Imagining Autobiography: Mahmud Darwish, his Poetic Persona, and his Audience[1]

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1 Introduction

> I come from there. I return the sky to its mother when for its mother the sky cries
> And I weep for a cloud that returns to know me
> I have learned the words of blood-stained courts in order to break the rules.
> I have learned and dismantled all the words to construct a single one:
> homeland.[2]
>
> Anā min hunāk. ʿu'īdu s-samāʾa ilā ummihā ḥīna tabkī s-samāʾu ʿalā ummihā.
> Wa-abkī li-taʾrifanī ghaymatun ʿāʾidah.
> Taʿallamtu kulla l-kalāmi, wa-fakkaktuhu kay urakkiba mufradatan wāḥidah
> Hiya: al-waṭan.

The voice that claims a transcendent status, to come "from there," aspiring to the role of an mediator between heaven and earth and boasting the achievement of subverting language as such to form one particular name–is it the lyrical "I" of a particular poem, or is it the poet's very personal voice? The speaker is a liminal figure: he is no less than a cosmic agent in that he reconciles heaven and earth, a kind of Prometheus who shatters the symbols of ruling power structures, and the First Man, Adam, who on divine order gives everything its name. Is this poem purely poetic and thus a licitly hyperbolic articulation of an artist triumphing over a situation of perversion, or is it a covenantal and thus an autobiographical statement of "the poet of Palestine"? This is a controversial question among the readers of Mahmud Darwish's work. The following communication will shed some light on the problematic inherent in modern political poetry that has in Darwish's case invited an immediate and long-lasting re-interpretation in the sense that readers, or more often listeners, claim autobiographical validity for poetical statements presented in the first person "I." Indeed, it is no exaggeration to state that by identifying Darwish with his poetic persona and raising him to the rank of a redeemer figure, they created a kind of poetic "meta-literary autobiography" for the poet from his poetical speech. Darwish has time and again defied this imposed autobiography; indeed, he refuted the allegation of such a mythic dimension by composing though not an autobiography in the strict

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1 An extended version of this paper has been published in German: "Hebräische Bibel und Arabische Dichtung–Mahmud Darwish und seine Rückgewinnung Palästinas als Heimat aus Worten." In: Neuwirth, Pflitsch & Winckler 2004: 136-157.

2 "Anā min hunāk" (I am from there), vs. 6-10, from: "Ward aqall" (Less Roses), 1986. In Darwish 1994: 326.

sense of the word, yet some divans that deserve to be considered as a kind of autobiography in the shape of a sequence of poems: *Li-mādhā tarakta l-ḥisāna waḥīdan* (Why Did You Leave the Horse Alone?, 1995) and *Sarīr al-gharība* (The Bed of the Stranger, 1999b)[3]. In these works, he critically revisits his early poetry–not succeeding, however, to erase the text of his persona's autobiography that has become his own "meta-literary" autobiography.

1.1 The poet between the individual person of the artist and the publicly claimed symbol

Mahmud Darwish[4] was born in 1942 in Northern Palestine in one of the villages that was destroyed in 1948. He was educated in both Arabic and Hebrew, and as a young man joined the editorial board of the communist literary journal *Al-Jadeed* in Haifa, and early on he had begun to write poetry with overtly political overtones. His coming-out as the outstanding voice of his community, however, can be attributed to his first long poem, *ʿĀshiq min Filasṭīn* (Lover from Palestine), written in 1966, a poem which reflects an experience recorded in his early memoir *Yawmiyyāt al-ḥuzn al-ʿādi* (A Diary of Daily Sadness), which according to my reading epitomizes his personal call to poethood:

> Suddenly you remember that Palestine is your land. The lost name leads you to lost times, and on the coast of the Mediterranean lies the land like a sleeping woman, who awakes suddenly when you call her by her beautiful name. They have forbidden you to sing the old songs, to recite the poems of your youth, and to read the histories of the rebels and poets who have sung of this old Palestine. The old name returns, finally it returns from the void, you open her map as if you opened the buttons of your first love's dress for the first time. (Darwish 1973: 140)

