

CIRS BRIEF

Reflecting on the Life and Work of Mahmoud Darwish

Munir Ghannam and Amira El-Zein



CIRS

CENTER FOR
INTERNATIONAL
AND REGIONAL
STUDIES

GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF FOREIGN SERVICE IN QATAR

No. 3
© 2009

Reflecting on the Life and Work of Mahmoud Darwish

Ambassador Munir Ghannam and Professor Amira El-Zein

© 2009 Center for International and Regional Studies
Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in Qatar

Brief No. 3

ISSN 2072-7518

About the Qatar Foundation for Education, Science and Community Development

Founded in 1995, Qatar Foundation is a private, nonprofit, chartered organization committed to the principle that a nation's greatest resource is its people. Qatar Foundation is headquartered in a unique Education City, which hosts numerous progressive learning institutions and centers of research, including branch campuses of five of the world's leading universities. For more information about Qatar Foundation, please visit www.qf.org.qa.

About the Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in Qatar

The Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in Qatar, opened in August 2005, is a branch campus of Georgetown University, the oldest Catholic and Jesuit university in America, founded in 1789. The program builds on Georgetown University's long tradition of educating future leaders for careers in the international arena through a liberal arts undergraduate program focused on international affairs. For more information about the School of Foreign Service in Qatar, please visit qatar.sfs.georgetown.edu.

About the Center for International and Regional Studies

Established in 2005, the Center for International and Regional Studies at the Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in Qatar is a premier research institute devoted to the academic study of regional and international issues through dialogue and exchange of ideas, research and scholarship, and engagement with scholars, opinion makers, practitioners, and activists. For more information about the Center for International and Regional Studies, please visit cirs.georgetown.edu.

About the Speakers

Munir Ghannam is Ambassador of Palestine to Qatar and Amira El-Zein is Visiting Associate Professor with Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service in Qatar.

On October 22, 2008, Ambassador Ghannam and Professor El-Zein were invited by CIRS to give a lecture entitled "Reflecting on the Life and Work of Mahmoud Darwish." This Brief is an edited transcript of that lecture.

Reflecting on the Life and Work of Mahmoud Darwish

Munir Ghannam and Amira El-Zein

Munir Ghannam on the Life of Mahmoud Darwish

This lecture is in honor of an exceptional poet, whose poetry marked deeply the cultural scene in Palestine and in the Arab world at large over the last five decades. A couple of months ago, we lost the most famous Palestinian poet and perhaps even the most famous Arab poet of modern times. This poet was most famous as “the voice of Palestinian resistance,” though I know that he did not like to be confined to such a description. In his death, an Arab cultural pyramid collapsed, and Arabic literature and culture lost a person whom many scholars described as “the savior of Arab language in modern times.” That is Mahmoud Darwish.

Mahmoud Darwish was born in 1942 into a land-owning Palestinian family in a small village called Birwe, in the north of what was called, just half a century ago, Palestine. Now it is called Israel. This was a village in a part of Palestine called Galilee. At the time when he was born, Israel had not yet been created.

In 1948, the British announced the end of their mandate on Palestine and a new state was created on a major part of historical Palestine, including Galilee. Immediately after that, the first Arab-Israeli war broke out. The Israeli Army occupied Darwish’s village and the whole family joined the exodus of Palestinian refugees – estimated to be around one million at that time. Now there are more than six million refugees. They joined the exodus of the Palestinian refugees who fled the Israeli massacres to neighboring Arab countries, like Jordan, Syria and Lebanon.

The Darwish family spent a year in a United Nations refugee camp in Lebanon, and in 1949, the family returned to their occupied homeland to find that the Israeli Army had already completely destroyed and depopulated their village in addition to more than 400 other villages and towns. And, of course, the Israelis built new Israeli colonies on the ruins of these villages and towns.

The Darwish family, considered by the new Israeli state to be

returning illegally to their country, was subjected to military rule and the emergency regulations that the state of Israel had established over expropriated Palestinian land. They were given the status of “present-absent aliens.” Now, they are considered absent from their homes. The Palestinians who left were considered absent, and the Palestinians who stayed in their houses were considered prisoners. Those who left and returned to find their houses destroyed were given the status of “present-absent” – a new expression in language. Occupation can create such expressions.

