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SIGNIFICANT BUT PROBLEMATIC OTHERS: 
NEGOTIATING “ISRAELIS” IN THE WORKS OF 
MAHMOUD DARWISH

Muhammad Siddiq

“Either I, or He”
That’s how war begins.
But it ends in an awkward meeting between
“My and Him.”

—Mahmoud Darwish, “A State of Siege”

The works of the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish abound in references 
and allusions to Jewish and Hebrew texts, persona, themes, and motifs. 
Invariably, the intertextual gesture implicates rival discourses of national identity, often directly and explicitly. And just as often, a sense of problematic, yet indispensable, otherness seems to animate the context of such transnational projections.

On the face of it, otherness may seem not only incidental but perhaps 
also categorically alien to the concept or conceptualization of national identity. And yet strident assertions of racial or ethnic purity and singularity aside, otherness may be no less central to the discourse of national or collective identity than the Derridean notion of “différance” is to effective linguistic signification. A brief glance at constitutive religious and historical formulations of the subject, from ancient times to the present, may suffice to gauge the validity of this generalization. To illustrate the point with just two striking examples from medieval European history, which still resonate with
particular contemporary relevance, let me consider briefly the “sermon” of Pope Urban II to the Franks at Claremont in 1095, which launched the two-hundred-year-long nightmare of the Crusades, and Martin Luther’s table talk “Faith Versus ‘Good Work,’” which helped launch the Reformation.

In his skillfully calibrated differentiations Pope Urban predicates the singularity of the “race” of the Franks—to whom his “sermon” is primarily addressed—not only on the geographic insulation of their mountainous country but also on the superior religious and character traits that distinguish them, collectively, from all others, but especially from the hapless Persians. The latter are summarily summoned, indicted, and dismissed as “a race from the kingdom of the Persians, an accursed race, a race utterly alienated from God, a generation forsooth which has not directed its heart and has not entrusted its spirit to God.” Similarly, Martin Luther strictly limits the applicability of redeeming grace to those who submit to (his version of) Christ: “For, without Christ, all is idolatry and fictitious imaginings of God whether of the Turkish Qur’an, of the pope’s decrees, or Moses’ law; if a man think thereby to be justified and saved before God, he is undone.”

What these examples show, among other things, is that pliability and susceptibility to extrinsic manipulation, contrived if necessary, are indispensable for the effective appropriation of the other’s narrative of identity. The success of such strategies of appropriation, in turn, is predicated on the premise that alternative sources of information are unavailable or inaccessible to the intended objects of persuasion. In this case, “the kingdom of the Persians” had ceased to exist four and a half centuries before Urban’s time—in 651 AD, to be precise, but its historic antagonism to the East Roman (Byzantine) Empire—perhaps still lingering, however dimly, in the collective memory of the literate among the Franks—amply qualified it for the villain’s role in the pope’s (ulterior) grand imperial designs. And if the mention of the menacing Turks banging at the gates of Europe makes the horrifying prospect of eternal damnation easier for Luther’s audience to grasp and serves his rhetorical and theological ends better, why not recast the Arabic Qur’an as Turkish? (Othello’s bragging before his Venetian overlords about “slaying the Turk,” nearly a century later, resonates with similar and equally specious import.)

Now, if general illiteracy, ignorance, and provinciality denied (mostly rural) communities access to the defining identity narratives of other collectivities in earlier epochs of history, ideological indoctrination and relentless propaganda have come to perform a similar task in modern mass societies. Considerable resources are invested by modern nation-states in
what Noam Chomsky has aptly called “manufacturing consent.” On this
score, few modern ideologies or states have been more successful than
Zionism and Israel respectively. The veritable absence of the Palestinian
national narrative from both the Israeli and world public arenas for so long
attests to the validity of this observation. Witness also the staying power
of the fatuous slogan “describing” Palestine as “a land without a people
for a people without a land.” Coined, in its final version, by the Brit-
ish Zionist Israel Zangwil in 1918, this insidious slogan has survived and
metamorphosed, surfacing in one form of Zionist propaganda or another to
this day. Thus on 15 June 1969, Golda Meir, then prime minister of Israel,
confided to the correspondent of the *Sunday Times* that “the Palestinians
did not exist.” Ed MacAteer, a prominent leader of what he asserts to be
“seventy-million-strong” Christian fundamentalist movement in the United
States, was equally emphatic when he told Bob Simon of CBS that “every
grain of sand between the Dead Sea, the Jordan River, and the Mediterranean
Sea belongs to the Jews.”3 In July 2009, Reuven Rivlen, the speaker of the
Israeli Knesset, went further by stating on several occasions that “Jabotinsky’s
dream of an Israel on both sides of the Jordan river is more relevant now
than ever before.” And when, in March 2000, Yossi Sarid, then minister
of education, floated the idea of including a couple of Darwish’s poems in
the curriculum of the Israeli high schools, Prime Minister Ehud Barak and
the Israeli Knesset shot it down forthwith. “Israel is not ready for Darwish
yet,” Barak is reported to have intoned.