Lost times, the land, her beautiful name, forbidden old songs and histories of the rebels, poets singing about Palestine–material and textual components: the land, memory, and history converge to make up the homeland. What had been forcibly banned from the speaker's consciousness reemerges in a kind of "vision," whose erotic radiance restores to him reality in its full dimension. It should have been this "vision" that inspired him to write the poem "Lover from Palestine." Mahmud Darwish at that time was twenty-four years old. As a consequence of his growing fame as a poet with overtly political overtones to his poetry, he had been imprisoned several times, and it is reported that he wrote the piece during a stay in prison. Soon after the publication of the poem he was discovered by Ghassan Kanafani, the famous Palestinian prose writer who succeeded in smuggling the poems of a number of young Palestinian writers from Israel to Beirut and thus managed to introduce them to the broader Arab public. Kanafani presented his literary protégés as authors of "resistance poetry" and

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3 He has also published two memoirs: *Yawmiyyāt al-ḥuzn al-ʿādi* (1973) and *Dhākira li-l-nisyān* (1986b), cf. van Leeuwen 1999: 259-268.

4 See for a bio-bibliographical survey, Embaló, Neuwirth & Pannewick 2000.

consequently, they were soon received as representatives of the movement of "committed literature" en vogue at the time (see Klemm 1998)–a label that Darwish would vehemently reject for himself just a short time after he had established himself in Beirut.

Increasing confrontations with the Israeli authorities, imprisonments, and house arrests had made creative work impossible for Darwish and finally induced him to leave the country in 1970 and eventually to join the Palestinian resistance movement in Beirut. During his exile in the city, which since the sixties enjoyed the rank of the cultural metropolis of the Arab World, he produced some of his most impressive poems, creating the figure of the *fidā'ī* (devoted fighter) or *shahīd* (martyr), an *alter ego* of the poet himself. Forced to leave Beirut with the expulsion of the Palestinian resistance movement by the Israeli army in 1982, Darwish chose Paris for his new exile, where he was to write his war memoir *Dhākira li-l-nisyān* (A Memory for Forgetfulness) and several collections of new, pronouncedly personal poetry. But whatever he wrote, he was to remain in the consciousness of his wider public as the voice of Palestine, the translator of those most intricate desires and aspirations of the Palestinians that could only be expressed poetically, through myths and symbols. It certainly came as a surprise that Mahmud Darwish, who for more than thirty years has been revered as the voice of Palestine, whose recitals attract thousands of listeners, whose divans reach innumerable readers over the Arab world, in 2002–six years after his return to the Arab world to settle in Ramallah and Amman–published a collection of poems in which he explicitly steps down from his rank of a mythopoeic poet of this people and questions an essential part of his own mythic creation.

2 Recreating the Promised Land: A Palestinian Genesis

What has been claimed for German romantic poetry seems to apply in some important aspects to modern Arabic poetry as well: "Since poetry is credited with a world-transforming and time-devaluating dimension, reflections about poetry often touch on eschatological horizons. The poet (in Novalis' work) bears the traits of the ancient poet Orpheus. Like Orpheus, he appears as a powerful magician who devaluates the laws of space and time, who connects between remote realms of being and invites all creatures into a comprehensive dialogue."[5] "The poet (in Novalis' work) occupies a privileged rank, since he commands a sort of mystical access to the Golden Age. He is capable of experiencing the unity of the ideal,

[5] See Valk 2003: 71: "Da der Poesie eine weltverwandelnde und zeitaufhebende Dimension zugeschrieben wird, rückt die Reflektion über ihr Wesen häufig in einen eschatologischen Horizont. Der Dichter trägt (im Werk des Novalis) die Züge des antiken Dichters Orpheus. Wie dieser tritt er als mächtiger Magier auf, der die Gesetze von Raum und Zeit außer Kraft setzt, entlegenste Wirklichkeitsbereiche mit einander verbindet und alle Geschöpfe in einen umfassenden Dialog eintreten läßt".

primordial world even through the most disparate phenomena of the present reality appearances. He is endowed with the exclusive gift of the analogical gaze thus realizing in the apparently unrelated phenomena of the empirical realm elements that unite them. He is able to de-cypher those enigmatic ciphers that are inscribed into everything earthly."[6] Although there is no topic of a Golden Age in Arab secular culture to reclaim, post-colonial poetry is markedly nostalgic. Poets endeavor to revert reality and recover the vision of a pre-colonial paradisiacal state of their living space beneath its real appearance that is disfigured through political circumstances (see Deyoung 1998).

