

Mahmoud Darwish: Poetry's State of Siege

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Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish often wrote under siege: He wrote under the military government of the nascent State of Israel, when he was required to appear before government officials to prove that he had not left Haifa and was later imprisoned for leaving Haifa without permission in order to read poems at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He wrote in Beirut, that in 1982 was bombarded and besieged by the IDF; and he wrote during the Israeli incursion in Ramallah in 2002. Besides these real-time sieges, his poetry repeatedly returned to the moment of the arch-siege, to his village Al-Birweh, which was destroyed in 1948 when he was seven years old. He wrote about his family's exile in Lebanon and their return as infiltrators a year later—or as “present absentees”¹—to his non-existent village in the Galilee: “I didn't understand why they destroyed this world, and who destroyed it. I was a refugee in Lebanon, and now I am a refugee in my homeland.”²

With his multifaceted personal and family story, Darwish represents the “state” of the Palestinian in the second half of the twentieth century—continuously in exile and under siege: exile from the Galilee to Lebanon in 1948, return to his destroyed village in the Galilee and life as a present absentee, life as a Palestinian citizen of Israel under the military government, departure for exile in the Palestinian diaspora, joining the PLO, the siege on Beirut and the exit from it, life in Tunis, the life of the exile in Paris, living in Ramallah after the establishment of the Palestinian Authority, and living in Amman. His broad personal experience and its connection to so many of his people's experiences have established him as a national poet.

Perhaps Mahmoud Darwish sought to break the siege with his poetry and believed in poetry's power to stand up to armies and to reality. Yet he admitted, more than once, that poetry was defeated by reality. In a poem addressed to the poet Samih al-Qasim, called “I called you a narcissus entwined around my heart,”

he wrote ironically “Would you believe that poems are still stronger than planes?”³ Darwish did not simply attempt to defeat planes with poetry, but rather believed that if, as the historically defeated side, he did not tell his story, not only would his villages be erased, but so would the name of each village and its story. His story would be erased not only in the consciousness of the erasers, but also in the world’s consciousness, in the consciousness of his people, and finally within his own consciousness. And then the defeat would be absolute.

For the poet, the battle for memory is often no less important than the battle on the ground, because a lack of memory obliterates any reason to fight on the ground. This insight is best seen in the title of Darwish’s book about the siege of Beirut: *Memory for Forgetfulness*. In our age of forgetting and obliteration, the victors continuously labor to blot out the memory of the vanquished. In recent months, we have even seen attempts to promulgate laws that would forbid the utterance of the word *nakba* (catastrophe) or of Arabic place names in Israel. Facing such determination to erase memory, one must at least allow “memory for forgetfulness.”

Darwish presents the forgetfulness of the defeated in the poem, “The Eternity of the Cactus,” in *Why Did You Leave the Horse Alone?* through a father’s words to his son during the Palestinian catastrophe of 1948: “You will grow up, / my son, and tell those who inherit their guns / the story of the blood upon the iron...”⁴

Similarly, Darwish wrote in “Counterpoint: For Edward W. Said,” in *Almond Blossoms and Beyond*: “He was the last hero in that epic, / defending the rights of Troy / [to share the story].”⁵

Darwish, in describing Said, is in a sense also describing himself: He is struggling in the name of the vanquished, the Trojans, to tell the story that Homer did not tell, in a very non-Homeric reality. In *State of Siege*, Darwish announces to Homer that the fate of Ramallah is different than that which he knew in Greece: “No Homeric echoes for anything ... / only a digging up of a comatose state / under the ruins of an encroaching Troy.”⁶ Ramallah is the “future Troy,” whose enemies have besieged it in order to destroy it. Nevertheless, the breadth and volume of the Homeric plot cannot be applied to Ramallah, since no *Iliad* or *Odyssey* will be written about it. Precisely because the *Odyssey* cannot be written in Ramallah, Darwish has written fragments of poems. Darwish senses that if the sons of this future Troy do not write their narrative, they will disappear from history and will only be known through the history of the victors: through the Homer appointed by the Israelis. If they do write, Darwish posits, their narrative has a chance of overcoming that of the victors—through its beauty, or perhaps through its ability to convince the readers that they were in the right.

