

Poetry Without Borders: Translating Darwish

A Conversation with Fady Joudah

BY DORIS BITTAR

Houston-based physician Fady Joudah is also a noted poet and translator of Mahmoud Darwish's poetry. In a recent conversation, we discussed how his experiences as a doctor have infused his poetry and writing.

You've had two powerful experiences while volunteering for Doctors Without Borders in Zambia and in Darfur. You were the only doctor for tens of thousands of people caught between war and poverty. How does that affect or inform your work with your patients in the non-war zone of Houston, Texas?

I work at the Veterans Hospital in Houston, so that is a war zone. Granted, it is not a "field" war zone, but the effects of the political stage and war are easily palpable there. However, being a doctor in any environment I realize how much power I have. The sum of my actions at times transports me to (Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness." Yet, admitting that carries with it some narcissism, no doubt. To try to balance my rights and humanity as a physician with – or is it against? – that of the patients can be confusing. A patient is first and foremost a patient – in a position of vulnerability. Even this notion of being a doctor for tens of thousands of people is a misrepresentation.

Your role in Darfur and in Houston was/is among people who may not appreciate the fact that you are an Arab, a Palestinian. How do you view your role as an activist, constantly fighting against the tide, doing work that you know may make little difference?

Within Doctors Without Borders, there was hope versus absurd hope, action versus inaction, while the dead or the immeasurable suffering of others piles up. That's really it – the word "immeasurable." Triaging patients is not the same as triaging people and nations, which is exactly what occurs at the level of international law and politics. Somehow, poetry can participate in restoring the humanity of others despite the language of the day. Similarly, poetry should revel in its lack of significant effect on anything global, much like humanitarian medicine, and not shy away from speaking truth to those with power about the inevitability of being complicit with the world.

I cannot help but think of William Carlos Williams, also a doctor, when I compare your life and work with his. Your work has woven into it a self-deprecating voice similar to Williams'. Like him, you wonder about your role as savior and you see both the banal and abject in a wondrous light. I am thinking specifically of Williams' "Patterson." But the form and minimalist strategies you employ are more like Wallace Stevens – Stevens with a conscience.

Well, Stevens was interested in the phenomenon of humanism as the god of the new age, so to speak. Williams fashioned, among other things, the poetic colloquial and thus heralded – I guess I can say that – the "democratic" voice we see today in American poetic diction.

I find that your poetry navigates between various modes of voice and syntax, and in addition to your own poetry, you are a translator of Darwish's poetry. As a child of immigrants who has an ear for both Arabic and English, do you find yourself slipping into states of entangled translations?

Most of "The Earth in the Attic" was completed before I started the Darwish translation. Yet I think I am naturally drawn to Darwish's art of sequence. That aside, I generally infuse Arabic expressions and proverbs in my poems as they come to me through a predominantly American existence. Much of what I have experienced is through the process of seeing the Other: my mom or dad tells a story and I am left with that story in Arabic. Similarly, events did not occur in English in Darfur or Zambia. Translation was an immediate necessity and a limitation. Combine this with the immensity of the situation there, and then

English is born. Why not? Writing then becomes a testament to the beautiful unity of the human mind, where language originated equally for all of us.

Then there is the magic of syntax - where English and Arabic meet or part becomes thinner for me the more I read poets like (George) Oppen and (Michael) Palmer. I believe in such unities. In translating Darwish, I attempted to duplicate cadence through an overflow of syntactical flexibility. I was warned about this, that it may sound “unnatural” in English or “archaic” even, but I find these arguments to be steeped in dogma about what separates: individuation as godliness. This is dangerous – a self-imposed solitary confinement.

I do think that all poetry is an act of translation, even for the monoglot: to make the private public through a process of language.