

“And we are now of Clay and Light”: History, Myth, and the Palestinian National Memory in Mahmud Darwish’s Poetry

Abdel Karim Twafiq Mohammad
Assistant professor of modern literature
The English Department
An-Najah National University
P.O. Box 7
Nablus, Palestine

I. Introduction: Challenges in a New National Discourse

(1) Promises from the Storm

So be it
I must reject death
And burn the tears of bleeding songs
To trim the olives of specious branches.
For if I sing in jubilation
Behind fearful eyelids,

It is because the Storm
Has promised me wine...
New toasts
And rainbows!

Because the storm
Swept the voice of tedious birds
And phony branches
Off standing trees.

So be it...
I'll have to be proud of you, wound of the city
Lightning in our sad nights
When the street frowns in my face,
You protect me from the shadows
And malicious glances

I'll sing in joy
Behind fearful lids
Since the storm blew in my country
And promised me wine and rainbows!¹

The creation of the state of Israel in 1948 triggered the first Palestinian experience of exile. The population split into three main groups. Hundreds of thousands sought refuge in neighboring Arab countries. Some emigrated to Europe, some to the United States and Latin America. But almost half the population remained where it had long lived in the West Bank, Gaza, and inside the newly declared Jewish state. Each group has since then experienced distinct objective realities. One of the underlying challenges for the Palestinian national movement has been to bring this diversity into one national character while simultaneously sustaining a liberation struggle. The refugees waited on the borders and in camps. Gradually, the deteriorating material conditions intensified feelings of exile, as the refugees realized that they were not welcome in their new homes.

¹ All translations of Darwish in the introduction are mine. “Promises From the Storm” appears in End of the Night (Beirut: al-Awdah) pp. 17-19.

Often treated as undesirables, they could not travel freely without being interrogated upon entering and exiting airports. They woke up to the wretchedness of camp life. Their women swept the floors of rich families. On the eve of the sacred Eid festival, their men waited in long queues to get charity clothes and food from the offices of UN Relief and Work Agency (UNRWA). Classmates discriminated against their children. The humiliating existence convinced them they could restore their pride only in returning to the villages they left behind. This dream of home became a symbol of restored dignity. “Then the small village with narrow alleys turned into a solution to a problem which you do not understand” (“The Moon Didn’t fall in the Well” JOG 35).

This era marks the emergence of a strong and unified Palestinian voice to represent all Palestinians, those inside as well as those in exile. Darwish’s “Promises from the Storm” celebrates this “jubilant” new beginning. It appears in a collection entitled End of the Night to mark the hope of rising from among the ruins. The “storm” the persona sings for is the military arm of the National Liberation Movement, a reference the Palestinians would immediately understand, since the first communiqués mobilizing for armed struggle were signed *Al-asifah*, that is, “the Storm”. It brought promises of recovery from defeat. The “trimmed specious branches” refer to the pan-Arab slogans that have led from one retreat to another. Here, the Palestinians claim their present and future. They would represent themselves. Imagery of the creative and protective force of “the storm” runs through Darwish’s poem. A blowing wind is healing old wounds. The trees, with the false branches trimmed, will bud and bloom once again. This new narrative marks the end of a silent phase in Palestinian history.

That was the end of Arab guardianship. The historical condition was ripe for Palestinian nationalism to emerge as the organizing principle of life in Diaspora after 1967. Edward Said provides a detailed analysis of the nature of what he names “Palestinianism” in The Politics of dispossession (1994). He uses the term to refer to the political discourse that emerged in contra-distinction to pan-Arab nationalism, and defines it thus: “The aim of Palestinianism is the full integration of Palestinians with lands and with political processes that for twenty one years have excluded them or made them more and more intractable prisoners” (3). The national movement, as the political and cultural documents of the time have it, has three primary missions: (1) to claim independence from the Arab countries; (2) to represent Palestinians everywhere; and, (3) to wage a liberation war against occupation, using the Algerian model.

