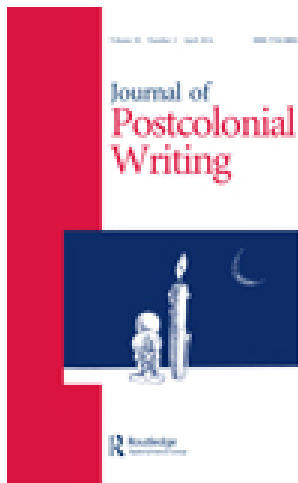


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“Gradual Exile” by Mahmoud Darwish

Translated and Introduced by Taoufiq Sakhkhane*

College of Arts and Human Sciences, Fes-Sais, Morocco

Foreword by Taoufiq Sakhkhane

Very few poets can claim to embrace in the fabric of their work the systole and diastole of the times, but Mahmoud Darwish stands today as a poet who encapsulated the experiences of many Palestinians living under the yoke of colonialism, while also expressing universal human values such as dignity, freedom, equity and love within his poetry. Born to a Sunni family in Al-Birwa near Akka in 1941, Mahmoud Darwish’s story comprises many interweaving narratives of homelessness, deracination, assassination, de-territorialization and, of course, nostalgia for the gleeful years of childhood and the mythical times when the land could spell out its own names. When he was 7 years old, a group of Zionists attacked his village, killing many of its inhabitants and sending the rest, Darwish included, into a permanent state of exile in neighbouring countries. Out of this state of uprootedness, of turning a whole people into a nation of exiles and dispossessed, were born Darwish’s first poems, that grew in number and sophistication along with the places and years of his exile. Thus, from Lebanon, Egypt, Moscow and back to Ramallah in the West Bank, Darwish turned the figure of “the Palestinian”, and by extension that of Palestine, into the paragon of exile. Against this backdrop, the *Quasida* (poem) emerges as the only possible haven that can protect humankind from the ravages of history, keeping alive the dreams and aspirations of whole generations of Arabs.

Through the perspicacity of his style, the neatness of his imagery and the multiplicity of his resources, Mahmoud Darwish charted the trajectory of Arab consciousness as it has developed since the conquest of Palestine and the creation of the Zionist state in 1948. The latter event, known as the *Nakba*, threw Palestinian identity into question: for those who survived Zionist pogroms and deportation and who moved to neighbouring countries, the dangers of diaspora could only be fought by nourishing the dream of returning one day to the homeland. As for those who stayed in Israel and became Israeli citizens, the plight of assimilation loomed equally large and was vociferously voiced by Darwish in his poem “Identity Card”, which begins with the defiant statement of selfhood: “Record! I am an Arab”. Later, with the defeat of the Arabs by Israel in 1967 and the dramatic collapse of Arab dreams, Darwish turned to a dissection of the Arab self to find out, to his disillusionment and stupefaction, that the Arabs had, as the poet Nizar Quabani would later claim, long been dead. Darwish himself passed away in 2008 after an incredibly fruitful career, during which he published over 30

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volumes of poetry, 8 books of prose and served on the editorial boards of a number of magazines, including *Al Karmel Magazine*. This piece, "Gradual Exile" [*Al Manfa Al Mutadarij*] first appeared in *Al Karmel* in Arabic in 1999. Through the prism of imagery and the flesh of his words, it seeks to reflect his sense of disillusionment at his unceasing state of exile. One exile only leads to another, and it seemed to Darwish that language was his only refuge in the teeth of the vicissitudes of the time. It is translated into English here for the first time, in the hope that a wider body of readers will find within his words a refuge of their own.

Gradual Exile

The road has not yet come to a pass to claim, so to speak, that the journey has started. For the end of the road may lead me to the beginning of another road. Thus, does the dichotomy of exit and entry stand open onto the unknown.