The Darwish family had a terrible experience of an uprooted status that deeply marked the life of the poet from that point onwards, preventing him from ever finding his homeland except in his language and poetry, as well as in his ever-loving audience. Darwish started to write poems whilst still at school. His first collection appeared in 1960 when he was only 19 years old. With the second collection of poems called, *Olive Leaves*, or *Awraq al-Zaytun*, in 1964, he gained a reputation as one of the leading poets of resistance in Palestine. His poem, “Identity Card,” or *Bitaqat Hawiyyah*, became a cry of defiance in the face of the occupiers who had been trying to overlook the presence of Arab-Palestinians on their homeland. It is a famous poem, and began like this:

Record!
I am an Arab
And my identity card is number fifty thousand
I have eight children
And the ninth is coming after a summer
Will you be angry?¹

He was addressing the Israeli occupation army, and he realized at that time how the poem can be a threat to the sword. He realized what an effect a word could have in the face of a gun. He was harassed by the Israeli military authorities for writing and reciting poetry that expressed his strong sense of Arab and Palestinian identity. Several poems appeared while Darwish spent his days between Israeli prisons and home arrests.

¹ Mahmoud Darwish, “Identity Card” in *The Complete Work of Mahmoud Darwish* (3rd edition, Beirut, Lebanon: Al-muʿassasah al arabiyyah li al-dirasat wa al-nashr, 1973), p. 96. Darwish subsequently refused to include this poem in later editions of his complete works, citing its overtly political nature.

He left the country in 1970 to go to Moscow and decided not to return. Cairo was his next step and then Beirut, where he settled down and worked as an editor of the journal, *Palestinian Issues*. He was also the director of The Palestinian Research Center, which was stationed in Beirut at that time, and was interested in conducting all kinds of research about the Palestinian situation, whether inside Palestine or about the exodus.

His poems became known throughout the Arab world and Marcel Khalife has put the words of Mahmoud Darwish to music. Most notably, “Rita,” “Birds of Galilee,” and “I Yearn for my Mother’s Bread” have become anthems for the last two generations of Palestinians and Arabs. Darwish wrote often of identity, exile, his past, and collective Palestinian memory. He wrote of the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land and the struggle for freedom and independence for the Palestinian people.

Darwish gradually became widely considered as the Palestinian national poet, who played a key role in articulating Palestinian identity. He became the voice of the Palestinian people. According to Hanan Ashrawi, whom I know will be invited by CIRS to visit SFS-Qatar, it was easy to describe Mahmoud Darwish as a national poet. But he is much more than that. For Palestinians, he not only shaped our language, he also shaped our self-perception and who we are. This is whether you are a man, a woman, rich or poor, educated or not. He did it in a creative, sensitive, human, and comprehensive way that made us realize who we are and the best and the worst of what we are capable of.

He also forged a common language, and shared values and perceptions with the rest of the world. So he put us in touch, not only with our identity, but with our basic humanity. He also gave us answers to things that were extremely difficult to cope with, like the sense of exile and alienation, and of captivity and siege. These are abstractions, but we live them every day, and he translated his personal experience in ways that would make them more understandable to each and every one of us. He gave us the tools to deal with our sorrow.

The poetry of Darwish has gained great sophistication over the years, and he enjoyed international fame for a long time. He published around 30 poetry and prose collections, which have been translated into 22 languages – more than any other contemporary Arab poet. He also founded and was editor-in-chief of the prestigious literary review, *Al Karmel*. Darwish has been widely viewed as the preeminent man of Palestinian letters, as well as one of the greatest contemporary Arab poets

who remained at the peak of Arabic poetry for four decades. His work earned him a number of international literary awards, but, nonetheless, politics played a major role in Darwish's life and work.

He identified strongly with the Palestinian Liberation Organization and fully supported a two-state solution. He was the author of Mr. Yasser Arafat's famous speech at the United Nations General Assembly in 1974 when he said, "Today I have come bearing an olive branch and a freedom-fighter's gun. Do not let the olive branch fall from my hand."² In 1988, he wrote the official Palestinian Declaration of Independence, which was read in Algeria by the Palestinian president Yasser Arafat at the Palestinian National Council.