What is poetry in “state of siege” and how does a poet write in a “state of siege”? What are poetry’s obligations when under siege and what are its means of escape? *State of Siege* is the title of Darwish’s book of poems, and the time and location which appear on the front of the book relate to a specific siege: “January 2002, Ramallah.” In Hebrew, the word “*matzav*” (state or situation), or more precisely, that word preceded by the definite article, “*ha-matzav*” (the situation) has become a code word for Israeli life today and the despair it engenders. At the same time, however, it is also a neutralized code, which refrains from assigning blame. The Palestinian state of siege is different: it is not a mere complaint about a situation whose perpetrators are unknown, but rather the confrontation with situation whose perpetrators are known. The situation’s ongoing existence, until it changes from a state of momentary crisis to a permanent state, makes coping with it difficult. The state of siege is firstly depicted as swallowing up all other times and states, the past and the future, wiping away the memory of the possibility of “a normal state,” if there ever was such a thing, and also as demanding the submissiveness of poetry, its silence, or its being silenced.

In *Memory for Forgetfulness*, Darwish wrote at great length, in prose rather than poetry, about the inability to write poetry in a state of siege. He explained that being involved in the siege makes it impossible to be engrossed in literature: “I halt my quest for figurative language. I bring my quest for meaning to a complete stop, because the essence of war is to degrade symbols and bring human relations, space, time, and the elements back to a state of nature, making us rejoice over the water gushing on the road from a broken pipe. Water under these conditions comes to us like a miracle.”⁷

In an interview, Darwish discussed the difficulty of writing poetry in Ramallah: “Poetry requires rest. The situation in Ramallah does not allow me that luxury. Being under occupation, under siege, does not provide inspiration for poetry. Nevertheless, I cannot choose the reality I live in, and that is the main problem of Palestinian literature: We cannot free ourselves from historical events.”⁸

Memory for Forgetfulness opens with the need for a cup of coffee, juxtaposed against the difficulty that the siege and the unremitting bombardment create for a person who wants to make a cup of coffee on a gas burner near a window exposed to bombers and snipers, when even the water supply cannot be counted on. Darwish declares: “I want the aroma of coffee. I need five minutes. I want a five-minute truce for the sake of coffee.”⁹ During the siege of Ramallah, Darwish will want a truce for reasons that are, perhaps, more serious than coffee:

It's a truce after a truce—to test the teachings:
 are warplanes needed to plow the land?
 We told them: a truce—to test intentions.
 Some particles of peace might sneak into our hearts
 inspiring us to adopt poetic means
 to come to terms for the things we love.
 They answer: “But don't you realize
 that such a peace with the self
 would fling open the doors of our fortress to
hijazi and nahawandi musical modes?”
 We said: “So what? And after that?”¹⁰

Instead of a military confrontation, in which the poet does not stand a chance, he wants a poetry contest between Palestinians and Israelis. This way, he can fulfill his dream as a poet, perhaps of every poet, of transforming poetry into a touchstone of reality.

The Israeli response, which Darwish imagined to his request for a truce, also comes from the realm of poetry, albeit from song, and it is a refusal. This rejection of reconciliation derives from the Israelis' cultural fear of *maqams*, the Arabic musical scales. Darwish depicts the Israelis as living voluntarily inside a fortress with closed gates; they too are besieged, no less than their prisoners, because they too are held within the walls that enclose their prisoners. In this sense Darwish understands both his own siege and the Israelis' fortification, as the result, in part, of the Israeli fear of Arab culture. As such, the siege is an Orientalist act, and in this sense, an Israeli weakness. In *State of Siege*, Darwish devotes a poem to an “Orientalist”:

