

Ramsey Nasr

Poetry and Engagement

Of late the matter of engagement in poetry has been raised in the Netherlands, without a trace of irony. But why? Weren't we happy having been released from that failed barricade-rhetoric, finally glad that life takes no notice of us?

Furthermore, is the matter of engagement in poetry clear, today? What is it that engagement is supposed to imply? Involvement? With what? Politics? Life? Universal suffering?

In some countries the question to what engagement is supposed to imply, is rather nonsensical. When I went on a tour in Indonesia with some fellow poets I found *everything* was political, there, whether you liked it or not.

A famous Indonesian poet traveled along with us, his name is Agus R. Sarjono. He was a star, especially among students. The response from a crowd of students to a poetry reading he held astounded us Dutch poets. When he read one particular favourite they cheered and called the words out with him, falling in on the word 'palsu', which means false, fake, and getting pretty much hilarious about it, with their teachers standing beside them.

The poem goes as follows:

Fake Poem

Good morning sir, good morning madame said the students
with a fake greeting. They studied
fake history from fake textbooks. Having finished their studies
they were dumbfounded at the mass of fake marks.
Since their school grades weren't good enough
they went to their teachers houses to present them
with envelopes full of comments and fake respect.
With fake smiles and making fake rejections
their teachers finally accepted the envelopes with the fake promise
to change the fake marks for new fake marks. Many schooldays

later they became fake economists, fake lawyers,
fake farmers, fake engineers.
Some of them became fake teachers, scientists
or artists. They plunged eagerly
into the middle of fake development
with fake economy as fake leaders. They witnessed the hectic
fake trade with fake export and fake import
which provided various goods of fake quality.
And fake banks full enthusiasm offered fake bonuses
and fake gifts, but at the same time with fake permits
and fake letters secretly asked for loans
from the national bank, run by fake high officials.
The public did business with fake money
supported by fake foreign exchange.
Therefore the foreign currencies, stimulated by fake rates
caused everybody to panic and end in a crisis
which made the fake government
crash into a fake fate. And fake people
cried out their fake joy and discussed
fake ideas during fake seminars and talk shows
welcomed loudly the start of a democracy
fluttering
and fake.

Such moments as that one – spun by the reading of this poem – are rare in poetry and in art in general. They are almost entirely brought about by the workings of engagement, involvement. But – by who's involvement? That of the poet, the audience, or both?

Reading reports on premieres of musical pieces by the composer Shostakovich one gets some pretty bizarre impressions. While the audience sat weeping after the end of the performance of his 14th symphony, the Kremlin stateofficials marched out of the concert hall, enraged. Because of a symphony.
Can a symphony be engaged? And has the 14th symphony – or the 7th or the 8th - lost

its validity after the fall of Communism? Is she out-of-date? I don't think so, she's even my favourite.

Is Shostakovich' 14th, obsessively dealing with death, friendship and ill-fated love, engaged? Without a doubt. But not a word about Stalin. It's neither just a pamphlet. For that it held too few solutions (exactly none). This is also what the Catholic dissident Solzjenitzyn would blame the composer for. It shows that engagement – like in Shostakovich' music – does not reflect the hopeful strive for progress and fulfillment. Engagement is not the same as the naive belief in, and fight for, 'the cause'.

But then, what is it?

To complicate matters some more: engagement is not per definition intentional. In 1995 I graduated from drama school with a monologue called "De doorspeler". An English-Arabic version of it, "The Wannaplay", was performed in Palestine and Jordan. The piece itself was a collage of sketches, love poems, cheezy jokes, cabaret, and theatre. It dealt with the fragmentation, about a confused boy who can no longer handle the overload of newflash information, flips out, and finally blames his ex-love for all the misery. A classical, or rather, post-modern psychiatric case. The impossibility to focus in a fragmented world.

That explanation did not hold in Bethlehem, Ramallah, East-Jerusalem and Amman. For the audience there, everything was about Palestine and Israel. All the pieces came together in that one focal point, that single theme that mattered, which cast its shadow over every day and every action.

It shocked me at first. They completely misunderstood the piece. For instance: the poem "The Lovers" is really quite trite: about a relationship breaking-up. It's about a woman who wants peace, and –to keep her husband from hurting – gradually cuts off all his senses, till he merely stands before her, lifeless as a bust, and she can rest. Gruesome – but trite. For the Arabic audience though it was completely clear what kind of poem they had been hearing: what it was about was the strangling embrace of two peoples. It was a political poem. But they didn't just misunderstand the poem, and consequently the whole piece, but they were all in tears about it. Crying men came to shake my hand after the end of the monologue. I wasn't sure how to take to

these emotional responses.

