

On Taha Muhammad Ali

Having found Taha Muhammad Ali's store on Casanova Street in the old quarter of Nazareth empty, I sat on one of the low, wicker-topped stools and let my eyes roam about the shop. The shelves running up to the vaulted ceiling were crammed with imitation pearl-studded scabbards, ceramic bowls of various shapes and sizes, colorful kaffiyehs, olive-wood camels, inlaid boxes, narghiles, post-cards of the legendary church rising above the shops at the end of the narrow street.

This wasn't exactly what I had expected. Some months earlier, when I'd first tried to translate two of Taha Muhammad Ali's poems, I had been told by a friend, who was then editing an anthology of Palestinian poetry, that the poet was a dealer in antiquities. Muhammad Ali was born and raised, my friend had explained, in the village of Saffuriyya, located on the site of what had once been the ancient town of Sepphoris, and at the age of seventeen was forced to leave with his family for Lebanon, after his village was attacked by the Israeli army in the Arab-Israeli war of 1948. A year later he and his family slipped back across the border and, finding the village destroyed, eventually settled in Nazareth.

Muhammad Ali, I now realized, was the proud owner of a souvenir shop. The only objects that might have passed for antiquities were some old farming implements and, leaning against the wall in one corner of the room, the waist-high jug once used by villagers for storing grain.

A slim young man entered the shop and introduced himself as Nizar, the poet's son. Taha would soon arrive, he announced. For some time now he and his younger brother had run the store. Their

father, Nizar added, would show up on occasion only to disappear into the nearby shops to sip Turkish coffee with his old friends. I wondered whether one of the shopkeepers wasn't the friend Muhammad Ali had spoken of several weeks earlier in Jerusalem, at the city's third international poetry festival. The poet had prefaced the reading of his poems by telling us, in halting Hebrew, "a little story." Many years ago, he said, he had started up a stand along the street leading into the Old City market in Nazareth where he would display small lacquered camels made of olive wood and sell them to tourists who came from all parts of the world to visit the Church of the Annunciation. A certain friend of his used to visit him at the end of his workday and sit on the wooden stool he'd set out for him, so he could enjoy looking at the foreign passersby. "I would ask him to listen to a poem I had written the previous night," Muhammad Ali told us,

and he would refuse loudly: "I don't want to hear it! I'm tired and I want to rest." One day it occurred to me that I might "bribe" him, by offering him one of the small wooden camels in exchange for his listening to my new poem. When I stretched out my hand to offer him the camel, a not unmysterious smile came across his face, and he took the camel, put it in his pocket, and offered me—of his two ears—only half an ear, with which he listened to my poem, all the while directing his eyes and his other ear-and-a-half to the people who were coming and going on the street before him, without there appearing on his face any indication that he was listening to me at all.

Time passed, and I continued to give my friend camels in exchange for his listening to each new poem that I wrote. On one of these afternoons, wanting to save myself a camel, I announced to my friend that Jean-Paul Sartre had visited Nazareth, and that the city council had invited me to participate in a reception for him where I met and spoke with him

at length. My friend cut me off abruptly and said: "I know all about it, and I read in the paper that you talked to him about his play *The Respectful Prostitute*. I've also been told that the municipality asked you to participate in the reception for Arthur Miller... But what has this got to do with our topic? Sartre isn't a poet. Arthur Miller has absolutely nothing to do with poetry and poets. And even if this French existentialist had been a poet, and the late Marilyn Monroe's husband had written poetry, what has that got to do with listening to your nonsense? I've come here to forget about my troubles and rest after a hard day's work... My friend, I don't feel like listening! But let's get it over with..."

I paid him his lacquered wooden camel and he put it in his pocket and listened grudgingly as I read him my latest poem.