2.1 The Land inscribed with Biblical history

This applies to Palestinian poetry in particular, which for its understanding relies–as Richard van Leeuwen has stressed–on the premise that land is the structuring principle to organize individual and collective perceptions of life. "There are various versions of history inscribed on the land, both by the occupier and by the Palestinians. The relations of power, however, imply that the Israeli version is dominant and that the Palestinian 'textual' homeland is threatened by elimination. What remains for Palestinians is not so much 'history' as 'memory,' which consists of recollections of childhood and of the exodus, emotions symbolizing the attachment to the land and the natural right of the Palestinians to the land" (see van Leeuwen 1999: 270). But these issues remain dispersed, lacking universal validity–that is, as long as no aesthetic catalyst is available. Here poetry comes in. The situation of exile which has been transformed–as van Leeuwen has pointed out–into "an emotional and intellectual disposition which affects every experience gives rise to an almost obsessive preoccupation with questions of identity (…). Palestinian identity has been denied and become disrupted, and among the tasks of the poet is reconstructing the identity by reintegrating it into the domains from which it was evicted: time, or the continuity of history, and place, the repossession of the homeland. This reintegration can only be achieved in one way: by recreating the two domains in texts, by enabling their essence to transcend a distorted reality and to return to their natural course of deployment" (Van Leeuwen 1999: 268f.). "In this way, poetry helps to restore and preserve the relations with the homeland, but, conversely, the land also be-

6 Valk 2003: 73-74: "Der Dichter nimmt (im Werk des Novalis) eine besondere Vorrangstellung ein, da er einen geradezu mystischen Zugang zum Goldenen Zeitalter besitzt. Für ihn ist die Einheit der idealen Ursprungssphäre auch in den disparaten Erscheinungen der gegenwärtigen Welt erfahrbar. Der Dichter besitzt die exklusive Gabe des analogischen Blicks und erfaßt in den scheinbar beziehungslosen Phänomenen der empirischen Erfahrungswelt ein verbindendes Element. Er weiß jene geheimnisvollen Chiffren zu entziffern, die allem Irdischen eingeschrieben sind."

comes the main inspirational source of poetry. Here the converging of the text and the land is completed" (Van Leeuwen 1999: 270).

But poetry in Darwish's case goes even a step further. Poetry is a response to a pre-existing writing that is inscribed on the land serving to ascertain the legitimacy of the dominance of the Others: the Hebrew Bible. There are many witnesses to that, one of whom, the American writer William M. Thomson, author of a work *The Land and Book* (1858) was recently rediscovered and discussed by Hilton Obenzinger in his study *American Palestine* (1999). Obenzinger has summarized this and similar works by stressing that "the country was considered strange, but it was a strangeness emanating from divine meanings waiting to be 'read' as they oscillated between sacred ground and biblical text, a strangeness considerably more intense than the mere excitation of the exotic expected to be found in the Orient, one redolent with meanings about the divine and the destiny of 'God's New Israel.' Palestine is 'where the word made-flesh dwelt with men,' as Thomson explains and as a consequence it 'is and must ever be an integral part of the divine Revelation.'" To quote Thomson himself: "In a word, Palestine is one vast tablet whereupon God's messages to men have been drawn and graven deep in living characters by the Great Publisher of glad tidings, to be seen and read by all to the end of time. The Land and the Book–with reverence be it said–constitute the entire and all-perfect text, and should be studied together" (Thomson quoted by Obenzinger 1999: 39). Obenzinger concludes: "American Protestants traveled to Palestine to read this entire, all-perfect text, to engage in a complex interpretive practice of reading a female land inscribed with a male pen that by the coupling of soil and story would provide evidence of faith and providence in a unified, eroticized entity, created by the traveler who has come with great purpose to 'read' it." Meanwhile, an extensive America-Holy Land Project at the Hebrew University has been established, initiated in the early 1970s by Moshe Davis, Yehoshua Ben-Arieh, Robert Handy, and other Israeli and American scholars who tend to view the nineteenth century history of the region as Israeli prehistory, expecting that the proper study of the western "rediscovery" of Palestine and the various pre-Zionist, Christian notions of "Jewish restoration" will prove the historical inevitability of the founding of the Jewish state (Obenzinger 1999:7).