Two aspects deserve scrutiny if we are to understand the challenges facing the new Palestinian discourse as it applies to both Arab and Palestinian conditions. Firstly, leery of acculturation, the movement sought to maintain an independent Palestinian political and cultural presence in the host countries. This proved impossible. Abu Iyad’s My Home, My Land (38-40) and Darwish’s journal, “Happiness When it Betrays,” speak of the control that some Arab leaders sought over the course of the revolution. To improve their standing with their own constituencies, they would make the Palestinians the subject of fiery public speeches about liberation. Yet, privately, they would ask them to keep to the state of unwritten peace since 1973. The official Arab message to the Palestinians was “if you want to fight the enemy, don’t do it on our land.” The choice for the Palestinians was either to accommodate the status quo, or to clash with it if they did not. Such a show of Palestinian independence led to armed confrontations with the Jordanians in 1970 and the Lebanese in 1982.

Secondly, the political discourse tries to unify three historically different experiences: (a) Palestinians inside the Green Line; (b) those in the West Bank and Gaza; and (c) the camp refugees. These were three groups with national goals, whether immediate or future, that must differ. Inside the Green Line, the first group lives inside Israel and strives for equality with Jewish citizens. The second one, West Bankers and Gazans, wants an end to the occupation and demands self-determination. The third, the refugees, awaits return to the property left in 1948, a claim Israel categorically rejects.

In the 1960s, the nationalist leaders had no illusions that they might be able to defeat Israel logistically. Abu Iyad wrote that the objective was “to put the cause on the international arena and to rally the people behind the movement” (35). The question of what was going to happen to the refugees was tabled indefinitely. The historical conditions dictated a cultural rather than a geographic identification of what made the Palestinian nation – an identification that would be reversed after the 1993 Oslo agreements. The political discourse needed to transcend all differences in order to sustain the presence of the revolution by appealing to a common past. Lacking unified national space, the discourse focused on the past and the intolerable present. In this sense, home was not only a space but also a collective psychological state of being. Home became an ideology, a consciousness, and the means to mobilize.

The Oslo agreement did not account for the possibility of a common future for a Palestinian nation that had already been formed in exile. The 1993 agreement postponed the possibility of return once again. The Palestinian Authority (PA) could not take responsibility for the totality of the nation as formulated in the early national discourse. Joseph Cleary points to the post-Oslo crisis I have just outlined. In chapter three of his dissertation, "Bordering Nations: Partition and the Politics of Form in Irish, Israeli and Palestinian Narrative," he distinguishes the postcolonial discourse, where nation and narration converge, from the Palestinian situation, where the two diverge. Cleary proclaims that the proposed state does not include the majority of the Palestinian population, since it omits the refugees and those in the Diaspora. Literary narratives try to provide imaginary homelands for a major portion of the Palestinian population. Writers realize that there is no future for the Palestinian nation without recovering a piece of land which it can call its homeland. The existing strategies are incapable of doing so. Cleary takes identity politics as a constant variable and consequently makes anachronistic conclusions, referencing Palestinian novels from the 1960s to refer to national identity formation in the 1990s.

Focusing on the work Mahmud Darwish wrote about two key historical moments, this paper explains the crisis as a sign of the cultural and political anxieties that come with the transition in the Palestinian condition post-67. As we progress in time, we notice that the value of literary works shifts from traditional Marxist functionalism attuned to the national project, to a dialogic structure where the comfort zone of uniformity in national culture dramatically shrinks. In the early years of exile, Darwish participates in creating Palestinian national consciousness by pressing continuity with space and time. He embraces a vision of liberation anchored in history. In the 1990s, the lines that earlier defined the nation's boundary start to fade. The speaker is out of time and place. The utterance becomes a zone of tension symptomatic of the memory crisis Palestinians have been living since Oslo. Darwish situates his poetic voice on the border between myth and history- "clay and light"- a space that allows for rupture and continuity, at once inside and outside history. In this liminal territory, there is room for both remembering and forgetting. Parallel to the evolution in national politics and culture, there runs a corresponding transformation in the significance of imagery across time. To the extent that history is the unifying element of individual collections, imagery can be viewed as the unifying structure of the Darwish canon. The dominant symbols mark the continuation of themes and trends introduced in his early work. The father, mother, trees, birds, and tents appear anchored in solid history and possess no metaphysical qualities. As Darwish enters the realm of atemporal creative memory, symbols develop into a more floating and transient state less conditioned by history.

II. Writing the Nation in the Early Years

(1) Roses and Dictionaries

I must refuse to die
 Even though my myths are dying
 I search in the ruins for some light,
 For a new kind of poetry
 Oh love, have you realized words in the dictionary are tedious.

How do they come to life?
 How do they grow? Get older?
 We still feed them the tears of memories
 Metaphors and sugar!