One day I said to my friend: "OK... And what do you have to say about the Hebrew poet Natan Zach and his splendid beard? He came here with a writer-friend of his from Paris and bought a camel from me to give to his French guest..." My friend cut me off and said: "I don't see any connection between a great poet like Zach and you." And I quickly shut him up with the usual camel... which he put in his pocket, and then, without looking at me or offering any visible sign that he was paying attention to the words, he listened to the new poem I'd written the previous night.

Mostly I was afraid that the ongoing blackmail would use up all of my "capital" and one day empty the store, and I'd end up with neither camels to sell to the tourists nor anyone to listen to my poems.

Last week, to my great surprise, I was sent a Spanish literary journal with poems by Natan Zach and Taha Muhammad Ali on facing pages. And that same week I also received an invitation to participate in the international poetry festival in Jerusalem. I took the Spanish journal and the invitation, and went to my friend and told him: What do

you have to say now? Natan Zach and I in the same magazine! And this is an invitation to read at a festival where hundreds of people will hear my poems, including agents and journalists and people from television.

My friend took my hand between both his palms and looked at me directly with both his eyes and said: "Taha, you're a wonderful poet! I tried to burn you to a crisp! I told myself: 'If there's anything left after I've burned him, then he's a real poet. But if he's lost in the clamor of the street, and transformed entirely into ash and dust blown by the winds, then there's no need to feel sorry for him, no need to be sad about what he's written.' And thus, my friend, I took part in your creation!"

The following day my friend came to me carrying a fairly large cardboard box, and said: "And these, my dear friend, are your camels! Safe and sound and yours once again!"

Taha Muhammad Ali entered the shop, his head rising ponderously above a sharply stooped back. A large, clownish nose and jutting jaw suggested the uneasy cohabitation of mirth and menace. Three parallel furrows ran up from brow to crown in a face whose raw, impacted vitality might have been painted by Francis Bacon. He shook my hand vigorously before proposing that we drive to his home, located in one of the neighborhoods of Nazareth. I soon found myself sitting on the balcony of a two-story stone house surrounded by densely planted fruit trees—a concentrated version of the traditional Arab *bustan*—and by rosebushes and a huge scarlet bougainvillea that rambled over the porch. Muhammad Ali's home seemed to belong to another time and place in the generally bleak mix of debris-strewn lots, pitted roads, and unfinished cinder-block homes, some rising to four or five stories. The neighborhood had seen better days, as its Arabic name, Bir el-Amir, "The Prince's

Well," suggested. Like most Arab neighborhoods, villages, and towns in Israel, Bir el-Amir suffered from overcrowding, a paucity of state-allocated municipal funds, and neglect.

It was here that we met, sporadically over the next few years, sitting on Muhammad Ali's balcony or, come winter, in the reception room adjoining his living room, to converse, in a mixture of English, Hebrew, and Arabic. But mostly I listened to the poet's animated, impassioned talk. Muhammad Ali is a born raconteur, and his talk—of his childhood in Saffuriyya, of his early years selling trinkets from a peddler's cart, of his visit to Lebanon in 1983 to meet a childhood sweetheart now living in a refugee camp—tended to spill over into poetry. Was this a poem or just another extempore story that I was hearing in the poet's excited accents? I was never quite sure. Muhammad Ali's talk had a certain self-propelling quality to it, one which I soon realized charmed, baffled, and exasperated even the most fluent of Arabic speakers.

Saffuriyya, or at least the village of his childhood, where myth and reality converged, shone in the poet's mind as a place of prelapsarian innocence and embodied, in Palestinian terms, that period before the "great catastrophe," *al-nakba*, brought about by the Arab-Israeli war of 1948 and the consequent shattering and exodus of the Palestinian community. In July of that year Muhammad Ali's village, which had sheltered local militiamen, was bombed by Israel Defense Forces (IDF) aircraft and then hit by artillery. Most of the villagers fled into the surrounding wadis and orchards, believing that the Arab Liberation Army would come to their defense. But the ALA was not forthcoming, and the inhabitants of Saffuriyya dispersed. Some made their way northward, to Lebanon, while others found temporary refuge in the neighboring villages of Kafr Cana and Reine. The poet and his family chose the northern route to Lebanon, where they spent a year before managing to return to Israel. By then, however, the IDF had leveled Saffuriyya, and the Israeli authorities had handed over to local Jewish collective settlements (moshavim and kibbutzim) thousands of dunams of fertile

village land. Like many other former inhabitants of Saffuriyya, Muhammad Ali and his family settled in Nazareth, where he has remained for the last fifty years.