It is true that Mahmud Darwish's public emergence as a poet, which may best be dated to the year 1966, predates the emergence of these debates as well as Edward Said's critique of orientalism and imperialism in the formation of western cultural and power relations in *Orientalism* (1978). Yet Darwish's extended cooperation with cultural and political figures such as Emil Habibi in the framework of the communist periodical *Al-Jadeed*[7] leaves no doubt that he was very early aware of the inseparable entanglement of text and land in the minds of the

7 See Embaló, Neuwirth & Pannewick 2000, s.v. Mahmud Darwish.

dominant society in his country, the Israeli Jews, an awareness that is also affirmed by his later published pre-exilic *Diary of Daily Sadness* from 1973.

In Darwish's view, as he has spelled out at a later stage, therefore, "poetry is essentially to strive to rewrite or to create its own Book of Genesis, to search for beginnings and to interpret myths of creation. It is through these myths that the poet can return to his origins and ultimately touch upon daily life in the present. History and myth have become an unavoidable detour to comprehend the present and to mend the gaps created by the violent usurpation of the land and its textual representations" (quoted by van Leeuwen 1999: 270). The master narrative of the eviction has to be de-narrated.

2.2 Darwish acting as the First Man, the writer of a Scripture

The Palestinian public–however exaggerated their desire to be represented by the poet–perhaps was not entirely arbitrary.

Let us look briefly at the poem that mirrors the above quoted experience of the recuperation of the land, and can indeed be read as a covenantal document. It starts with the line, "Your eyes are thorns piercing my heart" (*ʿUyūnuki shawkatun fī l-qalbi*), and thus obviously draws on experience that is not limited to the mere individual but that reaches deep into literary tradition. The Beloved's gaze at the poet's persona is the violent gaze familiar from the mystical ghazal[8]. The addressee of the ghazal, originally the great unattainable Other, the divine Beloved, has in the post-colonial era been re-incorporated in the image of the likewise unattainable–lost or occupied–homeland. It is therefore in the ghazal mood of addressing a high-ranking unattainable Beloved that the speaker addresses his homeland. But to be able to address "her," he has to first restore her to reality. In 1966, the name "Palestine" was still politically taboo, having been officially abolished with the foundation of the state of Israel. It was likewise taboo for the Palestinians of the West Bank after its annexation by the Kingdom of Jordan. There was nothing called Palestine existing in political reality.

It is no exaggeration to say that the poem *ʿĀshiq min Filasṭīn* re-creates Palestine. The poem is shaped in the standard form of a *qaṣīda* with the sequence of three sections each conveying a different mood: a nostalgic *nasīb* lamenting the loss of a beloved, followed by a restraint description of a movement in space, a journey, *raḥīl*, portraying the poet regaining his mental composure, and culminating in a pathetic *fakhr*, a self-praise confirming the heroic virtues of tribal society. In Darwish's poem, the *nasīb* laments the absence of the homeland and the resulting muteness of her loved ones:

8 See for a detailed discussion of the intertextuality: Neuwirth 1999; see for ghazal in general: Bauer & Neuwirth 2005.

Your words were a song…
But agony encircled the lips of spring.
Like swallows, your words took wing.
Led by love, they deserted the gate of our house
And its autumnal threshold….