So be it
 I must refuse the roses that come
 From the dictionary
 Or from a poet's *deewan*.

Roses grow on a peasant's arm,
 In the grip of worker
 In the fighter's wound,
 On the brow of rocks.⁴

⁴ The translation is mine.

“But in the smallest and greatest happiness, there is always one thing that makes it happiness: . . . the capacity of feeling ‘unhistorically’ throughout its duration,” wrote Nietzsche in his monumental essay The Use and Abuse of History (6). A few pages later he makes an exception, acknowledging the need an individual or a nation has for circumstantial knowledge of the past in times of hardship. For the Palestinians, an ahistorical form of existence constitutes an existential dilemma. Unable to let go of their original wound, they resist forgetting. Their choices are either to recapture the land militarily, which would involve a total annihilation of the enemy; or to hold on to the past in order to achieve something in the present. The first choice is impossible, given the power balance. The second attempts to create a space for a national self in spite of total denial.

In “Homeland Between Memory and a Suitcase,” Darwish describes this paradoxical state of being and non-being: “The moment they arrived on your land, they defined the parameters of their existence and those of their children. And at the same time they defined yours. The moment they became natives you became refugee” (JOG 55-56). He objects to the erasure resulting from the Israelis denial of Palestinian memory, “The Jewish people lived the feelings of refuge and exile and are proud of being pioneers in that, but they are unable to recognize those feelings in others” (JOG 58). In the few places where Palestinians figure in Zionist literature, they are presented as leading a nomadic primitive existence. The narrative obliterates their relation to the land. The loss of land and this Zionist disavowal constituted a threat to the continuity of the Palestinians and led to the resurgent nationalism I have outlined above. An exiled father responds to his son’s questioning:

Things don’t acquire the status of sacredness unless their status is the test of your existence. . . .
My homeland is not always right, but I cannot practice any real rights except in there. . . We don’t miss a village. But we miss paradise. We miss exercising our humanity in a place of ours (“The Moon Has not Fallen into the Well” JOG 32-33).

“Only in a country of our own” is the original Zionist argument. What is actually taking place here is a transfer of the memory of loss from one nation to another. The sense of community is suddenly shattered, and people are left with only memories of the recent past, now geographically distant. The present is a constant reminder of their condition, stateless people scattered in almost every corner of the globe. One feature marks the journey; there is no place to return to and no nation to belong to. In trying to find a collective voice, Darwish plainly defines the Palestinian community as us against them. Additionally, he subjects individual aspirations to the collective will.

The answer to Israeli negation, as Darwish phrases it in this journal, is to engage in struggle: Palestinian memory against the suitcases of new immigrants. In such context, an active historical memory acquires a political function. The Palestinians mourn what was lost and pledge not to forget. Said aptly describes the urgent need exiles feel to reconstitute their broken lives, “usually by choosing to see themselves as part of a triumphant ideology designed to reassemble the nation’s broken history” (177). During this era, strong national sentiments dominate Palestinian discourse from both left and right, united in their desire to protect national identity. Poems from Journals of Palestinian Wound (1969) and End of the Night (1969) show how political and literary discourses play complementary roles in molding national consciousness. Darwish contributes to writing into existence Palestinian nationalism. Not surprisingly, his poetics respond to politics: he chooses free verse, a revolutionary form in Arabic tradition introduced by socialist and feminist writers as the alternative to aristocratic traditional forms. These verses maintain a tight rhythm and a repetitive structure so they can be chanted in public events. Farmers, workers, and educators alike are able to decode the imagery with considerable ease.

Darwish carries the symbolism of words one step further towards concrete physical resistance. The persona of “Roses and Dictionaries” wants to exchange songs of love for action. Words are stony, lazy, neutral, indifferent, and static. He will no longer be content with silent love, or traditional love poetry:

I must refuse the roses that come
from the dictionary
Or a poet’s *deewan*
Roses grow on the arms of peasants,
in the grip of workers,
In the fighter’s wound,
On the face of rocks.