During one of my visits the poet drove me to what was left of Saffuriyya, now called Tzippori (derived from the noun "bird" in Hebrew and spoken Arabic). Only five kilometers northwest of Nazareth, situated on a wooded rise and surrounded by vast stretches of cultivated fields, traces of the village, which once boasted some four thousand Muslim inhabitants, were barely discernible in a few cactus hedges and tumbledown stone terraces. Tzippori is now a thriving moshav, or Jewish farming community. Muhammad Ali casually pointed from the window of his car at a couple of large, broken stones near some wild bramble bushes outside the driveway of a whitewashed suburban ranch house: "Our home was here," he said, and drove on. I cast a backward glance at the village and, farther up, at the archaeological site of Sepphoris, inhabited at one time or another by Canaanites, Persians, Greeks, Romans, Jews, Byzantines, Crusaders, and Muslims. The site had recently become a major tourist attraction, after magnificent mosaic floors were uncovered in what had been a Roman villa. The eighteenth-century citadel of the Bedouin ruler Zahir al-'Umar, which had served as a schoolhouse during Muhammad Ali's childhood, rose above the dusty shrubbery. Then dusk descended as we wound up the hills leading into Nazareth, the song of blackbirds rising from the darkening orchards behind us.

Perhaps because the poet is an autodidact whose formal education lasted only four years, the poetry came slowly. He had a family to support, and lived, like the entire Israeli Arab community, under martial law until 1966, and he describes the late fifties and sixties as a time when he would sell souvenirs to the Christian tourists during the day and study classical Arabic texts in the evening:

the pre-Islamic *Mu'allaqat* or "suspended" odes, *Kitab al-Aghani* (*The Book of Songs*), al-Mutanabbi, Abu Nuwas, the Andalusian Ibn Quzman, *A Thousand and One Nights*, and twentieth-century writers Taha Hussein, Badr Shakir al-Sayyab, Nizar Qabbani, and especially the Syrian Muhammad al-Maghut, who was, like Muhammad Ali, self-educated. Muhammad Ali had also taught himself English and read a great deal of American fiction, especially Steinbeck, Erskine Caldwell, and O. Henry. He was also reading the English Romantic poets and Poe, and, in translation, Chekhov and Maupassant. He published his first short stories in the fifties, long before publishing poetry. And well before the early seventies, when his poetry began appearing in various Arabic periodicals in Israel and abroad, the poet's tiny, unassuming souvenir shop on Casanova Street had become an informal meeting place for such leading literary figures as Michel Haddad, Jamal Qa'war, Samih al-Qasim, and the near-legendary Rashid Hussein—schoolteacher, journalist, translator, and poet. (Persecuted by both Arabs and Jews for his belief in coexistence—he translated into Arabic Israel's first national poet, H.N. Bialik, and into Hebrew, together with the Jewish poet Natan Zach, a collection of Palestinian folk poems—Hussein died, impoverished and alcoholic, in 1977, in a fire in his New York City apartment, where he had lived in exile since the late sixties.)

Muhammad Ali absorbed the lessons of the European- and American-influenced "free-verse movement," which burgeoned in the fifties in Lebanon and Iraq. The Beirut-based *Shi'r* magazine had become at the time the standard-bearer for a new poetry, advocating at once prosodic experimentation, literary and political engagement, and the interpretation of contemporary themes through the rediscovery of myths indigenous to the Middle East. Great emphasis was placed by poets such as Yusuf al-Khal and Adonis (Ali Ahmad Sa'ïd) on the idea of renewal, or, in archetypal terms, of rejuvenation—of death and rebirth as exemplified, for example, in the Tammuz fertility myth—and Palestine became a living symbol of a land turned barren that one day would become fertile again.