Darwish's *rabīl* section that leads to his imagined triumphal union with her presents a prolonged visual pursuit of the Beloved, which leads the poet through various sceneries of exile, suffering, and misery: to the harbor, locus of involuntary emigration, to abandoned hill-tops overgrown with thorn bushes, to the store-rooms of poor peasant houses, to cheap nightclubs, to refugee-camps.

I saw you yesterday at the harbor- a voyager without provisions…
I saw you on briar-covered mountains
- a shepherdess without sheep…
I saw you in wells of water and in granaries
- broken….
I saw you in nightclubs
- waiting on tables…
I saw you at the mouth of the cave,
- drying your orphan rags on a rope
I saw you in stores and streets,
In stables and sunsets
I saw you in songs of orphans and wretches.

The long sequence of visions of the Beloved in the state of need and humiliation eventually comes to a turn when the Beloved presents herself endowed with a clearly erotic emanation—as we know already from the poet's account of his experience at the seaside—as a sleeping beauty, displaying life in its most perfect aesthetic form:

I saw you covered all over with salt and sands,
Your beauty was of earth, of children and jasmine.

With this vision the speaker himself achieves a new state of mind: He regains his composure and swears an oath of absolute devotion to the homeland. He thus concludes—in the understanding of his listeners—a pact, an autobiographical pact so to say, with the Palestinian collective that is to be imagined behind that addressee. This oath, an overtly meta-textual section, placed exactly in the center of the poem, through a complex metaphor presents the process of poetical creation of the Other as a production of a textile, a garment for her made from parts of the body of the writer himself, thus constituting a kind of self-sacrifice:

I swear to you
I shall weave a veil from my eyelashes embroidered with verses for your eyes
And a name, when watered with my heart
Will make the tree spread its branches again
I shall write a sentence on the veil
More precious than kisses and the blood of martyrs
Palestinian she is and will remain.

The speaker in the poem thus acquires a mythical dimension, that of the Biblical Adam, the first man, who was entitled to give names to the newly created beings. Like Adam, he even cedes a part of his body to make the creation of his female companion possible. The new Eve, Adam's companion, who is thus emerging, who receives her name through the poet's creation act, is none other than Palestine[9]. The poem that echoes the Qur'anic creational imperative *Kun fa-yakūn*– "Be – and it is"[10]–is a Palestinian transcript of the Genesis story. The lyrical "I" of the poem is Adam, but at the same time, since he writes down the covenant, he figures as the writer of a new Scripture. This new poetic bestowal of identity on the Beloved, demanding the utmost extent of the poet's devotion, is deemed comparable, even superior to a real, i.e., a bloody sacrifice. It is *aghlā mina l-shuhadā'*. It has redemptive value, as the speaker is well aware when he ranks himself typologically among the bearers of the highest rank in love, the martyrs of love.

3 Exodus: The poet's alter ego: the fighter

Four years after the creation of ʿĀshiq, Darwish left his homeland to join the Arab intellectual elite in Beirut. Here for a second time he had to distance himself from the way his poetry was read, this time from the perusal of his poetry in ideological propaganda allegedly sanctioned by himself as an authoritative voice. It is true that he had during his stay with the Palestinian exiles in Beirut turned to extol the resistance fighter as a hero, a figure that since the beginning of military struggle in the mid-1960s had kindled new hope of recuperating the land. The *fidā'ī* in Darwish's poetry came to be regarded as a redeemer, as a tragic figure who through a highly symbolic act of self-sacrifice leads his people to freedom, without himself participating in it–a hero like the Biblical Moses who led the Israelites in their Exodus to re-settle in the promised land–himself dying before treading on its ground.