Let's presume I'm stupid:
 I don't play golf, I don't understand new technology;
 I can't fly an airplane—
 Is this justification to rob me of my life and then
 to live on top of it?
 If you were not you and I were not I
 we might be friends,
 even agreeing to our need for a certain stupidity.
 For hath not the stupid one “*heart, bread,*
and eyes full of tears,” like the Jew
 in *The Merchant of Venice*?¹¹

In one of the first poem fragments in *State of Siege*, Darwish proposes another idea that links the siege to culture: “This siege won’t end until we teach our enemies / a few odes from our pre-Islamic days.”¹² I must admit that years ago these very words tempted and even commanded me to delve into Darwish’s poetry. Initially, their charm lay in their proposal to break the siege by means of culture, in seeing the pre-Islamic tradition of Arabic poetry as an avenue toward reconciliation, if it could be shared by Arabs and Israelis. On second thought, I wondered whether Darwish was not forgetting the place of the Jews in Arabic culture, from the poetry of the Jahaliyya and the Judeo-Arab poet A-Samawal to the twentieth century and the Judeo-Iraqi poet Anwar Shaul, who wrote under the name Ibn A-Samawal, as a linking chain of Judeo-Arab poets. Why, I asked myself, does Darwish speak of us as if we were outside Arabic culture? Then I remembered that A-Samawal and Ibn A-Samawal had never entered the Israeli fortress, and that we indeed had to learn anew from Darwish: “a few odes from our pre-Islamic days.”¹³ In this sense, the state of siege of Israeli poetry, as Darwish understood, is the refusal to read the poetry of the Jahaliyya.

Unlike most national authors, Darwish did not try to hold his country with its language and its history above a maelstrom of identities: “I am a product of all the civilizations that have passed through the country—Greek, Roman, Persian, Jewish, Ottoman. Each powerful civilization passed through and left something behind. I am the son of all these fathers but belong to one mother. Does that mean my mother is a whore? My mother is this land that absorbed them all, and was both witness and victim.”¹⁴

He explained that he was “also the son of the Jewish civilization that existed in Palestine,” and accordingly, when there will be reconciliation between the Palestinians and the Jews, “the Jew will not be ashamed to find an Arab element in himself, and the Arab will not be ashamed to declare that he incorporates Jewish elements.”¹⁵ Just as Darwish embraced the Bible (which he knew in its original Hebrew) and the New Testament as dominant sources of modern Arabic poetry, alongside the Quran and the poetry of the Jahaliyya, he proposed that the Hebrew poet turn to the poetry of the Jahaliyya.¹⁶ In this sense, in order for the poetry of the Jahaliyya to again become “ours,” and not the property of some foreign other, we must study it anew.

The hope for an end to the siege, which appears in several of Darwish’s poems, is fleeting and unfulfilled. Therefore, Darwish labored to describe the siege itself, as it fills the lives of the endlessly besieged. In fragments of lines in *State of Siege*, it is as though Darwish is reminding Homer that he was unable to write an epic in

Ramallah: "Under siege, / life is measured between the memory of its beginning / and the oblivion of its end ..."17 It is here that we find the forgetfulness and the confusion about time that the siege generates among the besieged, and which also appear in the subtitle of *Memory for Forgetfulness: [The Time:] Beirut, [The Place:] August*.

Black coffee has a role also in *State of Siege*. Paradoxically, this time the besieged offer coffee to the besiegers, as a symbol of humanity, to remind the besiegers that they too are human beings, just like the besieged: "You, standing at our thresholds, come in, / sip some Arab coffee with us! / You may feel you're as human as we are."18 The poem observes the damage to humanity caused by the besiegers, who are themselves trapped within the siege. Yet it does not end with this hospitable invitation that is generous to the point of absurdity. Rather, the poem ends with a reversal, sending the besiegers far away, reminding us that even the besieged no longer feel like human beings:

You! At the thresholds of our houses,
Vacate our mornings,
so we may be *certain*
we're as human as you are.¹⁹

As a result, the siege depletes the humanity of both the besiegers and the besieged, but without creating a false symmetry between them. In face of this hopelessness, *State of Siege* opens with the declaration, "We nurse hope,"²⁰ with the understanding that there is no hope under siege unless you raise it, among the unemployed and the imprisoned, among the intentions and in the shadow of ruined orchards.