Darwish was elected a member of the Executive Committee of the PLO. This is the highest leadership body in the Palestinian National Movement. But, he resigned from this committee in 1993 to protest the Oslo Accords, which were signed between the Palestinian National Movement, the PLO, and Israel in 1993 to start negotiations in order to solve the problem instead of fighting. He resigned not because he rejected peace with Israel, but because he thought there was no clear Israeli commitment in these accords to withdraw from the Occupied Territories, and he felt Oslo would pave the way for escalation of the conflict rather than producing a viable Palestinian State or lasting peace – a judgment that turned out to be true. He said, "I hoped I was wrong. I'm very sad that I was right."³

It was, however, the Oslo Accords that permitted Darwish to go back to Ramallah in 1996 after 20 years in exile. But he refused an offer from President Yasser Arafat at that time to become the minister of culture in the Palestinian government. In fact, he moved firmly out of the political sphere in Palestine.

Later, he lamented the rise of Islamic extremism in Palestine, which he viewed as the bankruptcy of Palestinian public life – a dramatic change in the Palestinian public life. Last year, he bitterly criticized the Palestinian inter-factional conflict that ended in Hamas taking over Gaza. He is reported to have said: "We have triumphed [...] Gaza won its

² United Nations Audio Library. "Yasser Arafat United Nations General Assembly Speech." (1974). (Translated from Arabic). <http://www.unmultimedia.org/radio/library/classics/genre/speech.html>. Accessed on January 5, 2009.

³ Darwish, Mahmoud. "A Poet's Palestine as Metaphor" (December 22, 2001). *New York Times*. <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9C05E6DA1F3EF931A15751C1A9679C8B63&sec=&spon=&pagewanted=2>. Accessed on January 22, 2009.

independence from the West Bank. One people now have two states, two prisons who don't greet each other. We are victims dressed in executioners' clothing. We have triumphed knowing that it is the occupier who really won."⁴

On Saturday, the 9th of August 2008, Mahmoud Darwish – the poet who felt the pulse of Palestinians in beautiful poetry, translated their pain in a magical way, and was the mirror of the Palestinian society – passed away, leaving behind a great legacy of political non-partisan poetry. In his death, Palestine not only has lost a voice, but also a messenger carrying the message of a whole cultural project.

Amira El-Zein on the Poetry of Mahmoud Darwish

We have lost, with the sudden death of the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, an extraordinarily strong poetical voice, and I lost a very dear friend. Our friendship goes back to 1985 when I first met him in Paris. This encounter was followed by many others. Since then, we continued corresponding and seeing each other and talking about poetry and the Arab dilemma.

My husband, Munir Akash, and I embarked upon translating his work into English and introducing him to the English-speaking world. I am devastated because I have just finished translating his book, *Palestine as Metaphor* from French into English. Mahmoud was so eager to see it, but destiny willed that he die before that.

I will concentrate on his poetry and will argue that in Darwish's poetry, land and poem are one. His most repetitive metaphor is that the land is a poem and the poem is the land.

Darwish was born in the Palestinian village of Birwe, in the district of Akka (Acre) in upper Galilee – this Galilee, *al Jalil*, of which he says in one poem: “the plants of Galilee can bloom in my fingers.”⁵ In 1948 the Israeli Army occupies Birwe. To survive the ongoing massacres, the child and his family flee to Lebanon. The newly formed State of Israel destroys the poet's village along with 417 more Palestinian villages, cleanses them of their indigenous population and wipes them off the map. Darwish will

⁴ Darwish, Mahmoud. “Famed Palestinian Poet Mahmud Darwish Dies: Hospital.” (August 9, 2008). AFP. <http://afp.google.com/article/ALeqM5igYFPqJ-3jDYRqxIRY1rIVvtHvvg>. Accessed on January 22, 2009.