Nor is this categorical denial of the Palestinian claim to national
affiliation with Palestine limited to the verbal or discursive domains—
anymore than the pope’s pernicious rhetoric was limited to pedantry. The
systematic destruction of Arab towns and villages during and after the 1948
war and the subsequent expropriation of Arab lands for exclusively Jewish
settlements; the official policy of *yehud* (“Judaization”) of predominantly
Arab parts of the state of Israel, such as Galilee and the Negev; the ongo-
ing annexation of East Jerusalem and large parts of the occupied West
Bank, also for exclusively Jewish settlements, since 1967; and the currently
unfolding policy of “Hebraizing” all Arabic place names in Israel—these
instances and numerous others attest to a methodical intention to obliterate
the record of Palestinian identity off the land. (Many contemporary Israeli
scholars—Ilan Pappe, Avi Shleim, Oren Yiftachel, Shlomo Sand, Benny
Morris—before his volte-face—and, of course, the late Israel Shahak, among
others—have documented these systematic Israeli policies and practices
of uprooting and dispossessioning Palestinians.) Of particular note in this
connection is the Israeli writer A. B. Yehoshua’s early (1966) novella *Facing
the Forests. The plot of the novella combines preoccupation with the theme of the Crusades with the more recent Israeli variation on it, namely, the official attempt to hide the ruins of a destroyed Arab village—metonymic of Arab Palestine?—under a newly raised forest. This and similar, more or less direct literary interventions in the Zionist/Israeli national narrative urgently invite a sustained and methodical examination of the role of modern Hebrew literature, literary criticism, and the Jewish literary establishments in Israel and the United States, both in and out of academia, in abetting Zionist and Israeli propaganda. A brave first step in that direction has already been taken by Jewish and Israeli scholars, writers, and poets, both in Israel and abroad, including Ella Shohat, Ammiel Alcalay, Sami Shalom Chitrit, Hanan Hever, Yitshak La’or, Haggai Rogani, and Rachel Feldhay Brenner, especially in her book Inextricably Bonded: Israeli Arab and Jewish Writers Re-Visioning Culture.

My purpose in briefly rehearsing the historical record is to suggest the general ideological backdrop against and political climate under which Darwish grew up and in which his consciousness was formed. For it is virtually impossible to understand his complex treatment of the Israeli “other” in isolation from the adverse circumstances of his own life and experience. These, in turn, demand some familiarity with the institutionalized discrimination against the Arab citizens of Israel—to whom Darwish belonged until he went into permanent exile in 1970—and against Palestinians in general. In addition to having to cope with the general discrimination faced by all Palestinians, Darwish also frequently found himself detained by the Israeli secret service for (unspecified) political “offenses” and placed under house arrest when not in prison. Knowledge of the way he was treated puts us in a better position to appreciate the strain of personal anger and bitterness that permeates his dramatized response to representative figures of Israeli official power. As such, the Israeli invariably appears in the role of hostile and threatening authority: a representative of the military government, a police officer, a soldier, an interrogator, a guard, or a jailer. This highly negative aspect of the poet’s experience constitutes one pole for his imaginative treatment of the identity of the Israeli.

Though predominant, this grim pattern of political repression and literary response is occasionally decentered a little to allow for the representation of happier personal experiences, memories, and associations. On these rare occasions it is possible to glimpse something more benign and more humane behind the menacing mask of otherness. The dramatization of such encounters with individualized Israelis delineates the opposite pole in Darwish’s treatment of the subject.
At a measured distance from both these extremes lies a more abstract but no less significant source to which Darwish often appeals: the Old Testament. (He makes frequent reference to other religious sources as well, especially the New Testament and the Qur'an, often for similar discursive and rhetorical effects.) This practice has earned Darwish angry criticism from certain Arab quarters, as has his occasional “humanization” of the Israeli enemy.