After the performance in Amman the Dutch ambassador walked into the dressingroom in a slight panic. She said: “I want you to meet someone. This is my driver. I don’t really know what I should do. Watching your play he was suddenly crying. Now, I never really speak with him, I merely sit next to him during rides. And now I’m slightly shocked.”

The man was a Palestinian. He seemed to have experienced something rather extraordinary.

Meanwhile the questions grew in my head, whether it’s the artist himself who decides what his work is about. Whether the artist is also his, or her, own exegetist.

Perhaps you are thinking: A fellow tremendously glad with himself, that Ramsey Nasr. If that is so, I haven’t made my point clearly. What I’m trying to say is that *besides the artist*, the reader, or the viewer or listener, can actively seek engagement. It had become clear to me that a love poem can be a political poem.

From that time on, I have been reading my own love poems from a different viewpoint, more so since I found out that modern Palestinian poetry is riddled with love poems; they are love-letters to a landscape, biblical poetry. While their country is being broken-up the Palestinians write love poems.

In many cases, and contrary to what many believe, engagement does not emerge from the urge to “be political”, but from circumstances in which politics control life. Life engenders engagement, also for those who would go around it, as in the following poem from the Palestinian poet Nasri Hajjaj:

One Golden Honey Fig

Every morning, while the refugee camp is fast asleep, I wake up at dawn. Before I visit the toilet or bathe, I take off my night clothes and in my memory stand naked by the fig tree outside my grandmother’s room. I bathe myself in the greenness of its leaves and dry my body with the golden yellow of its fruit. Then I glare at a honey fig until it falls into my hand. I cut it in two: one half I eat and the other I offer to it, my memory, that it may stop haunting me.

And another example, a poem by a Palestinian named Mourid al-Barghouti:

It's also fine

It's also fine to die in our beds
on a clean pillow
and among our friends.

It's fine to die, once,
our hands crossed on our chests
empty and pale
with no scratches, no chains, no banners,
and no petitions.

It's fine to have an undustful death,
no holes in our shirts,
and no evidence in our ribs.

It's fine to die
with a white pillow, not the pavement, under our cheeks,
our hands resting in those of our loved ones
surrounded by desperate doctors and nurses,
with nothing left but a graceful farewell,
paying no attention to history,
leaving this world as it is,
hoping that, someday, someone else
will change it.

After touring Indonesia or the Middle-East, one cannot but recognize that postmodern art has become a luxury. After having experienced the horrors of the Second World

War first hand, Western-Europe developed a vigorous art that took fragmentation and absurdity as a point-of-departure. Because it could not do otherwise. If Nazism, Communism, of late also the unbridled free market economics, have proved anything, it is the bankruptcy of the idea of progress.

But we know all that by now rather to the point of boredom. And we have nothing to complain about, over here. We live in enormous prosperity, though suffering is not kept from us: Through television, the internet, newspapers, we learn about genocide, occupation, torture and corruption being day-to-day realities outside the borders of the West. It doesn't hurt us much, but it is apparent everywhere: mankind cannot be improved upon, there is no progress. Life knows no morals and there's nothing we can do about that. Postmodernism is omnipresent.

That thought is not just a luxury, it is also a misunderstanding.

Maybe life cannot be explained; it will not go away. It overwhelms us, whether we like it or not. And it can destroy us.

And maybe this is the reason I'm not very fond of poetry that seems to be on a drip in a stuffy hospitalbed. By request of the writer: no Womentongues or Begonias in the windowsill –God forbid: Womentongues!-, but instead a stack of philosophical writings, which take away every possible view on the world.

To avert a misunderstanding: I'm not saying that poets should get on the first flight to Iraq or Afghanistan. Let them stay indoors. Pamphlets are not what we need, not for 'the cause', or anything. Pamphlets seldomly run reprints. But what about a heart? What to do with a human being, reader or writer, who keeps on breathing, keeps longing against all odds? What to do with living people in a nonsensical world?

Is it possible to allow engagement in poetry without corroding that very poetry? I'm convinced it is as long as you're talented enough and steer clear of ready solutions. As long as your pen boggles and lives and slips from your hand. And this: as long as it's left up to the reader to decide what a love poem is, and what politics. Engagement is not about choosing for or against a party, engagement is simply about life, taking part in it. If need be, only through words; through language.

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