Dispossession, exile, and cultural marginalization—the sine qua non of Palestinian poetry, especially that written in the Arab diaspora—more often than not were treated symbolically, or even allegorically, and the figure of the Palestinian took on heroic dimensions (he was likened to Sinbad the Sailor, Ulysses, Harun al-Rashid, Lazarus, Houdini). Muhammad Ali's poetry, by contrast, eschews the heroic mode and is set in the context of everyday experience. His only semi-mythological figure, Abd el-Hadi the Fool, is an innocent dreamer "who gets on my anger's nerves / and lights the fuse of my folly." This doesn't mean that political and historical events are glossed over, but rather that feelings of collective humiliation, shame, rage, and disillusionment (augmented not only by the June war of 1967 and the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, but by the repeated sense of betrayal by the Arab world) are modified by a highly individualized voice grounded in the history and language of the Galilee, and tempered by the work of memory and the imagination.

The singularity of Muhammad Ali's poetry, and particularly his use of Arabic, needs some elaboration. Arabic poetry may have freed itself in the last half century from the trammels of an excessively formalized prosody and absorbed a wide range of modern techniques—from the high symbolism of *The Waste Land* to the radical disjunctions of French Surrealism—but it has also remained, on the whole, loyal in its use of both traditional meters and an elevated diction cast in the literary registers of *fus'ha* ("pure" or "clear" Arabic). In fact, what is called "free verse" in Arabic (*shi'r hurr*) is actually a flexible variant of the classical line employing quantitative meters and rhyme, but most often in a broken or irregular array. ("Free verse" as we know it in English—that is, nonmetrical, unrhymed verse—is called *shi'r nathr*, literally, prose poetry; the prose poem of the French and English tradition is referred to by still another term.) On the level of diction, every educated Arab child, in essence, grows up with two semi-independent linguistic systems: one spoken and particular to the region in which

he lives, and the other written, rooted in the Qur'an, and consequently pan-Arabic. A Syrian visiting Morocco might have a hard time making himself understood in the *souq* of Casablanca, but he will have no difficulty reading the local paper. Newspapers, the news on television, academic texts, philosophical tracts, novels, poetry, are all written, for the most part, in *fus'ha* – a literary language of great lexical and syntactic richness, but also one that is inherently conservative. Its venerable rhetorical tradition and inflationary allure have not diminished to this day. Hence the very real difficulty in writing an anti-rhetorical poetry that would transcend the layers of literary convention that poets traditionally manipulate. There is, in fact, something quietly subversive in deflating the language of declamation and reverting to a poetics of essences, which is at once innocent of pomp and cunning in craft. "For an Arab poet to be truly modern," writes Adonis, "his writing must glow like a flame which rises from the fire of the ancient, but at the same time is entirely new."

This is not to say that attempts to use colloquial speech in poetry and fiction haven't been made. Individual poets and writers, among them the Egyptian Salah Abd al-Sabur and the Syrian Nizar Qabbani, have experimented with dialect and the local vernacular, and with rhythms that approximate the rhythms of common speech. But this has been done with caution and, in order to legitimize their deviations from a purely literary idiom, poets have often drawn on the traditional colloquial *zajal*, a form, by and large satirical in nature, whose master was the twelfth-century Ibn Quzman. Until very recently the use of the colloquial in poetry has been associated, at best, with popular folk literature and traditional songs, and, at worst, with the actual corruption of the Arabic language. Naguib Mahfouz, for example, the Dickens of modern Arabic fiction, writes with considerable vehemence of his opposition to popular speech forms: "The colloquial is one of the diseases from which the people are suffering, and of which they are bound to rid themselves as they progress. I consider the colloquial one

of the failings of our society, exactly like ignorance, poverty, and disease.”