Memory for Forgetfulness was written in Paris after Darwish left Beirut and it describes a single day under siege. Darwish depicts a kind of negotiation with the Israelis about the exit of the Palestinian Liberation Organization from Beirut during the siege: "We said we'd leave. 'By sea?' they asked. 'By sea,' we said ... 'But first they must break the siege of the sea. They must clear the last path for the last thread of our blood.'"21 Palestinian life in Lebanon after 1948, with nowhere to return to, is paradoxical, as everyone reminds the Palestinian refugees of their double lack of belonging, saying: "*You are not going there, and you don't belong here*. Between these two negations this generation was born ..."22 Thus, one cannot call 1982 the beginning of the siege but rather its tragic and paradoxical continuation, because after 1948 the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon "were still being born without a reason, growing up for no reason, remembering for no reason, and being put under siege for no reason."²³

In *Memory for Forgetfulness*, Darwish describes how he became a poet seeking the past and how he searched for the moments when he was a child on the beaches of Lebanon after he and his family were exiled from the Galilee, after the beginning of the siege but before he understood that his life was under siege, perhaps in his last moment of innocence: “And I had grown up. I had become a poet searching for the boy that used to be in him, whom he had left behind some place and forgotten. The poet had grown older and didn’t permit the forgotten boy to grow up.”²⁴

Darwish wrote about his childhood also in *Almond Blossoms and Beyond*:

I always thought the place was identified
by the mothers and the aroma of sage.

No one said to me,
this place is called a country,
around the country are borders,
and beyond the borders is another place,
called *diaspora* and *exile* for us.

I did not yet need an identity
.....
I did not remember the words to defend the place
from its removal, from its strange, new name
hedged with eucalyptus.

The signs say to us,
You were not here.²⁵

Lebanon was not foreign to him for years, but had become a search for something that had disappeared. And the political situation he was born into determined his fate as a poet:

From massacre to slaughter have my people been led, and still they bring forth
offspring in debris-filled stopping places, flash victory signs, and prepare the
wedding feasts.

Does a bomb have grandchildren? Us.
Does a piece of shrapnel have grandparents? Us.²⁶

In *Memory for Forgetfulness*, Darwish refers to the siege on Beirut, by alluding to the poem “Identity Card,” written nearly twenty years earlier in Israel: “I’m Arab! I

said that to a government employee whose son might now be piloting one of these jets. I said it in Hebrew to provoke him. But when I put it in a poem, the Arab public in Nazareth was electrified by a secret current that released the genie from the bottle. ... This outcry then became my poetic identity ...”²⁷

In Beirut, Darwish reexamined his famous poem “Identity Card”: “I didn’t realize it was necessary to say it here in Beirut: ‘Put this in your record. I’m Arab!’ Does the Arab have to say this to his fellow Arabs?”²⁸ The Palestinian exile had been doubled, and now Darwish had to prove that he was an Arab, after Beirut rejected the Palestinians and had them deported. The situation of the Palestinians in the 1980s, which Darwish wrote about in his famous poem, “Oh my father, I am Yusuf,” reminded them that the Arab world had betrayed the Palestinians in 1948, and that the Arab world had forgotten the Palestinians who remained in Israel until 1967.

