والارض تورث كاللغة

AND LAND, LIKE LANGUAGE, IS INHERITED

INTERVIEW WITH FRANCK TORTILLER AND ELIAS SANBAR

Elias Sanbar, you know Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish well. He was your friend. How did you become his translator?

Elias Sanbar: I'd never worked as a translator. And Mahmoud remains the only person whose work I've translated. We were first and foremost close friends, and one day he asked me to translate a poem, telling me he couldn't quite recognise his poems when French readers spoke to him about them. I started with one poem, then another, then a collection, and eventually I translated a large part of his poetry—his prose was translated by Farouk Mardam-Bey. Mahmoud Darwish is often called a great "*Palestinian poet*" when he is actually a great "*poet from Palestine*." Poetry has no country. Or, rather, the only country of poetry is its language. Mahmoud Darwish is an "*Arab poet from Palestine*." He grew out of the Palestinian soil; his poetry is Arabic and universal.

While we know Mahmoud Darwish in French, could you describe his poetry in Arabic? What kind of text will you be reading at the Festival d'Avignon?

E.S.: Arabs have always been obsessed with their words, and their language has always rewarded them for it. To master that language is nigh impossible. Not because it is complex from a lexical or grammatical point of view, but because it is an ocean. Mahmoud Darwish is a poet influenced by the classics who, thanks to his knowledge of and love for this language, managed to write incredibly modern poems. This relationship to language was his life's stubborn work. Every collection was an attempt to explore it, to inhabit it. Each time differently, each time to develop new forms. Every new publication was a source of anxiety. He always wondered whether his readers would accept to follow him. Unlike many poets, Mahmoud Darwish could recite his texts admirably well. Often in front of thousands of admirers. And I think his immense popularity was due in part to the charm cast by his beautiful voice and the music of his poetry. His poems should always be "heard." Isn't that the true nature of all poems?
His work underwent a capital evolution after he settled in Paris in 1983. No less engaged but less lyrical-epic, as his great friend Ritsos called it, it was even more influenced by philosophy and universalism. His poems opened even more to the world. It's true of the one we'll be presenting at the Festival d'Avignon. It's not just a Palestinian odyssey, it's an Odyssey, period. I have to add here that Mahmoud Darwish always defined himself as a "Trojan poet." Here's how he explained it: Homer wrote his epics from the point of view of the winners, and I'll be the poet of loss, my mission being to bring back to light the lost epic of Troy. At the heart of this claim lies the difference he drew between defeat and loss. Defeat is sterile when loss forces one to better oneself.

Mahmoud Darwish had a unique relationship to the voice: he gave recitals, and his poetry was often sung. How was the idea of this collaboration with vibraphonist and jazzman Franck Tortiller born?

E.S.: I didn't want to trap the poem in some orientalist music, which would be just like adding subtitles. The poem is a land of evasion, where we can break free of genres, not a place to be hemmed in. The way I see it, to approach Mahmoud Darwish's poetry, a composer should wonder from where they can escape, how the poem allows them to better themselves by exploring new, different territories. I knew Franck Tortiller's work well. I attended several of his concerts when he was director of the Orchestre national de jazz. He's an exceptional artist. Over two years, we tried to find a score to fit the text. To find a form of cohesion. Franck Tortiller's amazing work allowed us to create that unity: a fusion that will allow people to enter the text with even more pleasure and to experience it under even better conditions.

Franck Tortiller, what did you feel when you first read *And land, like language, is inherited*?

Franck Tortiller: I see Mahmoud Darwish first as a poet of music, and Elias Sanbar's translation really highlights this musical impulse. This text has its own rhythm, because it brings together all sorts of poetic forms. It's an overlapping of different worlds. The challenge was to find a meaning for the music, to give the voice its own status; to know which passages needed us to compose music and which didn't need any; to understand when and where to improvise… To get there, I pulled on the thread of a sentence that punctuates the poem throughout, like a refrain: "*They returned*." The text is so dense and ramified that this refrain acts like a guide which would bring us back to the main road, to the trunk of the poem. After that, it's the musician's job to manage to find an organisation that would be as natural as possible so that music can be at the service of literature, without illustrating it, like a cinema background serving a story.

What status did you give to speech? How did you decide what should be said or spoken? How did you avoid the pitfalls of orientalism?

F.T.: It's all about changing sounds. By which I mean sonic universes. If something is sung, then there is a musical development, a melody, responses, improvisations… That's what we worked on with Dominique Devals, who is both a singer and an actress. When the text is spoken over the music, the music sounds different, the world we're in changes, becomes more dreamlike. When there is no music, which is another sound, it literally brings the text to the foreground. As for orientalism, it was never really a subject. I'm a jazzman born in Burgundy, the son of a winegrower… I make music that resembles me. I'm the one standing there, in a way! Moreover, this text isn't tied to a particular country, it's universal. I really tried to understand the way it sounds! Exile is something that touches us all across time. To delve into that text, to enter that world, with all necessary prudence, led to an evolution in my vision as a musician. Its unique epic scope forever changed my relationship to the voice, to the text. It was a great honour to follow in the footsteps of this poet.

Can you give us a quick definition of what jazz is to you?

F.T.: Jazz is a music of appropriation. It's the music that brings all the others together. Its specificity lies in its rhythm and in improvisation. I really like what Miles Davis said: "The first thing a jazz composer has to know is who he'll play with." It's very important, and the five musicians who make up this orchestra are people I've been working with for a long time. When I write a guitar score, I'm not writing a guitar score, but a score for Misja Fitzgerald Michel. The interpretation of what is written by the musicians is also fundamental. The score leaves a lot of freedom to their personalities, their ways of playing.

Tell us about your instrument, the vibraphone.

F.T.: Just like jazz in general, I discovered this instrument thanks to my father, also a jazzman, who gifted me a Lionel Hampton record. As a classical percussionist by training, I was immediately fascinated by this instrument, to which I ended up turning. It's a very simple instrument because I think the very first musical gesture in the history of humanity had to be a caveman grabbing a piece of wood, hitting a tree trunk with it, and listening to the sound it made and trying to make it his. That's the legacy all vibraphonists share. It's a very simple and natural instrument which awakens something of our origins in us, but also very sophisticated because, to make a sound and make it harmonious and melodic, you have to forget it's an archaic instrument and explore all possible vibrations. It can be telluric or lyrical, played mezzo-staccato and with flourishes. And all with very simple metal bars.

Interview conducted by Francis Cossu