



Occasional Papers

**Contexts of Language in
Mahmoud Darwish**

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Mahmoud Darwish was born in Al-Birweh, Palestine, in 1942. With the advent of the Israeli occupation in 1948, he fled with his family to Lebanon. The family returned to their homeland the following year, only to find an Israeli settler colony built on the ruins of their home. Darwish left Israel in 1970 and for 26 years lived in exile in Moscow, Cairo, Beirut, Tunis, Paris, and Ramallah. His first volume of poetry, Birds Without Wings, was published when he was 19. Other collections of his poetry and prose include Leaves of Olives (1964), Lover from Palestine (1966), Memory for Forgetfulness (1985), and In the Presence of Absence (2006). In 1996 he moved to Ramallah. Mahmoud Darwish died following open-heart surgery on August 9, 2008.

This paper explores three contexts of language in Mahmoud Darwish's poetry. The first is Darwish's performative use of language. The second deals with reading Darwish as a resistance poet. The third is Darwish's death, which I interpret as part of his language. This last point is speculative but of considerable interest in view of the role he assumed as the poetic voice of Palestine.

The more we know about Darwish, the more we realize the depth of his engagement with the Arabic language. In his book *Mural*, we find this cry to the goddess Anat: "Therefore sing, my noble Goddess / Oh Anat, I am the quarry and the arrows / I am language."¹

If language is both the quarry and the arrows, then language uses itself to hunt itself. Darwish is undoubtedly a difficult poet to understand. He pushes the very limits of what language can say, sometimes descending into obscurity. In his 1985 book *Memory for Forgetfulness*, Darwish explains how he uses obscurity: "The obscure heaps up on the obscure, rubs against itself, and ignites into clarity."² There is an element of wonder in this. If you rub two dark flints against each other, you will get a spark. And if you rub two dark thoughts against each other, a new meaning will result. This is Darwish's ironic way of proposing a new kind of dialectics in which an obscure thesis rubs against an obscure antithesis, resulting in a luminous synthesis. We find thinking by dialectic everywhere in Darwish. Indeed, the titles of his two magnificent works of prose, *Memory for Forgetfulness* and *In the Presence of Absence*, reflect this. In both, more meaning emerges from the combination of the two obscure elements than from each element on its own.

Like all poets, Darwish grappled with language to create new meanings and fresh

expression. Darwish also harnessed language's performative power to embody his homeland of Palestine. As such, he used language itself as a metaphor and drew on its grammar and structure for concepts that added philosophical depth to his work. "My language is the metaphor for metaphor," he writes in *Mural*.³

So many have dubbed Darwish the poet of Palestine that doing so has become cliché. Even *Time* magazine acknowledged this at the end of 2008 when it called him "the unofficial voice of Palestine." The lines in *Time*'s obituary from the poem "I Belong There" provide an opportunity to examine Darwish's embodiment of Palestine: "I have learned all the words, and torn them all apart, to create a single word: / homeland."⁴ Paying attention to the /k/ sound that characterizes the lines in Arabic, we note the musical rubbing that occurs in the words, and that is lost in translation: *ta'allamtu kull al-kalaami wa fakkaktuhu kay urakkiba kalimatan wahida / hiya-l-watan*. Moreover, there is a direct, metaphorical equation of homeland and language. The image received is that of a poet with the god-like power to tear language asunder and create a new being from the disorder he has imposed upon it. Essentially, Darwish presents language metaphorically as having materiality, and the homeland takes its form from that body. A kind of incarnation seems to arise from this poetic performance.