Darwish wrote “Identity Card” in 1964, when he was a member of the Israeli Communist Party. The poem is directed at an Israeli government official, perhaps from the military government, who symbolizes the Jewish-Israeli collective. The Israeli official is the poet’s adversary and interlocutor and the poet raises his Palestinian voice in an attempt to intimidate:

Write down!
 I am an Arab
 And the number of my [identity] card is fifty thousand
 And eight is the number of my children
 And the ninth... will come after the summer!
 Does this make you angry?²⁹

Darwish provocatively repeats the question, “Does this make you angry?” and the equally provocative demand, “Write down! / I am an Arab,”³⁰ and as a result focuses the reader on the poet’s demand from his Israeli interlocutor. The poem is one of response and of dialogue, which according to Darwish is a translation of a dialogue that originally took place in Hebrew. The poem concludes with future heroism and a warning to the current victor: “Beware, beware ... of my hunger / And my anger!”³¹ In this sense, the poem is representative of Darwish’s early writing, in which the bravery that is not always expressed in reality finds expression in poetry.

Darwish’s comments about the protests in Israel against the First Lebanon War and his reactions to the protest poetry that appeared in Hebrew are illuminating: “I didn’t rejoice over the demonstrations in Tel Aviv, which continue to rob us of all our roles. From them the killer and the victim. From them the pain, and the cry, the sword, and the rose; the victory, and the defeat.”³²

Israel's total appropriation of history and of world attention, as occupier and as the critic of the occupation, did not even leave Darwish the stance of protest or the narrative of defeat, and thus even Hebrew poetry besieged him and limited his possibilities:³³

For our sake they shouted, for our sake they cried; ... Is there anything more cruel than this absence: that you should not be the one to celebrate your victory or the one to lament your defeat? That you should stay offstage and not make an entrance except as a subject for others to take up and interpret.... Scores of Hebrew poems, but no Arabic poems, address the siege of Beirut and protest the massacre. From them the sin, and from them the forgiveness. From them the killing, and the tears. From them the massacres, and the justice of the courts.³⁴

There is very little room left for the Arabic poet, for Darwish himself, whose right to object and tell a story has been besieged, and whose story as the defeated is told by others. This is the total loss protested in his writing when he sought to retain, at the very least, the right to tell the story of defeat.

These words are testimony to the tragic and paradoxical state of poetry in a state of siege, a state of siege that enthralled and continues to enthrall both Palestinian poetry and Israeli poetry, though of course not in a symmetrical manner since Israeli poetry has the privilege of often ignoring this siege. Poetry, which dreams of being an aesthetic or ethical voice, an eternal voice, raised above the present time, returns again and again to the context of political power relations, lacking the ability to abrogate or ignore them, even when it wants to write against history. Darwish's stance was complex. On occasion he spoke about his desire to be translated into Hebrew and read in Hebrew as exemplified in his comments: "Israelis are not interested in teaching their students that there is a love story between an Arabic poet and this country. I would like them to read me only to enjoy my poetry, and not as a representative of the enemy."³⁵ However, it is important to remember that reading, and the dialogue with Darwish and with Arabic poetry in general that might and should develop in Hebrew poetry, does not break the state of siege in which we live, until we forget its beginning, until we forget its end, until we forget everything that preceded it and everything that may happen after it.