⁵ Hala Khamis Nassar and Najat Rahman. *Mahmoud Darwish, Exile's Poet: Critical Essays*. Forward by Salma Khadra Jayyusi (Northampton, MA: Oliver Branch Press/Interlink Books, 2008), p. 61.

be for the rest of his life haunted by the last scene that he saw of his native village set on fire and obliterated from the face of the earth. He also will never forget how he had to flee with his family in the midst of the night. In one of his poems, he remembers that night's terror, and addresses his mother:

Do you remember our migration route to Lebanon?
When you forgot me in a sack of bread (it was a wheat bread)
I kept quiet so as not to wake the guards.
The scent of morning dew lifted me onto your shoulders.
O you gazelle that lost both house and mate.⁶

In 1949, the seven year old Darwish and his family sneak back into their country "illegally," but too late to be included in the newly created state's census of the Palestinian Arabs who remained and survived the massacres. Until 1966, they are subject to military rule and complex emergency regulations, including one that requires them to secure a permit for travel from one village to another inside their own country. Mahmoud was imprisoned several times and frequently harassed by the Israeli apparatus, the crime always the same: reading poetry on Palestine, or traveling in his own country without a permit. From his prison he writes:

The Galilee air wants to speak on my behalf
The Galilee gazelle want to break my prison today
I am the awakened land
Plough my body.⁷

In 1971, he moves to Cairo, Egypt, and works for *al-Ahram* daily newspaper and in 1973, he migrates to Beirut, Lebanon. In 1982, while residing in Beirut, the Israeli Army invades Lebanon, throwing twenty thousand troops into a full-scale conquest, leaving many Lebanese villages destroyed and hundreds of civilians dead. Beirut is besieged for thirty-two days without water or electricity. Locked inside the city with

⁶ Mahmoud Darwish. *The Adam of Two Edens: Selected Poems*. Eds. Munir Akash and Daniel Moore, (Bethesda: Jusoor & Syracuse, N.Y: Syracuse University Press, 2000), p. 31. Darwish is survived by his mother who is now in her nineties. The poet was allowed to see her only in recent years after the Israeli authorities granted him the right to enter Galilee where she lives.

⁷ Hala Khamis Nassar and Najat Rahman. *Mahmoud Darwish, Exile's Poet: Critical Essays*. p. 60.

hundreds of thousands of Lebanese and Palestinians, Darwish lived the terror and sang from his shelter:

Our crypt is dug so we sleep like ants in the small crypt
As if we were secretly singing
Beirut is our shelter
Beirut is our star.⁸

Two years later, Darwish writes again about Beirut's siege in a compelling book entitled *Memory for Forgetfulness*:

Three o'clock. Daybreak on fire. A nightmare coming from the sea. Roosters made of metal. Smoke. Metal preparing a feast for metal the master, and a dawn that flares up in all the senses before it breaks. A roaring that chases me out of bed and throws me into this narrow hallway. I want nothing. If I only knew how to liberate the screams held back in a body that no longer feels like mine from the sheer effort spent to save itself in this uninterrupted chaos of shells. "Enough! Enough!" I whisper.⁹

Poetical Strategies that Unite Land and Poem

I argue that land and poem are one in Darwish's poetry. The selection of the term "metaphor" over any other figure of speech identifies language as extremely condensed and reduced to the essential, so to speak. With metaphor, the poet turns the sign into the signified, the subject into the object, and absence into presence, thus transmuting the land of Palestine into a poem and making this poem one with Palestine. More importantly, metaphor is a sort of proclamation of identity; a paradoxical and illogical one since it is 'this' and 'that' at the same time. It merges two entities together that are similar and dissimilar. The poet recurses to metaphor as to the most unrestrained method of thinking in order not to prove anything through reasoning, but rather to reveal to us a concealed and subtle truth which paradoxically asserts that "poem and land are one."

⁸ Ibid. p. 51.

⁹ Mahmoud Darwish. *Memory for Forgetfulness: August, Beirut, 1982*. Introduction and trans., Ibrahim Muhawi (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995), p. 4.