That sums it all: unity of land and the hand that tills it. Peasants, workers, and fighters make up one front. Darwish rejects as too passive the nostalgic trend in early and contemporary Palestinian poetry that, by lamenting loss, relegates words to the space of the poem.⁵ Nostalgia for a lost paradise only brings more tears and paralysis to the national condition. To Darwish, this is equal to accepting death. His new poetry gives action precedence over words; writing is employed in the service of fighting. The poet brings words to life when he speaks the language of common people, thus carrying the message into every house. Breaking away from passive nostalgia opens spaces for rebirthing: in the thin layer of soil, “on the face of rocks,” grows the rose. Only when nostalgia is channeled into collective work does it cross into historical possibility. The land stands for a field and, paradoxically, for a symbolic future. The voice remains true to memory to the end: “but they sang and danced on your tomb/ sleep for I’m awake . . . awake . . . awake/ to infinity.”⁶ It emphasizes the paradox that to have died (for the revolution) is to be reborn (a free nation).

The literature of this era is existential in its concerns, convinced that the pen must come to the aid of the sword, a position favored by Sartre. More than thirty years ago, in Sartre’s steps, Frantz Fanon described culture as one arena of struggle for colonized nations that must liberate themselves. According to Fanon, all forms of cultural productions -songs, poems, novels, short stories, essays, etc.- turn into political allegories where collective and national issues must preside over and subsume individual destiny and agency. The writer works on history and tradition, when these are threatened by deligitimization and annihilation (Fanon “On National Culture” 209). Looking back on those early years, Darwish sounds out a similar philosophy in a 1998 interview:

A poet in our national condition had to work without any aids. He had to work alone. He had to be the historian, the geographer, the mythicist, the negotiator, and the fighter. What the text conveyed was a public mission. As if the poem was the first and the last poem. It should tell the story from the beginning to the happy or tragic ending. . . . Because you are facing a program of erasure, you enlist your linguistic, epistemological, psychological, and aesthetic weapons in the dialogue.⁷

Enlisting thematic and aesthetic weapons, Darwish becomes a warrior struggling to break the chains. The writer expresses national aspirations and dreams because this is what his audience expects to hear and what his commitment to the cause dictates. In such conditions, the poet acquires the status of a national hero. As soon as his poem “Identity Card” came out as a pop song in 1976, Darwish stood as the leading figure in the “Poetry of the Revolution”.

As a result of the danger threatening the nation’s continuity following the early years of exile, Darwish seeks a functional literature that maintains a strong relation between the letters and those to whom they are addressed. His early poetry plays an important role in coding national discourse and preserving Palestinian memory. Early in his career, Darwish declares the political significance of his writing:

You are my virginal garden
As long as our songs
Are swords when we draw them.
You are faithful as the seed
As long as our songs
Nourish the land . . . (LFP 7)

In “A Secret Dialogue,” he tells a prison-mate, “I threw a poem on the vehicle of the invaders” and they captured me and accused me of mass murder” (JOG 78). His writing directly contributes to the liberation struggle. Many times, he found himself with combatants in the same jail cell. The existential bond to space is the subject of much of Darwish’s early poetry. An obsession with past life at home and the revival of tradition to maintain and assert difference with the invaders characterize the writing of this era. Images of fire, blood, death, and resurrection are everywhere, symbolic of on-going resistance.

⁵ Tawfiq Zayad (1932-) and Fadwa Tuqan (1917-2003) are among the more renowned Palestinian poets during and after the British Mandate. Their early poetry set the nostalgic tradition that Darwish is overturning here.

⁶ *A Lover From Palestine*, “Reflections in a Street” (Beirut: Humanities House, 1968) p. 73-74. Hereafter cited LFP. Ellipsis in the original

⁷ Translation mine. *Mahmud Darwish: Studies and Testimonies*, p. 18.

Land is a Palestinian mother, black eyes open wide, hair braided dirty from the dust of battles. She is the wounded beloved. The poet depicts the incomprehensible tawdriness of life in the camps, the bitter sense of loss, and the angry feelings of abandonment. He invokes the history of battles won against other invaders, bemoans the loss of freedom, the wounds, the chains, and the ruins. The Palestinian is a new Odysseus sailing the oceans. Mothers are waiting at the doors for his return:

This time we will return.
The wind blows
To the sailors tune.
The ship over-powers the tide . . .
We are coming mother. (“The Return” LFP 56)

Odysseus sailing from Troy never gave full consent to the temptations to stay away from Ithaca/Penelope. Despite rough times on sea and the wars in land, exiles remain faithful to the dream of return. As they travel, memories of home weigh heavily on their hearts, “On my heart the doors and windows, cement and stones are laid.” Land is carried in the memory of the refugees. In the last line, there is a strong sense the ship is ultimately going to anchor in the land/mother; that is, the motherland. All symbols work exactly against standard Romantic imagery. Trees are anchored in history. Even birds transform into material objects to resist erasure. Resistance ensures continuity as a nation.

