listen you, I am *he* you (187; emphasis added)

Since there is nothing in the poem to imply this trinity of “I/he/you”, the sentence in English emerges as hauntingly unclear.

Jūdah also states that he has tried to re-produce the rhythm of the Arabic poem, which he refers to as “prosody” (xvi), and considers it part of the ‘structure’ of the poem. He points out that his strategy involves transferring the Arabic “*taf’eelah* [...] to the English meter” (xvi). This proposition, too, constitutes another heroic task, considering the qualitative differences between Arabic and English prosodic principles, with Arabic relying on syllabic length, and English on a syllabic stress. Moreover, this task remains promised rather than accomplished in the translation. A salient example can be found in the translation of the sonnets interspersing *The Stranger's Bed* and providing the collection with some coherence. In their strong reliance on rhythm (and rhyme), the sonnets stand in contrast with the predominantly prosaic nature of most of the collection, and inject it with occasional song-like jubilation. In the English translation, however, there is no attempt to re-create a semblance of rhyme through compensation. Consequently, part of the structural cohesion (and also rhythmic quality) of the Arabic is lost. This stands in some contrast with Jūdah’s initial proposition of striving to adhere to the ‘structure’ of the original as much as possible.

Last, and certainly not least, this being a literary translation, culture-specific expressions and cultural references are particularly important. Taking Jūdah’s professed objective of adhering to the original as much as possible, we can with little difficulty surmise that he aims at what is known in translation strategies as ‘resistive’ translation, which seeks to preserve the cultural specificity of the source text, thereby dragging the reader into its intricacies. In line with this strategy, Jūdah does not seek to explain or familiarize cultural references to non-Arab readers. Instead, he often resorts to ‘borrowing’ (re-producing Arabic words in Latin script) and ‘calquing’ (literal translation of individual phrases), which preserves the opacity of words and expressions. Borrowing can be seen in Jūdah’s use of Arabic words such as *salām* (peace) (171), *zaghārīd* (ululations) (143), or *’Andalus* (Andalusia) (35), while calquing is seen in instances such as translating the phrase *جملة إسمية* as “noun sentence” (255), and *يتسربون من المدارس* as “leak out/of schools” (225 – my italics). In addition to foregrounding the cultural specificity of the source text, these two strategies give the reader an auditory glimpse into the Arabic language. They also help decentralize the assumed ‘superiority’ of a universal culture embedded in the use of English as a lingua franca, thereby symbolically adjusting a power imbalance. To slightly mitigate the impact of these resistive strategies, the Notes section provides information on some culture-specific words and expressions, such as Qur’anic references, word connotations, names of places, historical characters and mythical figures, as well as explains some puns.

The ‘butterfly metaphor’ occurs several times throughout *The Butterfly's Burden*, as well as in Darwīsh’s other writing. The butterfly embodies the hope for salvation

which is often sustained by the laborious act of writing poetry. In his 1977 collection, *'A'rās* (Weddings), Darwīsh dedicates a poem entitled “He Carried the Burden of the Butterfly” to reflections on his own fate and the ‘burden’ of poetry in the midst of suffering and injustice (Darwīsh 1987). Though most of the poem is pessimistic and mournful, it ends on an optimistic note, with the speaker and his poetry ultimately defying oblivion. To read *The Butterfly’s Burden* now is to ascertain the truth of this prophecy. We only need to experience lines like the following to see how Darwīsh’s poetry communicates the universal through the personal and specific:

In Damascus
the sky walks
barefoot on the old roads,
barefoot (105)

or

This siege will extend until
we trim our trees
with the hands of doctors and oracles (147)

or

My lord ... my lord! Why have you forsaken me
while I’m still a child ... and you haven’t tested me yet? (141)

The Butterfly’s Burden is undoubtedly an important addition to the poetry of Maḥmūd Darwīsh, one of the most powerful and eloquent voices of Palestine, in translation. It traces a unique phase in the poet’s life and art and embodies the development of the Palestinian struggle. As is the case with all great art, Darwīsh’s poetry here transcends the immediate contexts and continues to resonate after 17 years of its publication, and most certainly for much longer.

Notes

¹ Jūdah lists the year of publication of *Sarīr al-Gharībah* (The Stranger’s Bed) as 1998. However, the official year of publication is 1999, though the book was first released in late 1998.

² Jūdah lists the year of publication of *Lā Ta’tadhīr ‘Ammā Fa’alt* (Don’t Apologize for What You’ve Done) as 2003. However, the official year of publication is 2004, though the book was first released in late 2003.

³ Apart from *Jidāriyyah* (Mural) (2000), which comprises long reflections on Darwīsh near death experience during heart surgery.

⁴ Page numbers given between brackets hereafter all refer to *The Butterfly’s Burden* (2007) except where otherwise stated.

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