I was six years old when I embarked on what I had not known, when a modern army overwhelmed an infancy that received from the Western side, wafting across wheat and corn fields, the odour of the salty sea and the glow of a gold-tinged sunset. Swords turned into ploughs only in prophets' testaments. And our ploughs broke down in securing the perpetual relationship between good countrymen and the only land they had known – the land they were born on – in a war against foreigners who were armed to the teeth with aircrafts and tanks that provided their narrative of distant longing for the "land of salvation" the legitimacy of power. The Book fed into power and power required the Book.

From the very beginning, the struggle over the past and symbols went hand in hand with the struggle over the land. From the very beginning, too, it was David's picture that was clad in Goliath's breastplate while it was Goliath's picture that carried David's stone.

However, a six-year-old child hardly needs anyone to impress on him the lessons of history to take in the weird destinies that this widespread night, stretching out from a village at one of the Galilee hills to a North lit by a countryside moon hanging over the mountains, lay open: a whole people was being uprooted from its warm bread, from its fresh present to be relegated to a forthcoming past. There ... in Southern Lebanon, ramshackle tents were set up for us. And from now onwards, our names will change. Thenceforth, we will become only one and the same thing, making no allowance for differences. From now on, we will bear the same customs seals: refugees.

"What is a refugee, Dad?"

"Nothing. Nothing. You will not understand."

"What is a refugee, Granddad? I want to understand."

"To be no more a child."

I was no longer a child as soon as I began to distinguish between reality and fiction, between my present state and what I used to be a few hours back. Is it true that time breaks up like glass? I was no more a child the moment I perceived that the Lebanese camps are the true reality and Palestine the fiction. I was no more a child when the flute struck its cords of nostalgia. As the moon waxes over the tree branches, dubious letters conjured up recollections of a rectangular house amidst which were a strawberry tree, an unmanageable horse, a pigeon's cone and a well. Along its fence, there

was a bee-comb whose honey tasted pungent, and two grass paths branching out to the school and the church, and a location that went beyond the bounds of my language ...

“Will it take too long, Granddad?”

“It’s but a short journey. Soon we will go back.”

I had not known the word “exile” until my words increased. The word “return” was our sole linguistic bread: going back to place, to time; going back from the temporary to the ever-lasting, from the present to the past and future together, from the abnormal to the normal, from a shanty house to a brickwork lodging. So, Palestine became everything else, and it became “Paradise lost” until future notice ...

When we stole our way through the borders, we found out nothing of our monuments and previous existence. Israeli bulldozers had so reshaped the place that our existence was part of the Roman relics to which we are barred admission. Hence, when coming back to the “lost paradise”, the little returnee found nothing to welcome him but the concrete paraphernalia of absence, and a road open to the gates of hell.

There was no need for anyone to impress on me the lessons of history, I the present/absent. However, Simone Bitton, the filmmaker, would go fifty years later to my hometown to film my first well, the first water of my language, only to come up against the resistance of the new settlers. The following dialogue with the superintendent upon the Israeli settlement records some of what had taken place:

“The poet was born here.”

“Me, too. When my father got here, there were just relics. They gave us tents and later huts. I spent twenty years to have a house of my own. And now you want me to give it back to him?”

“What I want is to film these relics, relics of what remains of his house. He is your father’s age. Are you not ashamed?”

“Do not be naïve. They want the right ‘to come back’.”

“Do you fear that they may get it?”

“Yes.”

“And that they would turn you away just as we turned them away.”

“Personally, I did not turn away anyone. We got here in trucks and they offloaded us and told us to make do in this place. But, who is this Darwish?”

“He writes about this place, about the cypress tree, about these trees and the well.”

“What well? There are eight wells here. How old was he?”

“Six years.”

“What about the church? Does he write about the church?” There was a church here but it was destroyed. They kept the school for the sake of the milchy cows and bulls.

“Have you turned the school into a stable?”

“Why not?”

“Indeed why not, after all? Did they have a horse? Are there still any fruit trees?”