By saying that land and poem are one, I am implying that poetry has the alchemical power of transforming the land into the poem and making Palestine always present and immortal; its history alive, its past preserved and its present transmuted. This lecture is composed of three main parts. In the first part, I decode Darwish's poetical strategies that unite the word to the homeland. In the second part, I demonstrate that Darwish depicts this union as always existing in eternity. In the third part I conclude by exploring how the poet blends myth and history to show that Palestine is a confluence of many cultures, mythologies and histories that unite, more than ever, land to poem and open it to tolerance. Several poetical strategies work toward combining land and poem – two entities that are similar because they are both inherited. The heart of Darwish's poetry is the assertion that "Land, like language, is inherited."¹⁰ It is the task of the poet to save the inheritance of the one through the other. However, when the land is occupied, concord between language and land needs to be restored because the occupiers rewrote the history of Palestine in order to validate their occupation.

History is written from the perspective of the powerful conqueror, hence the necessity for Darwish to tell the true story of his people through his own Arabic language. The occupier's version states that the Palestinian land was a desert, that Palestinians were absent, and that their language was missing. The poet, consequently, strives to reinstate the harmony between land and poem by poetically conveying the authentic narrative of Palestine. It is in this perspective that one should interpret the poet's opening to the book of *Palestine as Metaphor*, "The one who imposes his story inherits the earth of the story."¹¹ The term "imposes" refers to the narrator's victory, which is as important as the victory on the ground since land and poem are one. To favor the occupier's narration over the Palestinian one is to rupture the harmony between word and homeland. Since land and poem are one, it follows that the language's loss equates the land's loss.

More drastically, if language and land are one, then both should be hospitable places for humans to dwell in. In this context, we are reminded of the German philosopher Martin Heidegger, who argued that, "To reflect on language means to reach the speaking of language in such a

¹⁰ Mahmoud Darwish. *Palestine as Metaphor*. Ed. & trans., Amira El-Zein, (Unpublished manuscript), p. 2.

¹¹ Mahmoud Darwish. *Palestine as Metaphor*. p. 3.

way that this speaking takes place as that which grants an abode for the being of mortals.”¹²

In *Palestine as Metaphor*, Darwish is asked the following question:

“So, do you live in your poetry?”

He responds:

“Yes, I dwell in my poetry.”¹³

Relentlessly and steadily, the poet magically brings into play linguistic shapes, structures, and sounds drawn out of the Arabic language in order to build his dwelling. In this context, Darwish explains: “I have learned to dismantle all the words in order to draw from them a single word: home, Palestine.” Darwish requests from the poem to bring back the land through a scent: “And with a Gardenia’s breath, it (the poem) can revive a homeland.”¹⁴

It is important to clarify that Darwish’s poetry does not mirror the external world. When we say that land and poem are one and the same, we do not imply that the poet transferred the land of Palestine into the poem, but, rather, that he recreated Palestine in the poem. One knows the secret of things only when creating them as a poet does. Poetry is not simulation, but alchemy and transformation.

The Name?

How does the name unite land to poem? I argue that, in Darwish’s poetry, the name is synonymous to identity. The name states the essence of that which it names. Henceforth, naming Palestine in the poem is initiating the reader into its higher truth. It is opening a window on the culture and past of Palestine. In Darwish’s poetry, giving away one’s name is giving away one’s existence. Without name, one tumbles into the void. The task of the poet becomes then to bring back the original name to life – that is, to revive the name of the land since part of historical Palestine becomes Israel.

¹² Martin Heidegger. *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Introduction and trans., Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 192.

¹³ Mahmoud Darwish. *Palestine as Metaphor*. p. 26.

¹⁴ Mahmoud Darwish. *Unfortunately, It Was Paradise: Selected Poems*. Ed. and trans., Munir Akash, Carolyn Forché, Sinan Antoon and Amira El-Zein (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), p. 86.