The struggle for the land which in the 1960s became manifest in military operations of the *fidā'iyīn*, thus took textual shape with Darwish's placing the fighter in the mythical context of his poetry. The poetical achievement of the creation of a being called "Palestine," i.e., the creation of a nucleus of a "Palestinian *Genesis* story," was thus followed by another act of inventing sacred history: elevating the fighter to the rank of a redeemer figure. It is hardly surprising that Darwish's poetry celebrating the *fidā'ī* was again taken as a "canonical expression" of the new collective experience: to be part of a decisive movement promising liberation, to live the miracle of an Exodus.

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[9] The poem is highly autobiographic since it opens a poetical dialogue in response to a famous earlier poem by the Iraqi poet Sayyab modifying particular poetological views of the earlier poet, see Neuwirth 1999.

[10] *Qur'an* 2:117, 3:47, 16:40, 19:35, 36:82, 40:68.

Reclaiming the land is not an exclusive matter of poetical words. The poetical tradition of Palestine was closely connected with the deeds of fighters and martyrs who had been celebrated in the 1930s as heroes par excellence. The figure of the *shahīd*, the martyr, was the yardstick for the achievement of keeping one's honor. "My land is my honor, either living in dignity or dying for the sake of it": *arḍī ʿirḍī* was the motto of the poets of the 1930s.[11] The power of the poet, however efficient, had to be measured by the power of the fighter. Beginning in the mid-1960s, Palestinian reaction to the situation expressed itself in acts of resistance. The self-dedication of the poet could not claim to be more than a kind of metaphor for the real self-dedication of the fighter. The poet remains alive; he is a martyr only virtually, or in other words: although being himself absent from the real fight, he participates in it through the *shahīd* who is his alter ego. The poet, in turn lends to the *shahīd* his poetical speech, inscribing his deeds into the consciousness of the Palestinian society. Darwish himself states:

> The fighters are the genuine founders of a writing that for a long, long time will have to search for a linguistic equivalent to their heroism and their amazing lives. How can the new writing crystallize and take form in a battle that has such a rhythm of rockets? And how can traditional verse define the poetry now fermenting in the belly of the volcano? (Darwish 1995: 62, Darwish 1986b: 79)

The fighter in Darwish's poetry is portrayed as a hero who through his self-sacrifice qualified as a sacred, superhuman figure, the true lover of the homeland,[12] indeed, her bridegroom, who through his violent death consumes a mythical marriage with her. One of the most overtly mythopoeic poems is *Aʾrās* (1977):

> From the war comes a lover to the wedding-day
> Wearing his first suit
> And enters
> The dance floor as a horse
> Of ardor and carnation
> And on the string of women's joyful trilling he meets Fatima
> And to them sing
> All the trees of places of exile
> And soft kerchiefs of mourning…
> And on the roof of women's joyful trilling come planes
> Planes, planes,
> Snatching the lover from the butterfly's embrace
> And the kerchiefs of mourning
> And the girls sing:
> You have married
> You have married all the girls
> O Muhammad!

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11 See Embaló, Neuwirth & Pannewick 2000: Einleitung.

12 See e.g., "ʿĀʾid ilā Yāfā" (Returning to Yafa) from "Uḥibbuki aw lā uḥibbuki" (I love you or I don't love you), 1972. In: Darwish 1994: 401-405.

You have spent the first night
High on the roof-tiles of Haifa
O Muhammad!
O prince of lovers…[13]

The idea of the mythic wedding of the dying fighter would be unthinkable in isolation from the ghazal tradition. In mythic love poetry the lover has to experience, indeed to welcome, the death of his *ego* in order to attain the desired union with the Beloved. At the same time, in the Palestinian context, the concept of the martyr of love is embedded in a ritual reflecting the most important social rite in the rural milieu. The *shahīd* becomes a bridegroom (*ʿarīs*), who warrants through his marriage the perpetuation of his community.[14] Messianic faculties had been ascribed to the *shahīd* earlier, but the step remained an individual literary device. Darwish involves the martyr into a drama located in the framework of a *rite de passage* and turning loss into redemption. Unlike the traditional Islamic imagination of the martyr, the post-colonial vision is not concerned with a reward in the beyond, his deed being an end in itself. He sacrifices himself, dedicating himself to the Beloved as a *fidāʾī*. Since there is no military gain either, the achievement of the martyr is primarily symbolic. It is the revival of memory, the crossing of the boundaries of gratuitous dreaming and fantasizing toward heroic activism; it is part of an Exodus into the disputed Promised Land.