“Of course. When we were children, we grew upon its fruits: fig and strawberries and everything that God blessed this earth with. All my childhood lies in those trees.”

“And his childhood, too.”

It was not a desert then, nor was it a desolate place. A child is born into another’s bed, drinks his milk, eats his figs and strawberries, and keeps growing up in his stead, fearing his return, and without the least sense of guilt because the crime was the work of other hands and the outgrowth of fate. Can the one space embrace a common life?

Can two dreams move along freely under the same sky? Or is the first child doomed to grow up alone without a homeland and without an exile, being neither here nor there?

My grandfather would die out of anguish, observing his life being snatched away from him and the land that he had irrigated with his own sweat to bequeath later upon his children running into havoc. He would die because of the odour of geography shattered upon the relics of time and because the right to go back from one side of the road to the other could not be realised unless an absence of a thousand years elapsed – time enough for the correspondence of the fable with modernity to come full circle. As to me, I would look for “the brotherhood of peoples” in an endless dialogue, through the cell gate with a jailor who never stops believing in my absence.

“What are you watching over, then?”

“My anxious self.”

“What are you anxious about, Sir?”

“I fear a ghost that keeps tracking me down. The more I triumph over it, the more visible it waxes.”

“Perhaps because the ghost is the trace of the victim upon the earth.”

“There is no victim but me. I am the victim.”

“But you are strong and powerful. You are the jailor. Why do you grudge the victim its status?”

“To justify my deeds, to be always right, to attain the state of sainthood and to get rid of the brunt of regret.”

“Why do you keep me a captive here? Do you think I am a ghost?”

“Not exactly. However, you keep the ghost’s name.”

Perhaps poetry is what keeps the name vibrant in its ever-alert tendency to name the first elements and things in a game that does not seem innocent to whoever besieges his being by seizing completely upon the space and its memory, the historical and the supernatural, all in the same breath. Perhaps poetry, not unlike dreams, does not tell lies or truths. However, the recurrent experience of detention has opened my eyes to the aesthetic as well as practical aspects of poetry. No, poetry was not an innocent game as it points to a being that was not supposed to be in the first place.

However, exile is blossoming out once more like weeds under the shade of olive trees, and it is up to the bird alone to provide the distant sky with the point of contact with a land that was deprived of its heavenly attributes.

Very few landscapes possess that variegated splendour that distinguishes our land from other parts of the world – the close-knit relationship between the real and the mythic. Every stone has its own narrative, and every tree tells of the struggle between space and time. The more beauty weighs heavily upon me, the more I feel the lightness of the stranger in me. I am present, absent and prisoner, half-citizen and a refugee fully bereft of his rights. Roaming the streets of Hebron, at the bottom side of Mount Al Karmel that stretches out between the sea and the land, I became thirsty to expand the space of land with as much freedom as I can only find in a poem that takes me to the prison cell. For ten years I have not been allowed to leave Hebron, and since the scope of Israeli occupation has widened since 1967, the scope of my residence has decreased: I am not allowed to leave my room from sunset to sunrise. Moreover, I have to present my credentials at the police station at 4 pm every day. As to my own evening, my private evening, I have lost that a long time ago: policemen have the right to knock at my door any time they like to check my presence!

I was not present. I was obliged to go back to my gradual exile gradually since the borders of the motherland and the exile became blurred and merged with the clouds of meaning. I had the intuition that language could fix what was broken and put together what was asunder. Perhaps my poetic “here”, which changed from a horizon into a limitation, needed to outstretch the logic of the distant.