III. “We Are Now of Clay and Light”: On the Border Between Myth and History

The Owl’s Night

There is, here, a present not embraced by the past.
When we reached the last of the trees, we knew we were unable to pay attention.
And when we returned to the ships, we saw absence piling up its chosen objects
and pitching its eternal tent around us.

There is, here, a present not embraced by the past.
A silken thread is drawn out of mulberry trees
forming letters on the page of night.
Only the butterflies cast light upon our boldness
in plunging into the pit of strange words.
Was that condemned man my father?
Perhaps I can handle my life here.
Perhaps I can now give birth to myself
and choose different letters for my name.

There is, here, a present, sitting in an empty kitchen
gazing at the tracks of those crossing the river on reeds.
A present polishing the flutes with its wind.
Perhaps speech could become transparent, so we could
see open windows in it, and perhaps time could hurry along with us,
carrying our tomorrow in its luggage.

There is, here, a timeless present, and here no one can find anyone.
No one remembers how we went out of the door like a gust of wind,
and at what hour we fell from yesterday, and then
yesterday shattered on the tiles
in shards for others to reassemble into mirrors
reflecting their images over ours.

There is, here, a placeless present.
Perhaps I can handle my life and cry out in the owl’s night:
Was this condemned man my father who burdens me with his history?

Perhaps I will be transformed within my name, and will choose
my mother's words and way of life, exactly as they should be.
Thus, she could cajole me each time salt touched my blood,
and give me food each time a nightingale bit me on the mouth.

There is, here, a transient present.
Here, strangers hang their rifles on the olive's branches,
to prepare their dinner in haste out of tin cans
and rush hurriedly to their trucks.

Poetic Regulations/ *Ars Poetica*

The stars had only one task: they taught me how to read.
They taught me I had a language in heaven
and another language on earth.
Who am I? Who am I?
I don't want to answer yet.
May a star fall into itself,
and may a forest of chestnut trees rise in the night
toward the Milky Way with me, and may it say:
Remain here!

The poem is "above" and can teach me whatever it wishes.
It can teach me to open a window
and to manage my household in between legends.
It can wed me to itself for a while.

My father is "below," carrying a thousand-year olive tree
that is neither from the East nor the West.
Let him rest from the conquerors for a while,
and be tender with me, and gather iris and lily for me.

The poem leaves me and heads for a port whose sailors love wine
and never return twice to the same woman.
They have neither regrets nor longing for anything!

I haven't died of love yet, but a mother sees in her son's eyes
the fear carnations harbor for the vase.
She cries to ward off something before it happens.
She cries for me to return alive from destiny's road
and live here.

The poem is neither here nor there, and with a girl's breast
it can illuminate the nights.
With the glow of an apple it fills two bodies with light
and with a gardenia's breath it can revive a homeland!

The poem is in my hands, and can run stories through her hands.
But ever since I embraced the poem, I squandered my soul
and then asked: *Who am I? Who am I?*¹⁶

In the present section, I contend that Palestinian national discourse in the 1990s wrestles with an identity crisis that came with Oslo. The voice in the text is constantly wondering, "who am I? And what are my choices?" In two instances, the speaker looks into mirrors. The first time, it is a smashed mirror.

¹⁶ Unless otherwise indicated, translations of all poems in this section appear in *Unfortunately, it was Paradise*, Trans. Munir Akash and Carolyn Forché (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

The second, his face stares back at him as if saying, “yes, this is who you are.” Between the earlier moment of painful discontinuity and the latter moment of recognition, the voice oscillates like a pendulum, triangulating among the major symbols of a trinity, with the Father/tree at the apex, poetry and tomorrow on either end. The connecting lines are not yet clearly defined. I look at poems from I See What I Want to See (1993) and Why Have You Left the Horse Alone? (1995) to fathom the (im)possibility of easing the tension that exists between the three angles of the triangle. “The Hoopoe” from I See What I Want to See (1993) is a rather long poem that I reference heavily in analyzing the symptoms of this identity crisis centered on memory.

