

Poetic Injustice. Writings on Resistance and Palestine
by Remi Kanazi
reviewed by Norbert Hirschhorn

A debate among poets – interminable as those between formalists and free-versifiers, hermetics against popularizers – is whether poetry should be engaged with the social and political issues of the day. Should the poet, a member of the polis, devote at least some part of her creative power to addressing the urgent issues of the time. Or should the artist and art remain above the fray, unsullied by historical, political, and social forces, in the sarcastic words of Carolyn Forché, doyenne of Poetry of Witness? [1] Of course, poetry has always dealt with the political, from Homer onwards, in some expectation that words beautifully wrought can represent the human condition. Even Auden, who in his elegy to W.B. Yeats claimed, poetry makes nothing happen, could lament in September 1, 1939 of a low dishonest decade, understanding that All I have is a voice/ To undo the folded lie, with the hope that while Beleaguered by the same/ Negation and despair, at least to Show an affirming flame.

Many great poets forced to engage with the circumstances of their surroundings came, however reluctantly, to this conclusion that they must bear witness, but worried about being cast into the role of prophet. Yeats was concerned that some young men might have died, inspired by his poetry. Mahmoud Darwish, the great poet of the Palestinian resistance, was hectored by his fans to write more to support the cause. He replied, I am a poet and not a political commentator! While in his early life he was a PLO activist, his weapon the pen, his later poetry became the most beautifully lyrical of our time. Toward the end of his life he said, I thought poetry could change everything, could change history and could humanize, and I think the illusion is very necessary to push poets to be involved and to believe; but now I think that poetry only changes the poet! [2] Czeslaw Milosz summed up the dilemma for an accomplished poet of conscience: “I was stretched between contemplation of a motionless point and the command to participate actively in history.” Yet we know he did both.

Seamus Heaney recounted this episode in his long poem ‘Station Island’ when an IRA operative asked him, ‘When for fuck’s sake, are you going to write/ Something for us’. To which Heaney said he replied, If I do write something,/ Whatever it is, I’ll be writing for myself. Which is to say, he will describe the terrible consequences of the tribal conflict to friends and to members of both tribes, but The angry role was never my vocation. The IRA man in question, Danny Morrison, who recalls the encounter as much less acerbic, is still rancorous about the failure of artists to support the hunger strikers with their poetry, as when he quotes Bobby Sands’ bitter stanza: The poet’s word is sweet as bird,/ Romantic’s tale and prose./ Of stars above and gentle love/ And fragrant breeze that blows./ But write they not a single jot/ Of beauty tortured sore./ Don’t wonder why such men can lie,/ For poets are no more. [3]

And yet, in the worst of times, the poets do carry forward the testimony, if not immediately, then some time after. The totalitarian rulers know this, and mark poets among the first for suppression and extinction. Anna Akhmatova, often under threat of arrest, standing for hours in front of a stone prison for news of her son, was asked by another mother, Can you describe this? She replied, I can. The powerful and beautifully crafted political poem Requiem that resulted was committed to memory by a few of her most trusted friends, and saw publication only in 1963. Unluckily, her fellow poet, Osip Mandelstam, lost his life in the gulag when his poem Stalin Epigram came to the dictator’s attention, with lines like, the huge laughing cockroaches on his top lip, and He rolls the executions on his tongue like berries.

Which brings me to Palestinian-American Remi Kanazi’s Poetic Injustice. Writings on Resistance and Palestine. [4] The ostensible cause is just, the poetry not as good. The poems are sustained crowd-pleasing rants (you can hear the poet perform on the accompanying CD) with chopped up prose lines like, every time I think of 9/11/ I see burning flesh dripping off the bones/ of Iraqi children in Fallujah... Or, dead babies missing foreheads/ and frontal lobes... Was he there? Does he know this? Can we suspend disbelief in reading his work? Hardly. All the world’s injustices are

gathered into trivial chants: we'll shout out Darfur, Rwanda/ and the need for antiretrovirals/ look at people as aid packages/ who can't compete/ rather than ravaged lands/ perfecting paradigms/ of imperialism and propaganda. Judging by the website, I fear another cause for this poet is himself.

We must demand that any political poem be as well written as any beautiful personal lyric, or with language that surprises. When Theodor Adorno said in his much-misinterpreted comment, It is barbaric to write poetry after Auschwitz, what he intended was that poetry (and film and drama) simply cannot faithfully and freely portray the ultimate indignity. Words are inadequate to describe the horrors. Our enlightened, free-agent culture itself was no barrier to the Holocaust; it could not erase how it happened, nor can it prevent another from happening again. Any artistic representation of the Holocaust is likely aesthetic anaesthesia. (Consider Spielberg's Schindler's List.) But, Adorno's dictum wasn't just about art: the Holocaust showed that our very existence as autonomous beings with choice is a delusion. Art and culture that represent us as free agents are therefore also delusions. Nonetheless, because we do, we must keep on living and acting, singing and writing, but with utter humility and awareness of the delusion. Art represents a way of presenting the unrepresentable, bearing witness to aestheticism's own failure. [5] To write poetry of this nature requires rare talent.

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