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This is not as absurd as it sounds. To understand the notion of the materiality of language, we turn to *Memory for Forgetfulness*. This book is a collage of highly poetic prose pieces that includes citations from other sources. The most relevant citation for the purposes of this paper is that given below from the *al-Mukhassas*, a dictionary cum thesaurus compiled by Ibn Sidah, who died in 1066. At one point during the siege of West Beirut in the summer of 1982, the Israeli army cut off the water, and that became the occasion for an extended reflection on the meaning of water. "For me," Darwish says,

and others like me who have burned with the wounds of water, Ibn Sidah has set out the names of water and its attributes. What follows is only a drop from that flood: water, waters, waterfall, rapids, cataract, cascade, snow, ice, hail, backwater, backwash, aqueduct, canal, droplet, drizzle, cloudburst, rain,

and so on, adding up to 112 synonyms.⁵

If the water is cut off in West Beirut, it has not been cut off in the dictionary, where there is a river of synonyms for water. Clearly, Darwish thinks of words as objects with a separate existence, as things in themselves. Language is a flood that can overflow material reality. Water is as much there in the imaginative universe of the poet as it is not there in the material world, and who ultimately is to tell which world is more real? “Oh fast-moving time,” Darwish cries out in *Mural*, “You’ve snatched me away / from what the obscure alphabet is telling me / The actual is the imagined indeed.”⁶ In the 112 words for water, we also see the power of synonymy to create a meaning that engulfs physical reality.

The organization of sound into rhythmic patterns is another way of incarnating the homeland. Darwish gloried in the inherent musicality of Arabic, in which new meaning is created by altering the rhythm of the basic root of words—that is, by vocally rubbing the consonants against each other. We saw this process at work in the example given above that hinges on the rhythmic elaboration of the sound represented by the letter /k/. Everything that Darwish wrote, including his prose, is suffused with rhythm. The whole first section of *Don’t Apologize for What You’ve Done*, consisting of 47 poems (121 pages out of 157) is titled, “On the Passion for Rhythm.” The first section of that sequence declares:

The rhythm chooses me; it chokes on me
 I’m the tempo of the violin, not its player
 I’m in the presence of memory
 When the echo of things speaks in me
 I speak.⁷

Memory and Presence are two of the most significant themes in Darwish’s poetry, as we can see from the titles of the two books, *Memory for Forgetfulness* and *In the Presence of Absence*, the first written in mid-career (1982-85), and the second towards the end of his life (2006). An earlier work, *Journal of an Ordinary Grief* (1973), explores Darwish’s memory of his early years and how in the process of the transformation of the homeland from Palestine to Israel he became a present-absent person. The phrase “in the presence of” has a reverential connotation, and memory refers to everything that connects Darwish with Palestine. Therefore, when he is “in the presence of memory,” the complex emotional/psychological state that is Palestine is present in his consciousness and he is in an unusually receptive frame of mind, such that it is not he but the “echo of things” that organizes the rhythm of his words.

Part of the problem with translation, even at its most rhythmic, is that it cannot convey the same rhythms. We saw that with the /k/ example. Of course, rhythm is part of the very structure of Arabic. However, the poet has to be there to receive the vibrations from nature, which he then turns into patterned language, almost

choking from the excess of passion. Therefore, if Palestine incarnates in Darwish's poetry as language, perforce it has to be the Arabic language that embodies that incarnation. To some extent this process parallels the kind of manifestation of the Divine in the Arabic words of the Qur'an.

The first stanza of the poem titled "For Our Country" further demonstrates the incarnation of the homeland via the chaos of language: "For our country / Close by the word of God / There's a roof made of clouds."⁸ An abstract thing, the word of God, is presented metaphorically as an incarnate object in space; so is the homeland. Here is God's word, and here, right next to it, is the homeland. The holiness of the homeland is a constant theme in Darwish. In *Memory for Forgetfulness* he calls Palestine the "object of worship": "Beirut is not creating its song now, for the metal wolves are barking in every direction. And the sung beauty, the object of worship, has moved away to a memory now joining battle against the fangs of a forgetfulness made of steel."⁹