In his poem, “Speech of the Red Indian,” Darwish expresses the idea that if you keep the name alive in your memory, you can still return to the land, as does the Native American:

As I waded into the river wrapped in my name only
I know I’m returning to my mother’s bosom
So that you, white master, can enter your Age.¹⁵

Many poets feel that to name is to unveil the root of things, the origin and the dawn of the homeland before the occupation. Thus, the Chilean poet, Pablo Neruda, reveals in the first book of *Canto General* the Latin American land of the pre-conquest, which he labels: “My land without name, without America.”¹⁶

Likewise, Darwish wants, through naming, to put out the Palestinian narrative before occupation. In a poem, entitled, “The Tragedy of Narcissus, the Comedy of Silver,” he writes:

They returned before sunset,
they returned to their names
and to daylight caught in a flying swallow’s wing.¹⁷

When asked about the role that the name plays in his poetry, Darwish replies: “There is also a more autobiographical reason, personal and collective in the recollection of names of my country, of its history and its culture. These names, I must assure their defense.”¹⁸

In this perspective, Darwish is close to the new and vibrant Native American poetry that negotiates the gap between its painful past and its tragic present. One contemporary Native American poet, Leslie Silko, writes:

Thought-Woman, the spider,
named things and
as she named them

¹⁵ Mahmoud Darwish. *The Adam of Two Edens*. p. 141.

¹⁶ Pablo Neruda. *Canto General*. Introduction by Robert Gonzalez Echevarria, trans. Jack Schmitt (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991), p. 14.

¹⁷ Mahmoud Darwish. *The Adam of Two Edens*. p. 178.

¹⁸ Mahmoud Darwish. *Palestine as Metaphor*. p. 60.

they appeared.¹⁹

Another Native American poet, Ray Young Bear asserts in an interview that he likes to write the name of his tribe the way it always has been, and not the way the invaders write it: “In the 1600s – it is said – when we first had contact with the French emissaries – explorers in Wisconsin, we adopted the English alphabet. For nearly three centuries the Mesquaki people have been utilizing the alphabet. But we don’t use it in the English context, rather we use it syllabically. Our tribal name, as an example, is written out as ‘Me skwa ki’ proper or The Red Earth People.”²⁰Darwish echoes in turn this need to continuously evoke the original name of one’s country. Repeating the name, keeping it in memory, and ingraining it in the hearts of his readers and listeners is a way not simply of keeping forgetfulness at bay, but, most importantly, of bringing it back into existence:

I write: The land is in my name
and the name of the land is the gods who share
my place on its chair of stone.²¹

Naming one’s country is at the same time stirring up its past, both recent and distant; it is bringing to mind its rich mythology. It is in this context that Darwish beckons to the gods of Canaan to give their blessings to his poetry and sanction his initiative of revival. Thus, he invites Anat, the Canaanite goddess of Palestine’s origins to come back:

Wells dried up when you left us,
streams and rivers ran dry when you died,
tears evaporated from clay jars,
air cracked like wooden embers
from dryness,
and we broke down over your absence
like fences rotting away.
O Anat, why remain in the underworld?

¹⁹ Arnold Krupat, ed. *New Voices in Native American Literary Criticism*. (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993), p. 371.

²⁰ Ray Young Bear. “A 1994 Interview with Ray Young Bear” by Elias Ellefson (1994). *Modern American Poetry*. http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/s_z/youngbear/1994.htm. Accessed on January 18, 2009.

²¹ Mahmoud Darwish. *The Adam of Two Edens*. p. 79.

Come back to nature!
Come back to us!
Come back, and bring
the land of truth and connotation,
the first land of Canaan.²²

Darwish's address to Anat, who was worshipped 5000 years BC, is intended to draw our attention to Palestine's very old Canaanite origins, and, by the same token, to testify to the ancient Palestinian belonging to Palestine before any invader came in and changed the names of its locales, the mythology of its gods, and the structures of its matriarchal society.

Calling Upon the Poem-Song

Darwish constantly and persistently addresses the poem-song as if it were a living entity born from the land and poem's union. He perceives it as a traveler always wandering through the world, its voice echoing the Palestinian pain to the four corners of the earth, and its function stimulating the relentless march of Palestinian refugees in search for their native dwelling. Whenever the song seems to become feeble or wane, the poet exhorts it, in a semi-imperative and lyrical tone, to wake up, for the journey is still ahead, and the poet and his community are still in urgent need of its arousing power to return to Palestine. Through a poignant and repetitive supplication, the poet addresses the song:

O Song, take all the elements of our being
and lift us up, slope by slope,
and descend with us down into deep valleys.
You know best the place, O song
You know best the time, and you know best our capacity.²³

Throughout many pages, the entreaty continues pressing the song not to halt:

O song, take all our thoughts, and

²² Ibid. p. 101.