However, the distance between internal and external exile was not completely visible. As a matter of fact, it was metaphorical since this country, semantically speaking, was smaller than its space. In the external exile I perceived how close I was to the opposite distant, how “there” was here too. Nothing was personal any longer as it sends back to the general. Nothing, too, was general any more for it interconnects with the personal. The journey would be longer on more than one road and would mostly be taken on shoulders. A banned identity would become problematic as it cannot be boiled down to questions of emigration and return. We do not know who the immigrant is: us or the motherland. And the motherland lies inherent in us with all the particulars of its landscape, and its image evolves in association with the concept of its opposite. Everything will be accounted for through its opposite. Many wounded daffodil flowers on the temporary soil of margin would spring up. Language will take the place of reality, and the poem will look for its myth in the entirety of human experience, and exile will become literature, or part of the literature of human loss, not to blow out the fire of the special tragedy, but to become part of the general human history. However, the Israelis would track down this status. They would say that it is they who are exiles – the exiles who have come back – and that Palestinians are not exiles, after they have returned to live in their Arab habitat! Once more the victim would be dispossessed of his name. As the special victim has the right to create his victim, the special exile has, too, the right to create his exile!

I was lucky enough, more than a quarter of a century later, to see a part of my country, Gaza, which I had only perceived in the poems of its late poet Mou’ine Bsisso who turned it into his own paradise. The way to it through the Sinai desert was desolate, dotted with desert bushes here and there, hot palm trees, a memorable tank and a sea to the north. As to my feelings, they were arranged at times from the perspective of sober reason, and at other times were the subject of the uncertainty of someone who knows the difference between the road and the objective. There were too many palm trees at Al Aarish. Here I am getting closer to the unknown which I hoped would last longer. However, the power of consciousness upon the heart loses its hold gradually.

“Let’s go before it gets dark.”

“Wait”, my friend, the Minister of Culture told me. “The motherland is at hand. It is what you are undergoing right now. It is this double sense of awe and excitement that you are going through.”

“Perhaps”, I told him, “it is this evening wherein the dream gets ready to become more real.”

I have no dreams right now. From here starts new Palestine; from this Israeli fence. A military jeep, a flag, and a soldier who asked our escort in a drawling Arabic: “What do you have with you?” He told him that there were a minister and a poet. I eschewed the cameras of the photographers seeking to capture the happiness of those making their long-craved homecoming to paradise. The lights of the settlements and the fences of the Israeli army lying at the sides of the roads seared my sight. The first thing that

shocked me was the breaking of geography and the distortion of the map. For every surprise there is a pat retort: this is the beginning. Gaza and Jericho first. We are at the beginning of the road, at the beginning of hope.

I could not get to Jericho. How can I then get to Aljalil, my hometown? This could only be done upon a number of conditions which he, Emile Habibi, was embarrassed to transmit. What he had not predicted was that he would leave two years later and that his funeral would grant me a sorrowful opportunity to cherish a short return to Aljalil: I was allowed a three-day mandate to attend his funeral and visit my mother's house! And there I was overexcited with the sensation of being back home for it was from here that I left and it is to here that I came back. And I perceived how man can be born once more: the place was my poem.

I did not need anything to make good my cherished death at the climax of this birth. But I perceived, as I missed the consummation of the circle, that the separation of the myth from reality still needed more of the past and that liberation of reality from the myth still needed more of the future. As to the present, it was no more than a visit after which the visitor restores his delicate equilibrium between an inevitable exile and an inevitable motherland. So that the one cannot be defined against the other, and vice versa, for in every fatherland there is exile, and in every exile there is a poetry-made home.

And I have not come back yet. The road has not come to a pass to claim metaphorically that the journey has started.

Notes on contributor

Taoufiq Sakhkhane is Assistant Professor in the Department of English at the College of Arts and Human Sciences, Fes-Sais, Morocco. He is a translator of books from English and French into Arabic, including Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*; Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*; Paul Bowles, *Without Stopping*; Patrick Modiano, *L'Horizon*; and from Arabic into English, such as Ibrahim Nasrallah, *The Birds of Caution* (forthcoming). Taoufiq Sakhkhane is also the author of *Spivak and Postcolonialism: Exploring Allegations of Textuality* (2012).