With this skeletal overview in mind, it may be possible to assess, through some concrete examples, the general significance of Israeli identity in Darwish’s works. This will be, at best, a preliminary mapping of the vast and highly complex subject. Above all, however, it is imperative to bear in mind that Darwish’s treatment of the image of the Israeli is defensive in nature: it aims to “rehabilitate” and shore up the habitually maligned and often forthrightly demonized individual and collective identity of Palestinians. The fundamental intellectual and existential challenge the poet had to face throughout his life and in his work arises from a stubborn dilemma: how to accommodate the emergent Israeli identity of the Jewish residents of Israel when the formative premise of that identity stipulates an exclusive eternal right to the very land that grounds his own personal and communal Palestinian Arab identity? In other words, the Zionist/Israeli insistence on Arab recognition of the inalienable, total, and eternal right of the Jews, collectively, to Palestine necessarily renders the presence of the Palestinians in the land at best transient and, consequently, contingent on the “rightful” owner’s benevolence. Zionist ideology thus demands of Palestinians to accept and internalize the inevitable logical conclusion of the following absurd scenario: if the Palestinians had been in Palestine at all before the advent of Zionism—a highly questionable premise according to Israel Zangwill, Joan Peters, and others of their persuasion—they must have been “squatting” in the land they (mistakenly) took to be theirs during the putative millennial absence of the “rightful” owner of the land, the Jewish people. (On 1 August 2009, Nili Wazana, chair of the Department of Bible Studies at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, defined the formative relationship between the “Jewish people” and “the land of Israel” on Israeli television as follows: “a people that came from the outside and conquered its country.”) It therefore follows that self-abnegation is a prerequisite condition for continued Palestinian existence in Palestine. The Arab citizens of Israel are not exempt from the perverse logic
of this paradox. Thus, in order to be at all (in Palestine/Israel) they must first cease to be who they are. This may sound like a far-fetched caricature, but it is precisely what the Israeli insistence on Palestinian and Arab recognition of Israel as a "Jewish state," not only de facto but also de jure, is meant to accomplish, (among other objectives). Other proposed laws before the Israeli Knesset, such as the one that would predicate the citizenship of Arab citizens of Israel on an oath of allegiance to Israel as "the state of the Jewish people," are integral to this conceptual and ideological framework. This and other draft laws prompted the Israeli daily *Haaretz* to brand the sitting Kenesset "bad and racist" in its editorial of 23 July 2010.

The rigid constraints of this ideological position and its equally stringent translation into official Israeli procedures vis-à-vis the Palestinians seem to have left Darwish little room for significant variation or maneuverability on the subject of identity. It is therefore difficult to speak of categorical changes or "paradigm shifts" in his depiction of the Israeli persona over the years, especially when these depictions happen to reference official power, which is often the case. What is evident instead is a general strategy that aims, ultimately, "to transform the historic enemy into an engaged adversary," as Darwish himself put it. (Exempt from this general inclination are the occasional, emotionally triggered responses to outbreaks of violence on massive scale, such as the Israeli military suppression of the first Palestinian popular uprising (Intifada) of 1987. The widely disproportionate force the Israeli army used against Palestinian stone throwers, mostly kids, was epitomized by Yitzhak Rabin’s pledge “to break their bones.” The cruel spectacle elicited perhaps Darwish’s most direct and categorical rejection of collective Israeli presence in Palestine. Darwish’s furious response came in 1988 in a poem titled “Transients Passing Through Ephemeral Words.” Darwish seems to have had second thoughts about this poem and in subsequent interviews and conversations sought to distance himself from it. It may be telling in this regard that he refused to include the poem in his collected works or to allow it to be reprinted in any anthology.)

In practical terms, this strategy splits the figure of the national other into two and calibrates the Palestinian form and tone of address accordingly. In his capacity as representative of unreconstructed Israeli force, the enemy qualifies only as an indicted defendant in a court of law. In the opposite capacity, he figures as an intimate interlocutor to whom are directed nuanced, sometimes even tender and wistful, pleas to forgo his murderous ways, for his own sake as well as the sake of others. This tendency is most evident in Darwish’s 2002 collection of poems, *A State of Siege* (from which I cite two short poems to illustrate the point in section 5).
To show how inextricably intertwined the personal and national narrative strands are in Darwish’s experience it may suffice to note the occasion of his first brush with the law. This happened when, as a teenager, he wrote a “political” poem that vaguely alluded to the destruction of his village, al-Birweh, rendering him homeless in his homeland, and to the disparity between the life of Jewish and Arab kids in Israel. He was subsequently summoned to the military governor’s office, where he received a stern warning and a blunt threat that his father would be fired from his job at the quarry if he “offended” ever again.