Let me briefly describe where the crisis originated. Its beginning is what I referred to earlier as “the segmentation” into three groups, a partitioning of the population that the discourse of Palestinianism had overlooked before 1988. In its 1988 session, the PNC called for the establishment of a Palestinian state through negotiated peace. The Declaration of Principles (DoI) proclaimed the independence of Palestine without defining its borders. Edward Said, who attended the session, interprets what happened: “there was no doubt that we were discussing the territories occupied in 1967.... All resolutions, however they are read, clearly intend willingness to negotiate directly” (Politics of Dispossession 149-50). Ibrahim Musleh, a respected political analyst and a professor of political science at Long Island University, identifies this session as the first in which Palestinian political discourse moves away from the ambiguity that characterized its previous language towards Israel.

The DoI was a mixed instance. Darwish drafted the document. Said narrates: “Later Darwish told me that the phrase “collective memory” had been struck by the Old Man [Arafat] because, we both opined, he took it for a poetic phrase. “Tell him it has a serious and even scientific meaning” (The POD 147). The DoI made no reference to collective memory. The tension was right there in the genesis. Although Darwish sensed collective memory was being dismissed, he knew the change was a historical necessity. Hanan Ashrawi, the spokeswoman of the Palestinian delegation to the Madrid Peace Conference and the subsequent bilateral negotiations in Washington, reported a mixed public reaction when the DoI was announced on November 15: “Palestinians all over the world wept. The reasons were complex and paradoxical – some having to do with the validation and denial of our past, and others with validation and apprehension about our future” (52-53). Present, past, and future converge in one moment of continuity and rupture, or continuity *by* rupture. That moment opens spaces of hope and simultaneously heightened the controversy about the Palestinians’ relation to their history. The Palestinians had to face their history themselves.

Here, I pursue the effect of the new political reality on the nation as it was constructed in the late sixties. In the 1990s, a fissure occurred for the first time between politics and culture, which has not been mended. The stakes of Oslo were too high. The primary losers were the refugees. The document brought no solution to the refugee problem, yet another deference to be added to the one they had received during the 1967 war. They continued to be homeless; worse still, they had lost the national vision that had unified all Palestinians into a single nation after the 1967 war. As a result of the Oslo conversations, “Palestinianism” has now dissipated into those ‘inside’ and those ‘outside,’ a new divisive reality that had never before surfaced in a negative sense in Palestinian politics.

“The Owl’s Night” reveals a crisis of memory. Paradoxically, once the Palestinians boarded ships of return after Oslo, the tent became an eternal reality. The deal granted them no home. The last tree, the eternal tent, and crossing on reeds all convey a sense of unredeemed absence. The wind polishing the flute does not produce music; rather it creates the nightmarish atmosphere of deserted castles. The owl sits undisturbed by human presence, but is it even listening to the persona’s cries through the night? With this role-shift (Owl listening to human screeching), the poetic persona sends bad omens about the condemned Father into the night.

“Timeless” and “Placeless” is the present. It sits in an empty kitchen gazing at the tracks of those who crossed the river in the first exile. The speaker feels the burden of memory (Father), weighing heavily on his back. The Father as history’s burden invokes Homer’s Priam in the Iliad. Homer depicts the son, Paris, running away from the carnage of Troy, carrying the sick and aged man on his back. The Father must be saved to protect the son’s identity. Darwish’s persona mourns abandoned Palestinian history. Temporal continuity has been severely disrupted, if not severed- the nation is a group where “no one remembers when it all started”. The Palestinian is the “Adam of two Edens” who “Lost them twice,” condemned forever to love an “absence,” a nation that no longer exists. The present is without agent. Others assemble its broken shards of mirrors to reflect their own images. The future comes as luggage that might get lost on the way.

The persona ponders two possible solutions (perhaps) to the crisis. He might give himself a new birth (a new name) out of Palestinian time and place. Or, he might choose his mother's way of life. Earlier imagery represented the mother either as the land of innocence before the Fall (the original conquering of the land through Sinai), or as modern Palestine awaiting returnees. Here, she is a metaphysical figure offering her son solace in his eternal exile. The realization that the original state cannot be recovered is the underlying assumption in the two cases, hence the association elsewhere with the first Fall. Since the first banishment, humans have been trying to recover the lost innocence in vain. By connecting the original state with the birth outside history, Darwish explores the liminal space between myth and history offered by language.