This new act of canon-generating was interiorized in a unique way by his meanwhile extended community of listeners and readers, who in a strikingly ritual fashion took possession of Darwish's art. Through a kind of translating Darwish's poetical speech into rite, the myth of the *fidāʾī*-redeemer severed itself from poetry and was concretized in daily life. The myth of the freedom fighter as a "dying god," as a figure dying a sacrificial death to redeem, or verbally, "to marry" the mythified Palestine was to be applied to every fighter who died in action. Burials become equal to wedding ceremonies. The ensuing condolence ceremony staged by women rather than the male members of the household betrayed a striking subversion of the customary social order: The patriarchal order–compromised in times of powerlessness–was temporally set completely out of validity. The *ʿurs al-shahīd,* the "marriage of the martyr," until our time has been a powerful rite of commemoration.

4 Leaving the symbolic stage: The Metamorphosis

It is worth noticing that Darwish in the 1990s reconsidered his "poetical youth" and identified his role of the *ʿĀshiq min Filasṭīn* (Lover of Palestine) as a poetic

[13] "Aʾrās from Aʾrās" (Weddings), 1977. In: Darwish 1994; Translation (slightly modified) by Johnson Davies 1980.

[14] See the collection "Aʾrās." In: Darwish 1994: 591ff. Darwish's earliest poem on the shahīd-ʿarīs (from 1964) has been discussed by Neuwirth 2006.

role played during a phase when he had not yet attained his maturity, when he was in a kind of ecstasy or even rapture, that only through a decisive turn in his perception of life could give way to sobriety. In his diwan *Sarīr al-gharība* (The Bed of the Stranger) he confesses:

A Mask of Majnun Layla

I found a mask, and it pleased me
to be my other. I was not
thirty yet and I thought, the limits
of being are the words. I was
sick for Layla like any young man, in whose blood
salt had spread. When she was not
present physically her spiritual image
appeared in everything. She brings me close to
the circuit of the stars. She separates me from my life
on earth. She is not death nor
is she Layla. "I am you,
there is no escape from the blue naught for the last
embrace." The river cured me when I threw myself into it to commit suicide….[15]

Though he is aware that he cannot completely step out of the role of Qays, he feels estranged from it; indeed, his form of existence is estrangement, a consciousness, in which the poet in the conventional sense no longer exists. "The concluding verses of the poem are unique in expressing a total renunciation of the modern self-perception as a subject and in dismissing any essentialist and monolithic understanding of identity, conveying as against that a self-consciousness that does not aspire any more to poethood but only to poetry" (See Milich 2004: 132-136):

I am a being that has never been. I am an idea for a poem
That is without land nor body,
Without son nor father.
I am Qays Layla, I
I am nothing (Darwish 1999b: 122).

The achievement of the poetic creation of Palestine once attained is not necessarily threatened by the transformation of the poet, nor does the poet explicitly attempt to de-narrate its genesis. Yet, his "ex-centric" self-location is, of course, indicative of a new mental condition attained in wider circles within the Palestinian intelligentsia.

It proved more complicate to re-think the second act of invention of sacred history. Darwish had already in the eighties tried to distance himself from the figure of the martyr,[16] claiming the more modest role of their guardian in order to

15 "Sarīr al-gharība" (The Bed of the Stranger). In Darwish 1999b: 121.

16 See e.g. the poems "When the martyrs go to Sleep" and "On the slope, higher than the sea, they slept" from: *Ward aqall* (Fewer Roses) 1986. English translation in: Darwish 2003: 16, 22.

defend them against their relentless exploitation in political propaganda. Speaking to the already martyred heroes, assuming them sleeping, remote from reality, he had consoled them, praising their state of integrity, their aloofness from the realm of propaganda. His "addresses to the martyrs" had been, however, of little avail to the consciousness of the Palestinian public who, since Darwish's once achieved coupling not only of text and land, but also of fighter and poet, had cherished the figure of the martyr closely related to that of the poet as an anchor of hope since they continued to live under siege and to long for redemption.