Soon thereafter, however, he met an antithetical type of Israeli Jew, in the person Shoshana Lapidot, his teacher of Hebrew literature in high school. (She taught for many years at the Kafr Yasif Arab high school and eventually left Israel and moved to Germany permanently.) It was this Jewish teacher who seems to have awakened his latent literary talent and instilled in him, at that tender age, a lasting love of poetry. But even this idyllic anecdote is not without a tinge of biting irony: the texts she used to initiate the nascent Palestinian poet included the Hebrew poems of “Israel’s national poet,” Chaim Nachman Bialik (from the Ukraine), expressing his longings for “the land of [his] fathers, Zion.” In addition to such poetry the curriculum also included selections from the Old Testament, modern Hebrew literature, and the history of the Jewish people, especially as it pertained to “the land of Israel.” Like all Arab students in Israeli public schools, Darwish probably learned more about the alleged eternal right of the “Jewish people” to Palestine than he did about his own “national” history in the land of his forefathers and ancestors.

Could the abysmal incongruence between the youth’s inability to visit, or even mourn publicly, the ruins of his nearby home and village and his being made to memorize by heart the poetry of “Israel’s (Ukrainian) national poet” and to celebrate Israel’s day of independence with pump and ceremony have contributed to the precautious awakening of the poet’s nationalist sentiment? And could it also have enticed the defiant terms in which he was soon to express his indisputable Arab identity and his steadfast commitment to hold on to the land? For this is precisely what Darwish did when he burst onto the literary scene in the early 1960s with the poem that made him instantly famous throughout the Arab world and, in due course, earned him the epithet “poet of the Palestinian Resistance.” The poem in question is of course “Identity Card.” (Little did the young poet know at the
time that this poem will follow him to his grave, literally. Already in *Dbākirah lilnisyān* (1987) [*Memory for Forgetfulness* (1995)] he was beginning to get weary of the relentless chase. Millions of Arabs throughout the world knew him primarily, some perhaps exclusively, through this fiery poem and refused to recognize his creative need, and desire, to overcome its severe poetic limitations.

Other than rhyme and meter, there is little in this poem to recommend it aesthetically. Often declamatory to the point of shrillness, it is a veritable litany of grievances against discriminatory Israeli policies and practices. But it also projects a stark assertion of proud Arab identity, albeit tempered by formulaic communist collocations in praise of physical labor and working-class solidarity. On the whole, these features are consistent with Darwish’s view of the nature and function of poetry at the time, namely, to instruct, agitate, and mobilize the oppressed nations and classes for inevitable struggle and resistance.

What then captivated Arab readers, and especially audiences, in this poem? To begin with, its thematic novelty: the poem dramatizes an encounter between a Palestinian civilian and an Israeli official, perhaps in the office of the military governor, where, between 1948–1966, the Arab citizens of Israel had to go every so often to secure an official, written permit to travel from one village or town to another within Israel. The encounter often involved a spurious “interrogation” of the Palestinian applicant, intended more to harass and humiliate than anything else. This is as likely a setting as any for the dramatic action of the poem. In an astounding rhetorical feat the young poet—twenty-three at the time—turns tables on the interrogating officer and “dictates” to him not only the terms of the present “exchange” between them but also that of all future relations between the two national entities metonymically represented by the two interlocutors. The anaphoric use of the emphatic form of the imperative "sajjil" ["record"] imparts a strong sense of authority that momentarily suspends the real historical power relations between the two sides. The scene is thus dramatic but not dialogic in the Bakhtinian sense (or any other sense, for that matter). Much of the lasting spell of the poem on Arab readers and listeners probably emanates from the audacity to speak (Palestinian) truth to (Israeli) power, contrived and illusory as that scenario may be.

Another of Darwish’s poems that has enjoyed wide popularity with his lay followers is “Rita.” But unlike the combative “Identity Card,” “Rita” is essentially a love poem pitched against a hostile background. Its popularity, like that of the other most “popular” poems, stems in large measure from the fact that its lyrics were put to music and sung by the popular Lebanese
singer and composer Marcel Khalife. What is particularly striking about this otherwise ordinary love poem is the identity of the beloved: she is Jewish, and Rita is her pseudonym. By his own admission, she was the poet’s first love. It is not surprising therefore that he kept coming back to the fond memory of this formative experience in later, far more desolate years.