In *Memory for Forgetfulness*, Darwish also elaborates on the association of language and divine speech. He cites a passage from the book *A Universal History* by the medieval historian Ibn Athir, who died in 1233. Ibn Athir writes, "Then God, having created the Pen and commanded it, so that it wrote into being everything that will exist till the Day of Judgment, created delicate clouds . . ."¹⁰ The Pen (*al-Qalam*) is the name of Sura 68 in the Qur'an, and it is used metaphorically in Sura 96, *al-'Alaq* (The Embryo), in which God is said to teach by the Pen. In Christianity, the Word was at the beginning, and in Islam the Pen wrote the universe into being. According to *The Concise Encyclopedia of Islam*, "the qalam is . . . symbolically the instrument of creation, inscribing existence on the cosmic table (*lawh*)."¹¹ The qalam corresponds to the Sanskrit *purusha* (form) and the *lawh* to *prakrti* (substance). History is thus conceived in terms of the metaphor of writing. If the Pen wrote it, it will come into being; if it's not written, it won't happen.

While Islam provides the poet with a means to understand history through writing, Christianity offers him an event that changed history. It is clear that Darwish was inspired by the universal dimension of Palestine as the birthplace of Christ and the home of the Incarnation, the place where the mythological event that altered history took place. His tribute to poetry was to base it on this mythological dimension of Palestine, and his tribute to Palestine was to adopt it as the central metaphor, icon, and symbol of his myth-making poetry.

On a more concrete level, Darwish's language inhabited and articulated a specific cultural context, and he could never shake off the label of "resistance poet," though he fought against it until the end of his life. The last occasion was in an interview he gave to the Haifa newspaper *Al-Ittihad* (for which he had worked when he lived in the city), as he was preparing to take his memorable trip to Haifa to read his poetry on July 15, 2007, after an exile of 37 years. "Those who attack

me are of two kinds," he said to the interviewer: "the Palestinian who wishes to imprison me in my old poems, and the Arab who wants modernism for himself, and bad poetry for me."¹²

However, though Darwish did not like to be called a "resistance poet," he did not object to being the poet of Palestine. In fact, he continually cast himself in that role and fulfilled it until the end of his life. When Palestine called, he always rose to the occasion. *Memory for Forgetfulness*, for example, is a powerful indictment of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982. His long poem "State of Siege," written in 2002 on the occasion of the Israeli siege of Arafat's headquarters in Ramallah, is a passionate affirmation of Palestinian endurance and humanity. Darwish wrote the eloquent Palestinian Declaration of Independence, which was adopted by the Palestine National Council at its historic meeting in Algiers in November of 1988. He also wrote a passionate plea to stop the bloodshed when civil war broke out between Fatah and Hamas in 2006.¹³

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Darwish's objection to others reading him as a poet of resistance harkens back to the Arab tradition in which the poet was the public voice of the tribe. The importance of this context to the public adoration of Darwish cannot be underestimated. Darwish's poetry is an affirmation of identity. To the Palestinians he gave a national voice around which to unite. But Darwish was not only a Palestinian but also an Arab nationalist. The very first words of "Identity Card," the poem that propelled him to instant fame, are: "Record / I am Arab."¹⁴ He also wrote the following sentence from the Declaration of Independence: "The State of Palestine is an Arab state, an integral and indivisible part of the Arab nation, at one with that nation in heritage and civilization, with it also in its aspiration for liberation, progress, democracy and unity."¹⁵

For the general Arab public, Darwish articulated a collective identity to which many Arabs aspire. The fact that this national Arab identity has repeatedly come under attack, not only from Israel and Western powers but from within the Arab world as well, is sufficient cause to consider Darwish a resistance poet. Not only *Memory for Forgetfulness*, but all of his work serves the purpose of enshrining this identity in magnificent language. For these reasons it seems that Darwish's objection to being labeled a resistance poet stems from his desire not to be pigeonholed. He wanted to be read as a poet of a Palestine that is part of the Arab nation, not as a mouthpiece speaking for the PLO "tribe."