In "Poetic Regulation," this space is a zone of tension. There is the duality of history and poetry: the father/olive and the poem. To the speaker, this duality marks an identity crisis: "Who am I?" Am "I" the olive on earth or the language in heaven? The poem carries him "above" to where he can build a house (Homeland). It provides an ahistorical space where "sailors love wine/ And never return twice to the same woman./ They have neither regrets nor longing for anything!" Darwish here is making a clear reference to Book Nine in *The Odyssey*. Odysseus is now at the coast of the Lotus Eaters. The sailors who ate of the flower lost all memory of their homeland. Darwish's speaker finds in this legendary space a retreat from the Father/olive tree and the burden of memory. There he can build a Homeland of words in the "legend". It is a liminal space between "here" and "there": a safe refuge where the speaker is the king of the beginning and ending.

However, he is aware he can enjoy this freedom only temporarily "for a while". The hyper-real is nothing like the real. There is this act of separation between the man and the poet: "The poem leaves me" to its own metaphysical spaces in an act that is beyond the control of the speaker. It has been frequently argued that writers go 'hyper-realistic' when politics become unbearable and action impossible. Darwish explores this realm only to finish the circle back in history where it began. History triumphs in the last line, and the question of historical identity is the disturbing noise with which the poem ends. "Who Am I?" A poet? A Palestinian? A present? A past?

All these historical anxieties come together in a densely symbolic poem, "The Hoopoe". The speaker is the collective "we," who explains the torture of longing and exile to the Hoopoe. The hoopoe advises them to walk down his transcendental path: abandon their bodies and turn into birds, to leave "the land- the mirage". At other times, the voice is exploring its own possibilities. The text is tense; it strains between the mythical and historical realms. The voice of the speaker and that of the hoopoe alternate, taking us back and forth between these two conditions of expression of eternal loss:

Soar so the distance between our past
and our nearest present will open-
The further we move away, the closer we come
to our reality and the walls of exile.
Our sole desire is to cross
We are the duality, heaven-earth, earth-heaven.

The duality of humans and birds, history (down on earth) and myth (up in the heavens) continues until the very last line in this twenty-page poem. Each time the speaker brings the discourse to the realm of history, the voice complains of the injustice and pain of forgetting. The Hoopoe repeats his offer of flying beyond the physical. "People are birds unable to fly" is the answer.

The poem opens with signs of the continuing exile. Wheat grows over the fence and swallows rise from ruins in deserted places and deserted fields. Poetry provides an imaginary space for the creation of myth. "We" write of flowers growing on distant rocks. Words provide the rain; flowers grow and blossom. To the exiles the hoopoe tells his story of eternal wandering and of shedding the feathers of spatial and temporal history. He is a sufi inviting them to soar above their mud into the light of angels. In the Islamic creation story, Adam is made of mud, the angels of light. "We are captives of what we love and what we are," the voice protests. As much as it embodies commitment, the word "captives" also carries overtones of paralyzing inactivity. Whichever way they look, the exiles see reflections of home in mirrors. Yet they know it's a mirage. They can't have it; neither can they run away from it. In the exchange that follows, one can hear various responses to the question "What to do?" which itself is based in history. The responses voiced by the collective "we" could be taken for answers to the "Who Am I?" raised earlier in "The Owl's Night".

There is the appropriation of the mosaic figure of the wandering Jew:

How many seas should we cross inside the desert?
How many tablets should we leave behind?

.....

And how many nations should we resemble before we become a tribe?"

The persona now replaces the exilic imagery of Jewish wandering with the Canaanite story of origin:

We gnawed on stones to open a space for jasmine.
We took refuge in God from His guards, and from wars.
We believed what we learned from words.
Poetry was exhaled from the fruits of our night,
And from herding our goats on their way to pasture.

The pastoral scene of prelapsarian innocence is identical to the description of the holy land in the Song of Songs. The allusion to the invasion from the South (Egypt) two lines later moves the description from the Old Testament to situate it in an earlier Canaanite setting. This collapses the distance between the self and the Other: "I am them, and they are me". I can wait as long as they waited. They sang their songs of exile; I can inhabit mine.