“A gun stands between Rita and my eyes,” reads the first line and refrain of the poem. It is permissible, I think, to read gun both literally and metaphorically here. That is, in addition to denoting literal violence it also stands for the social, religious, and legal segregation that makes interreligious marriage not only difficult but also impossible in Israel, where, to this day, civil marriage is a legal oxymoron. (One wonders whether this stillborn love affair had anything to do with Darwish’s brief, and evidently unhappy, one or two attempts at marriage and raising a family? He died, as he lived, alone.)

Be that as it may, what is certain is that the strong imprint “Rita” left on the consciousness of the poet rendered him practically incapable of stereotyping Israelis or Jews or of representing them as a single, undifferentiated monolith. (Could this impossible love affair have also played a role in prompting the poet’s tireless search for an alternative, less xenophobic, and more inclusive mode of national identity that might, conceivably, move the rival contenders for historical Palestine beyond the deadly impasse they had reached? There have been attempts on both sides, primarily literary, to imagine such an alternative by invoking the ancient, pre-Israelite heritage of the Canaanites as the common ancestors of both Palestinian Arabs and Israeli Jews. Darwish, as we shall see, has his own variation on this intellection.)

Whatever their merit, these musings belong to a later phase in the poet’s career. Paradoxically, the decade of the sixties of the last century may have momentarily united these two extraordinary lovers, but it also drove Arabs and Israelis, collectively, farther apart than ever before. The abysm gaped fully in the aftermath of the 1967 war.

As chance would have it, however, Darwish was soon to experience yet another fateful encounter with another atypical Israeli. His counterpart this time was an Israeli soldier who had just returned from the front, at the conclusion of the 1967 Six Day War. He and Darwish had been members of the youth organization of the Israeli communist party years earlier. His direct experience of and participation in the ghastly violence of the war left deep scars on him and, before too long, plunged him into a severe identity crisis that grew steadily worse at the sight of the public gloating over victory and conquest. He came to Haifa to bid his old friend goodbye.
before leaving Israel for another country “for good.” Engulfed by the smoke of cigarettes and the vapor of alcohol in the poet’s apartment, he recounted to his friend—who was under house arrest at the time—the gory details of his murderous exploits in the war and the inner turmoil the experience had unleashed in its wake. By the time he woke up from his heavy, inebriated sleep the following day, the poet had already “transcribed” the harrowing details of the experience into one of his most controversial poems: “An Israeli Soldier Dreams of Daffodils.” As might be expected, the intimate personal touch that animates the narrative of the soldier—his yearning, for example, for the simple things of life, such as drinking his mother’s coffee in the morning and returning home safely at the end of the day—did not sit well with many Arab critics who saw in it an act of betrayal, or at least dalliance with the enemy.

In due course, both friends would leave the contested country. The Israeli soldier would go to Paris, where he would pursue his graduate studies, receive a doctorate in history, and eventually return to teach at Tel-Aviv University; the Palestinian poet would go into a wandering exile that would take him briefly to Moscow and Cairo and eventually to Beirut in 1971, where the Israeli military invasion of Lebanon would catch up with him in 1982. Four decades later the Israeli scholar would recount the events of that memorable night in Haifa in a powerful, original study that questioned the foundational premises of Zionism as well as the officially sanctioned Israeli narrative about the origins of the “Jewish people” and its touted historical ties to Palestine. In an exceptionally poignant coincidence the study would be published in 2008, just as Darwish’s body was being returned, in a coffin, from a Texas hospital for burial in Ramallah. The disenchanted soldier and scholar is Shlomo Sand, and the Hebrew title of the book in question translates as When and How the Jewish People Were Invented. (The English version has since been published under a slightly different title: The Invention of the Jewish People.) Whether the striking symbolism of this uncanny coincidence and the other intertwining strands of the compounded identities of these two compatriots/comrades/enemies/friends/exiles warrant further speculation may perhaps best be left to the reader’s discretion and imagination.