When I met Darwish in Ramallah during the summer of 2005, he said he did not see any horizon for the Palestinians. He expressed the same sentiment in an interview with the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* on July 14, 2007: "The situation today is the worst one could have imagined. The Palestinians are the only nation in the world that feels with certainty that today is better than what the days ahead will hold. Tomorrow always heralds a worse situation."¹⁶

On the 60th anniversary of the *Nakba*, Darwish wrote a magnificent elegy, titled "At the Station of a Train That Fell Off the Map." It echoes the style of pre-Islamic poetry, with its pause over the ruins, the so-called *waqfa 'ala al-atlal*. Specifically, he echoes the *Mu'allaqa* of the sixth-century poet Imru' al-Qays, which begins: "Let us stop, my friends, and lament the memory of a love and her abode..."¹⁷ Darwish had many occasions to pause over the 500 or so Palestinian villages that had been reduced to ruins by the new state of Israel. The grass, solid air, thorns, and cactus that we read in the first line of "At the Station" are exactly what a person encounters at the site of one of these destroyed villages:

Grass, solid air, thorns and cactus
 On the tracks. There in the absurdity of no-form
 The form of things chews on its shadow
 Nothingness is there documented, surrounded by its opposite ...

...

I stopped at the station, not to wait for the train
 Or for my feelings buried in the beauty
 Of a distant something
 But to find out how the sea went crazy
 And how the place broke like a room made of porcelain
 To know when I was born, where I lived
 And how the birds migrated south or north.
 Is what remains to me enough for ethereal imagination
 To triumph over corrupt reality?¹⁸

This is the story of Palestine: the sea going crazy, the birds migrating, the country broken. The destroyed Palestine, which, in the absurdity of no-form, is the documented nothingness that chews on its shadow.

While "At the Station" chronicles the destruction of his homeland, Darwish's last book of poetic prose, *In the Presence of Absence* (2006), addresses the destruction of the self. In it Darwish describes himself as a text stretched out on the page. The Arabic word he employs, *musajjan*, is used for a corpse stretched out in a coffin. With this book, Darwish wrote his own obituary. In the earlier long poem, *Mural*, Darwish also addresses the self. He says, echoing Christ's injunction, "seek and

you shall find": "I am he to whom the obscure letters have said / write, and you will be, / read, and you will find."¹⁹ His being was his writing.

Darwish's death must be viewed in the context of his life, and the context of his life is his work as a poet. Therefore, his death is part of his poetry. Darwish went into open-heart surgery for the third time on August 6, 2008, to repair his severely damaged arteries, and he died on August 9. He had severe heart problems and needed to have surgery, but his condition didn't constitute an emergency. He could have had the surgery a week earlier or even a month later. So, why choose August 6? For an answer we return to *Memory for Forgetfulness*, which, as noted earlier, is about the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the 88-day siege of Beirut. At one point, the Israeli air force dropped a vacuum, or concussion, bomb on a twelve-story building, leveling it to the ground. This was a completely new kind of weapon that made buildings collapse by creating a vacuum inside them. The book, however, condenses the whole siege into a single day: August 6. Why August 6? The answer lies in the book:

The vacuum bomb. Hiroshima. Manhunt by jet fighter. Vanquished remnants of the Nazi army in Berlin. . . Headlines that jumble past with present, urging the present to hurry on. A future sold in a lottery. A Greek fate lying in wait for young heroes. . . On this day, on the anniversary of the Hiroshima bomb, they are trying out the vacuum bomb on our flesh, and the experiment is successful.

...

A Hiroshima tomorrow. Hiroshima is tomorrow.²⁰

From these citations it is clear that Darwish did not draw a line between himself and his work. The last act of his life is therefore also part of his work. I feel confident that his choice of Hiroshima Day was a deliberate act—a statement that documents the nothingness he saw lying ahead for the Palestinian people.