Muhammad Ali writes a literary Arabic that occasionally incorporates or, as he puts it, “grafts” onto the classical forms certain elements of a quasi-colloquial and often idiosyncratic Arabic, along with – in some instances – full-fledged dialect when his characters speak. In contrast to the stylized, heightened diction of most of his contemporaries, Muhammad Ali’s lower register anchors the poetry to a sense of place without ever sounding merely like dialect. That, in combination with the poet’s nonmetrical, unrhymed verse (he writes solely *shi’r nathr*), has given rise to the perception of him by some readers and critics as a popular, or *’ammiyeh*, poet and storyteller whose poetry is removed from the strains of his younger Palestinian contemporaries Samih al-Qasim and Mahmoud Darwish, both of whom have written an engaged poetry of resistance in the most resonant tones of a metrical *fus’ha* – which in itself assures them an audience inside and outside of Israel, the West Bank, Gaza, and Jordan (and, paradoxically, beyond exclusively literary circles). But Muhammad Ali’s seeming insularity within the Palestinian community should not be disparaged. Arabic poets and critics have pointed out that Muhammad Ali’s originality (and even his relevance to the Palestinian cause) lies precisely in his blending of registers and employment of natural, homespun imagery—both of which contribute to the poetry’s apparent simplicity while belying all along its complex sensibility. Saffuriyya may have been razed to the ground, but its mores, language, and landscape remain paradigms of durable hope in the poet’s imagination. In effect the rhetoric and technique of Muhammad Ali’s poetry constitute yet another means of clinging to his home and land, and of being a *samid* – a term coined by Palestinians in the late seventies and meaning one who holds on tenaciously to his land and its culture and perseveres in adverse times.

Written in a forceful, direct style, in short lines of varying beats, with a minimum of fuss and a rich array of images drawn primarily from village life, Muhammad Ali's poetry recalls in contemporary terms the work of the great modern Turkish poet Nazim Hikmet, as well as the Central and Eastern European poetry of Ungaretti, of Holan, of Różewicz and Herbert, and of Weöres and Juhász, poets who wrote with unflinching honesty as the lights dimmed in their native lands. Such poets replaced the "poeticisms" of their elders with a stark, emotional directness. Montale spoke of wanting to "wring the neck of the eloquence of our old aulic language, even at the risk of a counter-eloquence," a turn of phrase that seems particularly applicable to Muhammad Ali's own poetics. But the poet's spoken rhythms and lean diction also suggests the down-to-earth vitality and inventiveness of America's early modernist poets. William Carlos Williams comes to mind: "And in proportion as a man has bestirred himself to become awake to his own locality he will perceive more and more of what is disclosed and find himself in a position to make the necessary translations. The disclosures will then and only then come to him as reality, as joy, as release."

Muhammad Ali has bestirred himself awake, and in doing so he has released a complex of emotions of startling and often unexpected force. One may be charmed by the poet himself, the village chronicler and seller of trinkets, the self-educated poet who has described himself as "a camel fleeing the slaughterhouses, / galloping toward the East, / pursued by processions / of knives and assessors, / women wielding / mortar and pestle for chopmeat!" But the parallel thrust of Muhammad Ali's work is revealed in a harsh, often painful realism, in emotional desolation, and in telling images of desertion, ruin, and the sudden eruption of violence that act as a foil to any temptation to give in to mere folklore and nostalgia. Not infrequently pain, joy, bitterness, and hope are inexorably linked, as in "The Evening Wine of Aged Sorrow," or in the poet's marvelous story, "So What," where a child's walking barefoot for the first ten years of his life leads to cuts and scars from "daggers

of splintered glass," and "thorns sharp as venomous stingers," but also to the unmediated, tactile exploration of his surroundings:

I'd walk, stand, then walk in the water, which usually covered my calf, feeling against my bare legs and the flesh of my feet and the nerve-ends of my toes small pieces of metal, for the most part little coins with holes at their center, coins that had been lost by their owners and swept away by the water, or marbles, bullet casings, and old ladies' copper rings that had been thrown away by grandsons, and small keys, and sometimes bigger keys, in addition to crooked old nails, bent like the words of liars.