²³ Ibid. p. 175.

lift us, wound by wound,
heal our forgetfulness and take us
as high as you can, to the humanity of man,
shining by his early tents, the brass-covered sky dome,
to see what lies hidden in his heart.
Lift us up and descend with us down to the place,
For you know best the place
And you know best the time.²⁴

After crossing many excruciating stations throughout the world, the poet and his community are ready to totally consume the song, which allows them to return. They return, as Darwish tells us, before the news of their return is known because, in a way, they have never left. In this sense, Palestinians never leave their land as long as it is always within them, sung over and over again. This is the power of poetry. It lures reality, compels it to fail despite its physicality, abolishes its momentum, and takes it to the heights of paradox so that Palestinians return to their native land each time they sing the poem of Darwish:

They repaired their carriages and arrived before
news of them arrived, having lit
The star of memory in the sky
above the windows of Central Asia.
They returned as if they did return,
From the North of Syria, from small
Islands in the ocean's vastness, from
Numberless conquests,
Numberless captivities.²⁵

The return occurs in numerous ways; in communal processions, while they are asleep, and in their minds. Thus the poet could say: "They returned as caravans, dreams, thoughts, memories."²⁶

The return of Palestinians to Palestine is not bound by time conceived as linear. It is happening in all tenses. This collective march towards the land is so flexible, genuine, and inventive in its search of their original home that it can come from the future to the present to capture the past and reintroduce it into the present:

²⁴ Ibid. p. 186.

²⁵ Ibid. p. 179.

²⁶ Ibid. p. 180.

They returned from the future to their present,
and they knew what would happen to the songs in their throats.”²⁷

The poet registers all the stages of the dreaming and wandering community with all its hesitations, vacillations, and pauses. What begins within, in the dream, is now exteriorized. It paces with the walking refugees:

They dreamt of the fitful spring of their feelings
and they knew what would happen
when their dream rose up from a dream
knowing
it was only a dream.
They knew and dreamt and returned and dreamt.
They knew and returned and returned and dreamt
They dreamt and returned.²⁸

This Darwishian vision of his community in a marching procession – his knowledge of its smallest details – actualizes the union between poet, land and poem. This is reminiscent of similar unions achieved by Native American poets. In one Native American poem, the poet declares at the closure of his poem:

I,
the song,
I walk here.²⁹

In this sense, it is not an exaggeration to liken Darwish’s latest poems to shamanic ones in the sense that Darwish performs his poem-song in an ecstatic state of consciousness. Like the poet-shaman, Darwish attempts to alleviate the suffering of his people through the transformative power of the poetical act. His words aim at changing the harsh reality of the refugees by activating their imagination, hence their hope in a real return to the homeland.

²⁷ Ibid. p. 202.

²⁸ Mahmoud Darwish. *The Adam of Two Edens*. pp. 202-203.

²⁹ A. L. Soens. *I, the Song: Classical poetry of Native North America* (Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah Press, 1999), p. 3.

The Eternal Now

In the first part of this paper, I argued that Darwish's poetry strives to unite the poem to the land through various poetical devices. In the second part, I argue that at a higher level, the poet discovers that land and poem have always been united. In order to convey this all-time truth, Darwish moves with his communal poem-song to the epic form. The choice of the latter mixed with his habitual lyrical vein seemed urgent to the poet inasmuch as epic allows him to better reflect upon the tragic perception of history and the expression of a collective conscience in the face of Palestinian defeat and bereavement. The contemplation of the present tragedy within the lyrical and epic forms shifts the poem from the temporal to the eternal. What appears at first glance to be impossible is now feasible because we are in the domain of the poetical.

I argue that poetry is beyond paradox inasmuch as it is beyond time and place. Poetry is what the Japanese seventeenth century poet, Basho, terms "our everlasting self," and what I term as the "eternal now."

