I saw Ramallah: Foreword by Edward Saïd

This compact, intensely lyrical narrative of a return

This compact, intensely lyrical narrative of a return from protracted exile abroad to Ramallah on the West Bank in the summer of 1996 is one of the finest existential accounts of Palestinian displacement that we now have. It is by Mound Barghouti, a well-known poet who, as he says here and there in the book, is married to Radwa Ashour, the distinguished Egyptian academic and novelist; the two were students of English literature together at Cairo University in the 1960s, and for a period of seventeen years during their marriage lived apart from each other, he as PLO representative in Budapest, she and their son Tamim in Cairo, where she is professor of English at Ain Shams University. The political reasons for the separation are alluded to in I Saw Ramallah, as are the circumstances of his exile from the West Bank as well, of course, as his return thirty years later. Widely and enthusiastically received all over the Arab world when it appeared in 1997, the book went on to win the Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature, one of the most satisfying parts of which is this elegant and compelling English translation by Ahdaf Soueif, herself an important Egyptian novelist and critic whose own work (notably In the Eye of the Sun and The Map of Love) is in English. It is therefore an important literary event to have these two talents contained within the same cover. I am delighted to be able to say a few prefatory words about this work.

Having myself made a similar trip to Jerusalem (after an absence of forty-five years), I very well know the admixture of emotions—happiness, of course, regret, sorrow, surprise, anger, among others—that accompanies such a return. The great novelty and power of Barghouti's book is that it painstakingly chronicles, and gives clarity to, the whirlwind of sensations and thoughts that otherwise overwhelm one on such occasions. Palestine after all is no ordinary place. It is steeped in all the known histories and traditions of monotheism, and has seen conquerors and civilizations of every stripe come and go. In the twentieth century it has been the site of an unremitting contest between the indigenous Arab inhabitants, who were tragically dispossessed and mostly dispersed in 1948, and an incoming political movement of Zionist Jews, of largely European provenance, who set up a Jewish state there and, in 1967, conquered the West Bank and Gaza, which they in effect still hold. Every Palestinian today is therefore in the unusual position of knowing that there was once a Palestine and yet seeing that place with a new name, people, and identity that deny Palestine altogether. A 'return' to Palestine is therefore an unusual, not to say urgently fraught, occurrence.

Barghouti's narrative in a sense was made possible because of the grotesquely misnamed 'peace process' between Yasser Arafat's PLO and the state of Israel. Begun in September 1993 and continuing unresolved as I write (in early August 2000), this US-brokered arrangement neither provided for real Palestinian sovereignty in Gaza and the West Bank nor allowed for peace and reconciliation between Jews and Arabs. But it did allow for the return of some Palestinians from the 1967 territories to their homes, and it is this happy fact that triggers the border scenes with which / Saw Ramallah opens. As Barghouti quickly discovers, the irony is that even though there are Palestinian officers at the Jordan River bridge separating the Hashemite Kingdom from Palestine, Israeli military men and women are still in charge. As he tersely notes, "the others are still masters of the place." Yet whereas he is a West Banker and can make the visit he so eloquently narrates here, the overwhelming majority of most Palestinians (about 3.5 million) are refugees from the 1948 territories and therefore cannot return under the present circumstances.

Necessarily, there is a good deal of politics in Barghouti's book, but none of it is either abstract or ideologically driven: whatever comes up about politics arises from the lived circumstances of Palestinian life, which, most often, is surrounded by restrictions having to do with travel and residence. Both of these related matters, taken for granted by most people in the world who are citizens, have passports, and can travel freely without thinking about who they are all the time, are extraordinarily charged for the stateless Palestinians, many of whom do in fact have passports but nevertheless, like the millions of refugees all over the Arab world, Europe, Australia, North and South America, still bear the onus of being displaced and hence, misplaced. Barghouti's text is consequently laced with problems related to where he can or cannot ay, where he may or may not go, for how long and in what circumstances he must leave, and what, most of all, occurs when he here. His brother Mounif dies an unnecessary and cruel death in France because no
one can (or will) get to him and help. Major figures of cultural importance like the assassinated novelist Ghassan Kanafani and the cartoonist Naji al-‘Ali haunt the book as well, reminders that no matter how gifted and artistically endowed Palestinians are, they are still subject to sudden death and unexplained disappearance. Hence also the intermittently grieving, sorrowful tone of this book, otherwise so exuberant and celebratory.

Yet what gives this book an unmistakable stamp of profound authenticity is its life-affirming poetic texture. Barghouti’s writing is really amazingly free of bitterness or recrimination; he neither reproves and harangues Israelis for what they have done nor berates the Palestinian leadership for the bizarre arrangements they agreed to on the ground. He is of course absolutely correct to note several times that settlements dot (and usually disfigure) the gently rolling and often mountainous Palestinian landscape, but that is all he does, in addition to noting what is an inconvenient fact for the supposed peacemakers to deal with, especially since places like Ramallah and Deir Ghassanah are so indomitably, unchangedly Palestinian. There is no small irony in play when he excavates the etymology of his family name. (Although I have no firm information about this, I think the Barghoutis constitute the single largest Palestinian family, with estimated numbers running as high as 25,000.) He cannot get away from the fact that it seems to derive from the Arabic word for ‘flea’, and this humbling detail strangely gives the narrative even more humanity and poignancy.

For it is as an account of loss in the midst of return and reunion that I Saw Ramallah gets its main distinction. And it is Barghouti’s extended rebuttal and resistance against the reasons for that loss that endows his poetry with substance and gives this narrative its positive valence. "The Occupation," he says, "has created generation of us that have to adore an unknown beloved: distant, difficult, surrounded by guards, by walls, by nuclear missiles, by sheer terror." Therefore, in his poems and in this prose accompaniment to his return he seeks to break down the walls, evade the guards, gain access to his Palestine, which he finds in Ramallah. Once a quiet garden suburb of Jerusalem, Ramallah has in recent years become the center of Palestinian urban life. It has relative autonomy, a decent amount of cultural activity, and a rapidly increasing population. So it is in this newly invigorated and rediscovered Ramallah that Barghouti the exile and dispossessed writer finds himself anew—and again and again in the new forms of his displacement. "It is enough for a person to go through the first experience of uprooting, to become uprooted forever." Thus despite its joy and moments of exuberance this narrative return at bottom reenacts exile rather than repatriation. This is what gives it both its tragic dimension and its appealing precariousness. Ahdaf Soueif’s excellent translation makes precisely this rather special tone available now to readers of English. The Palestinian experience is therefore humanized and given substance in a new way.

Edward W. Said, New York, August 11, 2000