The 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon culminated in the forced exodus of the Palestinian fighters from Beirut and the subsequent massacre of defenseless
Palestinian refugees in the refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila. In the aftermath of these atrocities Darwish’s treatment of the subject of identity underwent a drastic revision and reformulation. The overall shift is marked by a haunting sense of cosmic despair and a dark apocalyptic mood. The maddening, claustrophobic effects of the prolonged siege of West Beirut—nearly three months—were later captured in vivid graphic detail by Darwish’s *Memory for Forgetfulness*. The search for new vistas, both literal-spatial and literary-stylistic, is evident in the dramatic poems of the 1980s, especially perhaps the ones that deal directly with the siege. Foremost among these is the long poem “A Paean for the Tall Shadow” (1983).

In this poem, the expulsion of the Palestinian fighters and political leadership from Beirut is viewed in mythic rather than historical terms, as a veritable collapse of the cosmic order. In the face of the ensuing chaos, nothing short of remaking the universe anew will suffice. And this remaking will all be in the image of the Palestinian fighter, whose footstep will set the measure of all things in the new creation. Likewise, the sea enters Darwish’s poetry, and perhaps Palestinian and modern Arabic poetry in general, on a grand scale here, as if to baptize the new creation, on the one hand, and to marshal a symbolic antidote against the arid Arab desert (read Arab officialdom), on the other hand. The bold and vehement rhetorical flights in which Darwish casts his gloomy vision in this poem, as in “Beirut” and other poems of this period, strongly echo the mournful and accusatory voice of the later prophets of the Old Testament. Both the gesture and the resultant pathos remain unmatched in modern Arabic poetry.

To restate the matter in less apocalyptic terms, Darwish’s new post-Beirut poetic evinced drastic changes in several directions. Revisiting the site of collective identity, both Arab and Israeli, is paramount among these. Concerning the Arab side of this dyad, it may suffice to note here that bitterness over official Arab complicity in the Israeli assault on Beirut elicited Darwish’s most radical deconstruction of the assertive Arab identity that had launched his illustrious poetic career two decades earlier. Henceforth, this romanticized “traditional” Arab identity becomes more the subject of interrogation and scathing ridicule—though aimed primarily at unsavory Arab leaders and regimes—than of heady affirmation or celebration. The generalized Arab identity of earlier phases steadily recedes into anachronistic irrelevance as other dimensions of identity, notably Palestinian particularism, subjective concerns, and metaphysical preoccupations and intimations, especially of existential loneliness and death, take center stage in the new poetic order.
But while the “cosmic” drama lasts, the Israeli figures in it primarily as an abstract force of darkness that rains terror and destruction on the besieged city from the safe distance and security of his superior land, air, and sea war machines. And when he materializes in human form, he typically masquerades as the victim, not the murderer. The fact that the Palestinian “addresses” the Israeli only once in this long poem bespeaks the abyss that the invasion and its aftermath had opened between the protagonists. It may in fact be more accurate to say that he speaks at him, rather than to him. In an evident reversion to the monologic rhetorical mode of “Identity Card,” the Palestinian challenges the Israeli, who had “killed the Palestinian and assumed his identity,” to step forward beside him in the court of justice where both sides will testify truthfully, the Israeli by handing in the murderer’s knife, the Palestinian victims by giving their names: Sabra, Deir Yasin, Kafr Qasim, Shatila. These, of course, are the names of sites of Palestinian massacres: Deir Yasin in Palestine (1948), Kafr Qasim in Israel (1956), and Sabra and Shatila in Lebanon (1982).

The court to which Darwish summons the Israeli adversary dispenses moral, not legal, judgments. But that is no less crucial for any eventual historical reconciliation between the combatants in Darwish’s vision. A collective Israeli mea culpa for the historical wrongs visited on the Palestinian people would go a long way in that direction. As it happens, Darwish knew only too well that such a historic gesture from the Israeli side was not exactly imminent. Perhaps that is why his mood on the “national question” grew steadily more ambivalent with time. He was evidently pessimistic about the available and foreseeable political options but markedly less so about the power of the imagination to alter perceptions and change attitudes in the long run.

Henceforth, a two-pronged “strategy” will inform Darwish’s outlook vis-à-vis his Israeli nemesis: to dislodge him from his rigid, ultimately suicidal ideological position and to open up the contours of Palestinian identity to accommodate former enemies and adversaries in a more inclusive regional identity. The idea is not as outlandish as it may seem, nor has Darwish’s effort on this score been completely in vain.