It is hard to think of another Palestinian poet of Muhammad Ali's generation who writes with such intimacy while skillfully modulating between the personal and the public spheres of life. Muhammad Ali speaks in what might be called a figurative plainness, reducing the traditional rhetorical flourishes of Arabic literature to a minimum. In "Empty Words," for example, he addresses his "little notebook / yellow as a spike of wheat," in a tone reminiscent of Waller as echoed in early Pound. Though here, too, pastoral fancy soon turns into unremitting, even brutal, sorrow, a sorrow that is at once private and communal as the poet alludes to the exodus of Palestinians from the Haifa seaport in 1948. The poetry may be acutely personal, but time after time it conveys the sense that happiness is not something that "flees / every which way, / like a partridge." It is of another order altogether, and must in the end ally itself to the aesthetic realm, and the natural world embodied in the Blakean "minute particulars" of Saffuriyya. Lightened by a touch of the trickster's wiles (*Fooling the Killers* is the title of the poet's second volume of poems), the poetry is at once lyrical and blunt, graceful and harsh in its veracities.

Invited once again to Jerusalem to read from his work in the spring of 1997, Taha Muhammad Ali prefaced his poems with another short tale. (Introducing his poems with a story, the poet explained, was like showing the animated trailers that used to be run before a feature film appeared on the screen.) This time the poet spoke not of wooden camels but of an old-fashioned mousetrap. The story went something like this: One day, back in 1941, Muhammad Ali's mother discovered a mouse in their home. She gave her son two piastres and told him to run off to the local shopkeeper in Saffuriyya and buy a mousetrap. Muhammad Ali returned with the mousetrap, which the shopkeeper had mentioned was rare and made only in Hebron, and at exactly five o'clock he heard the trap door click shut. "I then saw," the poet exclaimed, his wrinkles creasing in his troll-like face, "the most beautiful mouse, with green eyes and a belly white as cotton." Fifty years later, the poet's wife spotted a mouse in her Nazareth kitchen and implored her husband, "Taha, quick, fetch me a mousetrap." Muhammad Ali drove into Nazareth and was told that the sort of mousetrap he was looking for no longer existed, though someone had heard that they were still being made in Hebron, now part of the West Bank. A week later, it just so happened, the poet was scheduled to read his poems at the Hebron sports club. Muhammad Ali recited his poems and was then invited to a sumptuous lunch. At the conclusion of the meal he asked his new friends, "By the way, does anyone in Hebron sell old-fashioned mousetraps?" A young man said that he knew where they could be purchased, and he promptly drove the poet to one of the local stores where Muhammad Ali saw the exact same mousetrap he had bought for two piastres as a child. "Did you make these traps?" he asked the owner of the shop. "No," the man answered, "they were made by my father, Ziab al-Shantawi." Muhammad Ali paused, and then said to the Jerusalem crowd: "This was the very same name as the shopkeeper in Saffuriyya." And so he returned home with a new-old mousetrap, and the next day, he added, at exactly five o'clock the mousetrap clicked shut, and once more he saw "the same, beautiful mouse, with green eyes and a belly white as cotton..."

The audience of Israelis—and a handful of Palestinians—chuckled, uneasily perhaps, and somewhat beguiled, for all were now dislocated: aware that the poet had caught them in the snare of his words, though it was hard to know just how. Taha Muhammad Ali, too, was visibly shaken by the story, as Saffuriyya of half a century ago was suddenly, disturbingly present, while present and future seemed every bit as fragile as the past he had summoned to his poems.

G.L.

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