Darwish died on August 9, which is Nagasaki Day. It is not given to us to know the hour of our death, and if Darwish died naturally on that day, then destiny was helping him make his statement. But I understand that he had given definite instructions not to be revived if he was going to come out of the surgery mentally impaired and destined to spend the rest of his life in a wheelchair. In essence, it wouldn't be surprising if he consciously made a nuclear statement with his death. He was the complete poet; his life was his poetry.

In conclusion, while the absurdity of no-form in Darwish's elegy "At the Station" is an ambiguous construction that does not yield an easy interpretation, one can almost understand how, when one looks at the scorched earth of Gaza, where nothingness is documented, the form of things can chew on its shadow. Forms

begin to chew on their shadows as the sun sets. By nightfall, there is neither form nor shadow—the absurdity of no-form. Darwish had such total identification with Palestine that he saw her condition as his condition, and his as hers. When he wrote these lines, he knew he was heading towards permanent darkness.

If I had to attach an overall label to Darwish's work, especially after 1982, I would call his vision ironic. But his is a very dark irony, an entropic irony of the straight line that sees everything heading towards dissolution. I do not concur with this vision because I am a student of *The Arabian Nights*, a book that is the mother of ironies, but irony of the circle rather than the straight line. *The Arabian Nights* is constructed in cycles of stories that echo each other in theme and content. Most stories in the *Nights* exist within the framework of the larger story that constitutes a particular cycle. As such, there is no beginning, middle, and end, as there is in Greek tragedy. One story generates another story until one cycle is complete, at which time another cycle begins. This arrangement, in affirming the supremacy of an ironic fate, defeats the tyranny of time, since the end is another beginning. I suppose at one time or another we are all victims of history, but if one's view is that of the circle, there will always be another story to tell.

ENDNOTES

1. Mahmoud Darwish, *Mural: A Poem (Jidariyya: Qasida)* (Beirut: Riyad El-Rayyes, 2000), 46-47.
2. Mahmoud Darwish, *Memory for Forgetfulness* (translated with an introduction by Ibrahim Muhawi) (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), 17.
3. Darwish, *Mural: A Poem*, op. cit., 13.
4. Translation by the author. *Time* (January 5, 2009, 155) has: "I have learned and dismantled all the words in order to draw from them a single word: Home," from Mahmoud Darwish, *Unfortunately, It Was Paradise: Selected Poems* (translated and edited by Munir Akash and Carolyn Forché) (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 7. The original Arabic appeared in Mahmoud Darwish, *Fewer Roses (Wardun Aqall)* (Beirut: Al-Mu'assassa Al-'Arabiyya li-l-Dirasat wa Al-Nashr, 1987), 15.
5. Darwish, *Memory for Forgetfulness*, op. cit., 36.
6. Darwish, *Mural: A Poem*, op. cit., 26.
7. Mahmoud Darwish, *Don't Apologize for What You've Done* (Beirut: Riyad El-Rayyes, 2004), 15.
8. *Ibid.*, 39.
9. Darwish, *Memory for Forgetfulness*, op. cit., 146.
10. *Ibid.*, 42.
11. Cyril Glassé, *The Concise Encyclopedia of Islam* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1999), s.v. "Qalam."
12. Interview available at: <http://jehaat.com/vb/showthread.php?t=3015>.
13. Mahmoud Darwish, *Al-Hayat* newspaper, July 17, 2006.
14. Mahmoud Darwish, *Collected Works (Diwan Mahmoud Darwish)*, Vol.1 (Beirut: Dar Al-Awada, 1996), 71.
15. The Declaration is available at: <http://middleeast.about.com/od/documents/a/me081115f.htm>.
16. Interview available at: <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/881350.html>.
17. Translation by the author. The full text of the poem in Arabic is available at: <http://www.library.cornell.edu/colldev/mideast/elqys.htm>.
18. Mahmoud Darwish, *Al-Quds Al-Arabi* newspaper, May 15, 2008, 12.
19. Darwish, *Mural: A Poem*, op. cit., 25.
20. Darwish, *Memory for Forgetfulness*, op. cit., 84-85.

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