5

Darwish’s imaginative recourse to the Old Testament figures prominently in this two-pronged strategy, just as it does in other areas of his psychological
and intellectual/literary formation. But here, too, the conflicting ideological/political and literary/aesthetic forces that conditioned his earliest experiences are in full play. In 1939, two years before Darwish’s birth, David Ben Gurion, first prime minister and virtual founder of the state of Israel, had declared unequivocally that “the Bible is our mandate (for Palestine).” By “our” he meant world Jewry, and by “Bible,” the Old Testament. This tendentious invocation of the scripture for patent ideological and political, that is, mundane and secular, purposes raises a host of profoundly troubling questions on as many precipitous fronts and levels. These are by no means limited to the present context or to the Bible. But for now, let us consider the following quandary: unless countervailing forces from within the community of believers in any text or discourse assert otherwise, what is to prevent the logic of association from implicating that text or discourse in the moral consequences of wrongs perpetrated in its name? Religious scriptures are no exception to this inevitable general conclusion, I think. If anything, they may in fact be more liable on account of their foundational claim to moral eminence and divine omniscience. To put this slightly abstract query in more concrete terms, let us consider the following spectacle, readily available on YouTube: Jewish settler kids, dressed in the traditional religious attire, are throwing stones at the quarantined house of a Palestinian family in Hebron and taunting the terrified women and children inside with cries of “Amalec get out of here”—all this in full view of idling Israeli soldiers. The harrowing implications of the analogy become instantly apparent when we remember that the indigenous Amalecite people of ancient Palestine were slated for extermination by the Israelites, especially under King David, in the Old Testament. (The Israeli human rights organization Betselem has amply documented systematic settler violence against the defenseless Palestinian population of the West Bank.)

As many prominent Jewish and non-Jewish scholars of Judaism and Jewish history have shown, Zionism, an avowedly secular ideology, made exceptionally effective, though ultimately cynical, use of the Old Testament for its ideological and political ends. For Darwish and his family, like hundreds of thousands of Palestinians whose homes and villages were seized or destroyed to make room for Jewish settlers under this fictive “biblical mandate,” the question was neither hypothetical nor academic. It was, and remains, painfully real and relentlessly personal. The last thing one would therefore expect from a precocious, seven-year-old child who was forced out of his home, never to return to it, is to grow up entertaining sentiments of
affinity with the very text that “authorized” his traumatic extirpation from
the land and his lifelong wandering in exile.

But there she was again: the nurturing mother figure of Shoshana
Lapidot, the Jewish teacher of Hebrew literature in Darwish’s Arab high
school. “She taught us to love the Bible as a literary, not a religious text,”
Darwish would relate on more than one occasion in future years. As such,
the Bible was immune to specious ideological manipulations by any author-
ity, no matter how politically eminent. This transformative experience
would sustain Darwish’s interest in biblical characters, themes, and motifs
throughout his tumultuous life. He thus felt as free to invoke the wrath
of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Habakkuk on Israel for its unjust conduct toward
the Palestinians as he did to emulate the psalms and Ecclesiastes, celebrate
Shulamit’s liberating carnality in the Song of Solomon, and reintegrate
the biblical and Qur’anic versions of the Joseph story (which he did with
stunning originality).

Nor did Darwish shy away from spelling out the intellectual and
discursive implications of his extensive recourse to biblical material. In
numerous interviews he elaborated his “theory” of Palestinian identity as
one that encompasses the entire history of Palestine, from ancient times to
the present. Inevitably, that includes the Hebrew or Israelite phase of the
historical record. The major problem, as Darwish states it in his prose book
Yawmiyyat al-huzn al-‘adi (1973) [Journal of an Ordinary Grief (2010)], lies
in the fact that Zionism and Israel deny the Palestinians the right to their
own memory of Palestine. (The 23 July 2010 editorial of Haaretz also lists a
proposed law before the Israeli Knesset that seeks to do just that: to outlaw
all public displays of, or references to, the Palestinian nakba [calamity] of
1948.) Nevertheless, the literary imagination seems to have its own ways to
beguile the brute force of history, especially when much of that history is
shrouded in hazy mythology.

By way of wrapping up this discussion, let me consider briefly two
instances in which discrete lines of intertextuality between Arabic and
Hebrew texts (and contexts) intersect across prescribed boundaries of
national identity to gesture toward the kind of alternative formulations
envisioned by Darwish. It was during the prolonged siege of Ramallah,
in the wake of the second (Aqsa) Intifada of 2000, that Darwish wrote
the aptly titled A State of Siege. (PLO chairman Yesser Arafat died under
that siege.) Several of the poems in that collection rehearse a hypothetical
dialogue with “representatives” of Israeli (military) power. Two, in fact, are
downright “killers,” and the poems are titled accordingly: “To a Killer,” and
“To Another Killer.” Both poems are quite short and may warrant translating in full here, however roughly:

To A Killer

Had you contemplated the face of the victim,  
And reflected, you could have seen your own mother,  
In the gas chamber,  
You could have broken free of the logic of the gun:  
That’s no way to reclaim identity.