To truly embody the Palestinian tragedy, Darwish carves poetry for eternity, as in his long poem, "The Tragedy of Narcissus, the Comedy of Silver," where he chants:

A place of exile must exist
where pearls of memory
reduce eternity
and all time shrinks to a moment.³⁰

This realization of time condensed means that the poet can recover from now on moments thought to be gone. He even can freeze them forever in his memory. For example, the well that he depicts in one of his poems is filled with "past meaning;" it is overflowing with heritage, and it is deep. It has always been there, and he, in fact, has never left his native village:

Wasn't I that child playing
near the lip of the well,
still playing?³¹

³⁰ Mahmoud Darwish. *The Adam of Two Edens*. p. 188.

³¹ *Ibid.* p. 64.

Strengthening the memory of past events through their constant evocation allows the entrance into eternity. This means that the Palestinian past, recorded as being inexistent by the occupier, is now not only back on the stage, but the true narrative of Palestine could conquer their defeat in history. Darwish explains this intricate situation as follows:

Hence, we are facing a received idea that asserts that we will have no past. As if our past just began, as if it were the exclusive property of the Other. As if in being at a distance from the Other, we disposed of a shattered history we can no longer reconstitute. They tell us that our history began a year ago and they require us to conceive our existence on this basis. That is why I think that the defense of the past is confused with the defense of the right of the present to take its leap. It is the necessary condition to take the first step toward the future.³²

The doorway to eternity means that the poet succeeded in appropriating Palestine not only on the ground, but also, and simultaneously, on the level of myths and history. Darwish sheds more light on the myth-history question:

This land is mine, with its multiple cultures: Canaanite, Hebraic, Greek, Roman, Persian, Egyptian, Arab, Ottoman, English and French. I want to live all of these cultures. It is my right to identify with all of these voices that have echoed on this land, for I am not an intruder, nor a passer-by.³³

Conclusion: Peace Embodies Space not Place

Reclaiming all the different heritages of Palestine opens up the poetical corpus to dialogue and openness. It enfolds once again the wealth of the Palestinian past that has always contained infinite strata of civilizations. The Darwishian poetical vision of Palestine is an embodiment of tolerance. It is in this sense that Palestine is transparently eternal:

Because I couldn't find my place on the land, I attempted to find it in history, and history cannot be reduced to a compensation for lost geography. It's also a question of observing shadows, the self and the

³² Mahmoud Darwish. *Palestine as Metaphor*. p. 24.

³³ *Ibid.* p. 24.

other captured in a more complicated human journey. History awakened in me the sense of irony, which lightens the weight of national anxiety. Thus, we are embarked on an absurd voyage. Is this an artistic trick, a simple borrowing, or is this, on the contrary, helplessness taking form? The answer has no importance. What is essential is that I found a greater lyrical capacity and a passage from the relative to the absolute, an opening to inscribe the national within the universal, not limited to Palestine, but establishing an aesthetic legitimacy in a wider human space.³⁴

Because Palestine is a bountiful blend, it embraces all forms of otherness. Darwish's generous concept of the stranger is an invitation to sharing all these cultures while the occupier remains locked in one single identity. Despite his mourning and loss, Darwish addresses the Other in one of his poem as follows:

Stranger, hang your weapons in our palm tree
and let me plant my wheat in Canaan's sacred soil.
take wine from my jars.
take a page from the book of my gods.
take a portion of my meal,
take the gazelle from the traps of our shepherds' songs.
take the Canaanite woman's prayers
all the feast of her grapes.
Take our methods of irrigation, take our architecture.
Lay a single brick down and build up a tower for doves.³⁵

³⁴ Ibid. p. 20.

³⁵ Mahmoud Darwish. *The Adam of Two Edens*. p. 75.

© 2009 CIRS
Center for International and Regional Studies
Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in Qatar

Telephone: +974 457 8400
Fax: +974 457 8401
cirs.georgetown.edu



CIRS

CENTER FOR
INTERNATIONAL
AND REGIONAL
STUDIES

GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF FOREIGN SERVICE IN QATAR