

[I Discovered That the Earth Was Fragile and the Sea Light]

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Source: *boundary 2*, Vol. 26, No. 1, 99 Poets/1999: An International Poetics Symposium (Spring, 1999), pp. 81-83

Published by: [Duke University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/303855>

Accessed: 25-03-2015 18:21 UTC

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words; and it doesn't seem necessary to find something in the world that would explain them.

(Translated from German by the author and C. B.)

Mahmoud Darwish

. . . I discovered that the earth was fragile and the sea light; I discovered that language and metaphor are not enough to provide a place for the place. The geographical part of History is stronger than the historical part of geography. Unable to find my place on earth, I tried to find it in History. And History cannot be reduced to a compensation for a lost geography. It is also a point from which to observe the shadows of self and other, graspable in a more complex human journeying. History awoke a sense of irony in me. This lightens the weight of the nationalist worry somewhat. And so one sets out on an absurd journey. Is that just artistic cunning, a simple borrowing? Or is it, to the contrary, despair incarnating itself? The answer has no importance whatsoever. What matters is that I was able to find a greater lyrical capacity, and a passage from the relative to the absolute. An opening allowing me to inscribe the national on the universal, so that Palestine not limit itself to Palestine, but that it may found its aesthetic legitimacy in a vaster human space.

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I believe that it is not only Palestine that is a poetic alibi. Every subject is an alibi. Which brings us back to the fundamental question: where does poetry live? In the subject it addresses or in its aesthetic independence in relation to its subject? I believe that the theme of Palestine, which is simultaneously a call for and a promise of freedom, risks transforming itself into a poetic cemetery if it remains locked inside its textuality, inside the limits that are the "self" and the "Other," inside delimited space and the historical moment. In other words, if the poetic project does not contain its own aspirations, its own proper object, which, when all is said and done, is but the accomplishment of poetry itself. Thus my postulate that every subject, even that of a sanctified Palestine, is finally an alibi.

It is up to the poet to produce a personal aesthetic. If this aesthetic is open enough, it will set a horizon for the homeland; if it is too narrow, the homeland will feel constrained in it. A homeland cannot be reduced to what

it is objectively. Because poetry opens the homeland onto the human infinite, on condition that the poet be able to take it there. In order to achieve this, the poet has to create his own myths. By this I don't mean the myth proceeding from another, already known one, but the one born of the poem's construction, partaking of its own form and universe. The one that transforms concrete language into the language of poetry.

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With the disappearance of our country we suddenly found ourselves relegated to a pre-Genesis. And so our poets have had to write our own Genesis starting from the mythic one of the Other. For one has to be aware that Palestine has already been written. The Other has done it in his manner, through the narrative of a birth which no one dreams of denying. A Creation narrative that has become one of the sources of knowledge for humankind: the Bible. Given this, how could we have written a less mythic narrative? The problem of Palestinian poetry is that it set out without extra resources, without historians, without anthropologists; it therefore had to equip itself with all the necessary baggage needed to defend its right to exist.

This forces the Palestinian to traverse the myth in order to arrive at the familiar. I am a poet and I am before all the poet of the familiar human details. But I have never stopped arguing with the consecrated version of Creation. An argument that has forced me into a mythic writing of the quotidian real, of the Palestinian present. It is a cycle that moves from ordinary dailiness to the mythical, and which can be accomplished only by a return to its origins. Even when I refer directly to the myth, my obsession is to write that which is simple, familiar, banal. I am trying to humanize the Palestinian text. Myth is not always the enemy of man. Not always. Here it is but one aspect of the cultural struggle to write the same place. We Palestinian poets write in close proximity to the Book of Genesis. In hailing distance of a finished, definitive, and consecrated myth. Maybe we will find our way in an aesthetic of the quotidian, in the most simple human questionings. This does not seem like a contradiction to me. Our lyricism can move in the space of myth, even in that of the epic. Today we find ourselves in a hybrid place, at a median point between the historical and the mythic. Our situation, our very existence partakes of both.

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My last four books of poems are part of an ambitious project I hope I'm able to complete. It's the project of a lyrical epic, of the liberation of poetic language toward epic horizons. History would serve as a scene through which peoples, civilizations, and cultures could circulate freely. I am on a quest for my identity according to the laws of crossbreeding, of the shock and cohabitation of all identities. I want this hymn to take root in the open space of history. I don't know where this quest will lead me, but I know that its origin is the multiplicity of cultural origins. In such a project, poetry comes up against cultural racism and rejects any culture based on purity of blood. Aren't we the children of a region that from time immemorial has been the theatre of interactions, both positive and negative?

I have found a terra firma saturated with history. I draw my strength from it because I look through the prisms of past and future. Thus the present appears less fragile, more like a passage toward a more certain history. Standing on said earth, when I observe something tragic I also see its temporary aspect, for human beings are finally the product of this tragedy crisscrossed with absurdities.

Rome, despite all its brutal attributes, will not dominate the earth again. I am one of the inhabitants of the suburbs of Rome; it is with irony that I watch the emperor pass by—and continue my story.

(Original translation from Arabic and Hebrew by Elias Sanbar and Simone Bitton; adapted and translated from French by Pierre Joris)

Haroldo de Campos

The Brazilian Jaguar

The couched Brazilian Jaguar

—T. S. Eliot

Brazilian poetry, like some mythological heroes, never had a true infancy (infant, one that cannot speak). It was born already adult, operating (fluently speaking) a universal code: the Baroque, a very sophisticated and elaborate language. Our first great poets were Baroque and multilingual: Gregorio do Mattos Guerra (1636–1696), a virulent satirist nicknamed “The Mouth of Hell,” but also a gifted lyricist, wrote in Portuguese and Spanish, including in some of his poems African and Indian words. Botelho