To Another Killer

Had you spared the fetus  
Thirty more days, things might have turned out differently:  
The occupation may end someday,  
And that child may not remember the age of siege,  
He may grow up whole, to become a young man,  
May attend the same school, with one of your daughters,  
To study the ancient history of Asia,  
Perchance they may fall in love,  
Beget a girl (who will be Jewish by birth).  
Now look what you have done:  
Your daughter has become a widow,  
And the granddaughter an orphan!  
What have you done to your runaway family?  
And how did you kill three doves with a single shot? 5

The evident pathos in both poems is amplified by the direct appeal to the humanity of the besieging enemy, even in his capacity as actual or potential killer. Significantly, the Israeli “killer” is not cast here in the traditional abstract guise of a faceless enemy that remains invisible behind or inside distant, conspicuously indifferent war machines. Rather, he is a distinct individual, with intimate family ties and memories, and, above all, a conscience that may be momentarily atrophied but perhaps not irrevocably lost. The ingenuous ploy of framing the prospects of tragic violence in a hypothetical mode not only demonstrates (anew) the superior truth of the imagined over the actual but also serves Darwish’s strategy well. That strategy, we remember, ultimately aims to transform the enemy into an adversary
and perhaps, eventually, into lover and kin. It gets the point across vividly and forcefully without antagonizing the intended target of the imaginative exercise: the Israeli “other.”

Even as some Israelis, such as Dan Margalit of Haaretz, were branding Darwish “a racist” on his death, others were vouching for the prophetic soundness of his vision in far more compelling ways. I cite here only two striking examples. Benny Ziffer, literary editor of the self-same Haaretz, translator and poet in his own right, related in his (Haaretz) blog of 14 July 2009 a tragic event that enacts with uncanny poignancy the very scenario Darwish warned against in his poem “To Another Killer.” Here is a rough translation of the relevant portion of Ziffer’s unhappy piece:

I live in an absurd state that, in the name of the security it purports to grant me, it is willing to choke me, literally, with gas. This is what it almost did to me and my wife last Friday.

We went to visit friends, who are actually almost relatives, in Bil’in—a picturesque Palestinian village (in the West Bank), where Basem Abu Rahmeh, the boyfriend of my daughter, was killed by a tear-gas canister, thrown at him from zero distance, two months ago. . . . He was meant to be my son-in-law.

Whether or not Ziffer is consciously alluding to Darwish’s poem here, it is impossible to miss the sudden eruption of the Lacanian real on the already overdetermined scene. Once again, the convergence between the imaginative and the historical seems to suggest that it is only a matter of time before the insights of the visionary poet materialize in historical reality.

“I am the soldier who kills, time and again, three doves with a single shot, for it’s now a matter of habit with me,” writes the poet Sami Shalom Chetrit in a powerful, soul-searching 2007 poem dedicated/addressed to Mahmoud Darwish. In an explicit intertextual gesture to Darwish’s 1999 collection Mural, Chetrit titles his poem “A Mural Without a Wall: Qasida to Mahmoud Darwish.” No other Hebrew poem, or poet, as far as I know, has subjected to such rigorous interrogation the Zionist enterprise of constructing a new Israeli/Jewish identity on the ruins of both the Palestinian Arab identity indigenous to the land and the Arab identity indigenous to Arab Jews—that is, Jews from the Arab world. Space does not allow for a substantive discussion that could do justice to this highly original, profound, disturbing, and unflinching reexamination of the subject of Israeli identity, especially as it insinuates itself simultaneously into its postulated counterparts: the Palestinian Arab and the Arab Jew. Suffice
it to note here that Chetrit conducts the interrogation, and marshals the evidence for a collective mea culpa, through repeated reference and allusion to identifying lines, images, locutions, and collocations in Darwish's poetry. Although no positive identity emerges from this deconstruction of the available discourses of identity, Palestinian Arab and Israeli Jewish alike, Chetrit and Darwish seem to agree that a new synthesis that simultaneously acknowledges and negates the available historical modes of identity is the only way beyond the present historical impasse. And both emphatically enlist the poetic imagination to point the way.

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**Notes**