The poetic creation of the martyr had established himself as a redeemer figure bearing strong mythic characteristics, whose "*hieros gamos*," his "sacred marriage," with the mythic earth of Palestine presupposes divine dimensions. Gods, once established through poetic words, do not die, but have—in order to disappear—to be killed by those whose words created them. About thirty years after the creation of the martyr, in 2002, Darwish turns the hierarchy of ranks upside down and exposes himself to the devastating critique of his poetical creature, the martyr. He allows the martyr to correct his perception of martyrdom and tell him that his entire martyr poetry was superfluous, was nothing but idle noise. The martyr thus steps out of the creation of the poet, rejecting any part in poetic imagination. To quote from Darwish's divan *Ḥālat Ḥiṣār*[17]*:*

> The martyr besieges me when I live a new day
> He asks me: Where have you been?
> Return the words you gave me as presents
> To the dictionaries,
> Relieve the sleepers from the buzzing echo.

Step by step, the figure of the martyr as a poetic creation is de-constructed. Thus, the inverted social order—where not men but women determine the social life staging a wedding instead of a funeral—needs to be revised:

> The martyr warns me: Do not believe their ululations
> Believe my father when he looks at my picture, crying
> Why did you change turn, my son, walking on ahead of me
> I was to be first.

Martyrdom is no longer a social rite with redemptive power, but an individual act motivated by personal pride and defiance of despair:

> To resist means: to be confident of the health
> Of the heart and of the testicles, to be confident of your incurable malady
> The malady of hope

Martyrdom is an absolutely private endeavor: it resembles the transition from real time and real space into imagined time and space familiar from the Islamic ritual prayer. That interpretation is suggested by the concluding verse of the sec-

[17] "Ḥālat Ḥiṣār" (Situation of siege) in Darwish 2002: 98 ff. English Translation of extracts by Elbendary 2002.

tion on the martyr which echoes the concluding phrase of Islamic ritual prayer, *al-salāmu ʿalaykum* (Peace be upon you). But whereas in prayer those words–uttered in the end and addressed to the real or imagined co-performers–mark the re-entrance of the praying person from imagined sacred time and space into reality, the martyr bids farewell for good: he addresses the "nothing" that has become of him: he bids farewell to his shadow.

> And in what remains of the dawn – I walk outside myself
> And in what remains of the night – I hear the echoes of footsteps within me
> Peace be upon him who shares my alertness at the ecstasy of the light,
> The light of butterflies
> In the darkness of this tunnel
> Peace be upon my shadow.

By presenting a wholesale de-construction of the poetical image of the martyr, Darwish ends his long personal history of a mythopoeic poet and thus concludes his role as a liminal figure though he does not cease to reflect collective, i.e., political, issues in his poetry. But he certainly converts or more precisely: he concludes his long impending conversion from a sort of "magician poet" submersing vicariously for his community in mythic time and space, to a more secular and socially independent role that comes close to that of the modern free-lance writer. Following his success in creating a *Genesis* story and an *Exodus* drama for his homeland Palestine, Darwish turned to write his non-territorial, poetic homeland. Similar to the Islamic mystic who considers the entire existence on earth to be an exile of the soul, and similar to the religious Jew who views the entire world to be in exile, the Palestinian Mahmud Darwish, very much like Paul Celan, the Poet of Exile *par excellence*, perceives the world as an exile-home, "a land made of words." "In the end we will ask"–he says in the poem *Fī l-masāʾ al-akhīr ʿalā hādhihi l-arḍ* (On the Last Evening on This Earth, 1992): "Was Andalusia/ here or there? On this earth … or in poetry?" The acceptance of this totally revised self-image as part of the poet's "meta-literary" autobiography by Palestinian society will, of course, not last be a matter of the political developments in the future.

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