Notes

- 1 "Present absentees," also known as "internally displaced Palestinians," is a term that refers to Palestinians who were displaced during or after the 1948 Arab-Israeli War but remained within the borders that today constitute the Israeli State. For further reference, see: David Grossman, *Sleeping on a Wire: Conversations with Palestinians in Israel*, translated by Haim Watzman (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1993).
- 2 Salman Masalha, epilogue to the Hebrew translation of *Memory for Forgetfulness*, 161. The English translation does not include the epilogue.
- 3 Mahmoud Darwish and Samih al-Qasim, *Ben shnei batzaei ha-tapuz* [Between two halves of the orange], trans. and ed. by Hannah Amit-Kochavi (Tel Aviv: Mifras Publishing House, 1991), 19. The quotation cited here is taken from the Hebrew translation and translated into English by Esther Hecht.
- 4 Mahmoud Darwish, "The Eternity of the Cactus," in *Why Did You Leave the Horse Alone?* trans. Jeffrey Sacks (Beirut: Riad al-Rayyes Ltd, 1995; New York: Archipelago Books, 2006), 28. Citations refer to Archipelago edition.
- 5 Mahmoud Darwish, trans. Mohammad Shaheen, "Counterpoint: For Edward W. Said," *Almond Blossoms and Beyond* (Northampton, MA: Interlink Books, 2009), 94. The last line of the poem, "to share the story" appears in the original Arabic but does not appear in the published English translation.
- 6 Mahmoud Darwish, *State of Siege*, trans. Munir Akash and Daniel Abdal-Hayy Moore (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2010), 17.
- 7 Mahmoud Darwish, *Memory for Forgetfulness, August, Beirut, 1982*, trans. Ibrahim Muhawi (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982), 9.
- 8 "Mahmoud Darwish: 'Hayiti rotze she-Yisraelim yikrau oti'" [Mahmoud Darwish: 'I wish Israelis read my work'], *ynet.co.il*, by Merav Yudilovich, December 24, 2011, <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/1,7340,L-1456849,00.html>.
- 9 Darwish, *Memory for Forgetfulness*, 7.
- 10 Darwish, *State of Siege*, 163.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 135.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 7.
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 "The exile is so strong within me, perhaps I will bring it home," Mahmoud Darwish, interview by Helith Yeshurun, *Hadarim* 12, 1996, 172-198; see 177 for exact quote.
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 The Bible's influence on Darwish was a popular topic in Israel. See: Ofra Bengio, preface to *K-parhe ha-shaked o rahok yoter* [*Almond Blossoms and Beyond*] (Tel Aviv: Pitom

Publishing with Sifrei Iton 77), 6 [Hebrew]. An Egyptian scholar, Rashad Al-Shami, discussed the influence of Bialik on Darwish's poetry but Darwish's position was that the Hebrew Bible and, to some degree, Hebrew literature belonged to him no less than they belonged to others. See Rashad Al-Shami, "Shā'ir al-Qawmiyyā al-Yahūdiyyā Ḥayyim Naḥman Bialik: Amīr al-Shu'arā' al-'Ibriyyīn fī al-'as)r al-Ḥadīth," [The Jewish national poet Hayim Nahman Bialik] (Cairo: al-Dār al-Thaqāfiyyā li-al-Nashr, 2006).

- 17 Darwish, *State of Siege*, 9.
- 18 Ibid., 21.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Ibid., 3.
- 21 Darwish, *Memory of Forgetfulness*, 9.
- 22 Ibid., 17.
- 23 Ibid., 14.
- 24 Ibid., 87.
- 25 Darwish, *Almond Blossoms and Beyond*, 74-75.
- 26 Darwish, *Memory of Forgetfulness*, 90.
- 27 Ibid., 174.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 Mahmoud Darwish, "Bitaqat huwiyya" [Identity Card], in *Leaves of Olives* (first published, Haifa: 1964). The translation published here is from the Arabic original by Yonatan Mendel.
- 30 Ibid. The State of Israel has always preferred to talk about "Arabs" rather than "Palestinians." For example, in the dialogue between the heroine of "Bab el-Shams," the wife of Khalil, and the Israeli interrogators who want to know her husband's whereabouts, she complains that the Palestinians are the only Arabs in the world, whereas all the others are described by an additional adjective—Syrians, Egyptians, Lebanese—and thus the Palestinians became, paradoxically, connected to the writing of Palestinian prose throughout the Arab world, the fulfillers of pan-Arabism.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 Darwish, *Memory of Forgetfulness*, 109-110.
- 33 As he saw it, the Israelis had always been afraid to lose their identity as victims, which was essential to Jews throughout their history, and bemoaned the destruction that they themselves had caused.
- 34 Darwish, *Memory of Forgetfulness*, 110.
- 35 Darwish, interview by Yudilovitz.