Yet, in the belly of imagery the twins (waiting and return) sit next to each other rather uncomfortably: "we are not basil so we return in spring to our small windows/ we are not leaves- so the wind carry to our shores". There is an obsession with place and the impossibility of reaching it: "O child of tension [the hoopoe]/ when the butterfly is split from its wings/ and is obsessed with longing." Although a symbol of external life and rebirth in the East, the butterfly is a recessive image. What is portrayed here is a chrysalis that wants to fly from place to place, but, without wings, she is bound to one location. The image embodies the nervous tension between a burning desire to reach home while simultaneously lacking the means to do so. What is the meaning of the tale? The Palestinians are caught in an impossible situation. "Our ruins lie ahead of us/ Behind is our absurd objective" is another recessive image. Darwish reverses the order, putting the ruins ahead and the objective behind. Liberation has not been possible. Palestinian villages exist only in memory. The hoopoe is the messenger to those who carry this memory. In Islamic mythology, the bird brought the secrets of heaven to humans. To the Palestinians, it now brings heaven's prophecy of eternal wandering: "you won't find a tree to rest."

The collective voice accepts the sufi bond with the immaterial because physical love is impossible: "God is more beautiful than the path to Him." It sheds the material part (mud) and asks to join the Hoopoe in an eternal journey to the ungraspable: "Fly us. Nothing left of us except the journey to him." Mystical Sufism demands transcending the material and the self to unite with a selfless God. At this point, one would think the text has reached its final destination, easing the tension between heavenly light and earthly clay. It has not. The decision the speaker takes to leave the chambers of the mind and enter the chambers of the heart is already engulfed in doubt: "the mind is but smoke, let it be lost! The heart is our guide,/ so take us O Hoopoe of mysteries to our demise in its chambers... Real love is not to possess the beloved." Soaring with the Hoopoe, the voice sees his mother's tomb on the bird's peak. The harmony of the transcendental unification on the sufi path is severely disrupted by the very unpleasant image of the mother's tomb, an intimation of human mortality, replacing the bird's crest. In the concluding lines, history persists. "We are now of clay and light," the speaker announces. They are half angels, half humans, somewhere in poetry's liminal space between history and myth. The tension remains unresolved. Exiting totally into the realm of metaphysics is not possible. Resisting history is not an option either. Darwish finds his personal deliverance in identifying with language:

I am my language, I am an ode, two odes, ten. This is my language.
I am my language. ...

.....

Let my language overcome my hostile fate, my line of descendants.
Let it overcome me, my father, and vanishing that won't vanish.
This is my language, my miracle, my magic wand.
This is my obelisk and the gardens of my Babylon,
My first identity, my polished metal ...

("A Rhyme for the Odes")

Language acquires a totally different function from the one Darwish ascribed to it earlier. Then, it helped him to resist the amnesia imposed by the Israeli jets. Here, it is the divine force that will help him overcome history. "What to do with the burden of history and memory?" The question remains the greater challenge of Palestinian recent history. The tension in the Hoopoe brings forth the debate between the tide of memory and the ebb of forgetfulness, a debate that peace made inevitable. In the new political reality, whether forgetfulness is a new freedom or a new exile remains unresolved. The major difficulty, however, is that Oslo, for the refugees, has turned into an end much like the beginning. They are to bid their history farewell. In return, they must stay in their camps in exile.

"Where to go from here?" Said asks. In the debate that ensued, there are signs of an internal crisis the symptoms of which are as cultural and historical, as they are political. The choices, it seems, are:

- (1) Trade roles with the Jews as the voice in Darwish's poem wants to do. They carried the land as a memory. They have waited for 2000 years, their memory alive. When they returned, they made this memory a legitimizing principle of the future.
- (2) Turn to culture. The poet claims the right to his voice within the boundary of the text. The space of the poem is his uncontested territory. Poetry is the space where he can lay claim to his voice: "My history is mine in the poem".
- (3) Accept the terms of the Oslo deal. The arrangement replaces culture as the criterion of identifying the nation in the early years with geography; it splits the nation into groups.

Whatever the option, the Palestinians by no means have a clearly defined answer. The search for peace marks an absence of consensus on the meaning of national history. Memory struggle culminates into a memory crisis as the nation confronts its early legitimizing national narrative. The possibility of a peaceful solution forces the impossibility of earlier national narratives, a moment that is potentially liberating and explosive at the same time. Between the lines, besides the pain and bitterness, a nation faces its own national narrative. The emerging national discourse explores spaces to reconcile the memory-saturated existence and to explore a definition of the new nation.

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