



Mahmoud Darwish's Lyric Epic

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Abstract: This essay is a reprint of an introduction by Fady Joudah, noted Palestinian-American poet and translator of Mahmoud Darwish's poetry, to *If I Were Another* (2009), a collection of poems by Darwish translated from the Arabic by Joudah. It is republished herein courtesy of the author Fady Joudah and publisher, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York. According to Joudah, "*If I Were Another* is a tribute to Darwish's lyric epic, and to the essence of his "late style," the culmination of an entire life in dialogue that merges the self with its stranger, its other, in continuous renewal within the widening periphery of human grace."

When Mahmoud Darwish and I met on August 4, 2008, five days before he underwent the surgery that would end his life, he reiterated the centrality and importance *Mural* holds for this collection. In *Mural* he grasped what he feared would be his last chance to write after surviving cardiovascular death for the second time in 1999. The poem was a song of praise that affirms life and the humanity not only of the marginalized Palestinian but also of the individual on this earth, and of Mahmoud Darwish himself. *Mural* was made into a play by the Palestinian National Theatre shortly after

its publication in 2000 without any prompting from Darwish (his poetry has often been set to film, music, and song). The staged poem has continued to tour the world to astounding acclaim, in Paris, Edinburgh, Tunisia, Ramallah, Haifa, and elsewhere. A consummate poet at the acme of innermost experience, simultaneously personal and universal, between the death of language and physical death, Darwish created something uniquely his: the treatise of a private speech become collective. *Mural* was the one magnum opus of which he was certain, a rare conviction for a poet who reflects on

Fady Joudah, a Palestinian-American poet and physician, was the 2007 winner of the Yale Series of Younger Poets Competition for his collection of poems *The Earth in the Attic*, which was published by Yale University Press in April 2008. Joudah was born in Austin, Texas, in 1971 to Palestinian refugee parents, and grew up in Libya and Saudi Arabia. He returned to the United States to study to become a doctor, first attending the University of Georgia in Athens, and then the Medical College of Georgia, before completing his medical training at the University of Texas. Joudah currently practices as an ER physician in Houston, Texas. He has also volunteered abroad with the humanitarian organization Doctors Without Borders. Joudah's poetry has been published in a variety of publications, including *Poetry* magazine, *Iowa Review*, *Kenyon Review*, *Drunken Boat*, *Prairie Schooner* and *Crab Orchard*. In 2006, he published *The Butterfly's Burden*, a collection of recent poems by Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish translated from Arabic. He was a finalist for the 2008 PEN Award for Poetry in Translation for his translation of Mahmoud Darwish's *The Butterfly's Burden* (Copper Canyon Press, 2007). The translation won the Saif Ghobash-Banipal Prize for Arabic Literary translation from the Society of Authors in the United Kingdom. **CREDIT:** Previously published as Introduction to *If I Were Another: Poems* (2009), a collection of poems by Mahmoud Darwish translated from the Arabic by Fady Joudah, this essay is republished herein courtesy of the author Fady Joudah and publisher, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 18 West 18th Street, New York, NY 10011.

his completed works with harsh doubt equal only to his ecstatic embrace when on the threshold of new poems.

His first experience of death, in 1984, was peaceful and painless, filled with darwish. "whiteness." The second was more traumatic and was packed with intense visions. *Mural* gathered Darwish's experiences of life, art, and death, in their white serenity and violent awakening, and accelerated his "late style" into prolific, progressively experimental output in search of new possibilities in language and form, under the shadow of absence and a third and final death. "Who am I to disappoint the void / who am I" ask the final lines of *The Dice Player*, Darwish's last uncollected lyric epic, written weeks before his death on August 9, 2008. But I still remember his boyish, triumphant laugh when I said to him: "*The Dice Player* is a distilled *Mural* in entirely new diction," and his reply: "Some friends even call it the *anti-Mural*." He had overcome his own art (and death) for one last time, held it apart from himself so that it would indisputably and singularly belong to him and he to it.

If I Were Another is a tribute to Darwish's lyric epic, and to the essence of his "late style," the culmination of an entire life in dialogue that merges the self with its stranger, its other, in continuous renewal within the widening periphery of human grace. The two collections of long poems that begin this book, *I See What I Want* (1990) and *Eleven Planets* (1992), mark the completion of Darwish's middle period. In them he wove a "space for the jasmine" and (super)imposed it on the oppressive exclusivity of historical and antinomian narrative. In 1990, between the personal and the collective, "birth [was] a riddle," but in 1996 birth became "a cloud in [Darwish's] hand." And by *Mural's* end (2000), there was "no cloud in [his] hand / no eleven planets / on [his] temple." Instead there was the vowel in his name, the letter *Waw*, "loyal to birth wherever possible." By 2005, Darwish

would return, through the medium or vision of almond blossoms, the flower of his birth in March, to revisit the memory and meaning of place, and the "I" in place, through several other selves, in *Exile*, his last collected long poem. Dialectic, lyric, and drama opened up a new space for time in his poetry, a "lateness" infused with age and survival while it does not "go gentle into that good night."

It is necessary to read Darwish's transformation of the long poem over the most accomplished fifteen years of his life: the shift in diction from a gnomic and highly metaphoric drive to a stroll of mixed and conversational speech; the paradoxes between private and public, presence and absence; the bond between the individual and the earth, place, and nature; the illumination of the contemporary Sufi aesthetic method as the essence of poetic knowledge, on the interface of reason and the sensory, imagination and the real, the real and its vanishing where the "I" is interchangeable with (and not split from) its other; and his affair with dialogue, and theater (tragic, absurd, or otherwise) to produce a lyric epic sui generis. If Darwish's friend the great critic Edward Said had a leaning toward the novel, Darwish was undoubtedly a playwright at heart. This had been evident since his youth, whether in poems like *A Soldier Dreams of White Lilies* (written in 1967 and now a part of the Norwegian live-film-performance *Identity of the Soul* [2008], in which Darwish is featured), or *Writing to the Light of a Rifle* (1970), or in his brilliant early prose book and its title piece, *Diaries of Ordinary Sorrow* (1973).

Yet Darwish was never comfortable with looking back at his glorious past. He was an embodiment of exile, as both existential and metaphysical state, beyond the merely external, and beyond metaphor, in his interior relations with self and art. Naturally, and perhaps reflexively, Darwish ex-

pressed a fleeting reservation at my desire to include here the two older volumes *I See What I Want* and *Eleven Planets*. True, the two are linked to a larger historical reel than is *Mural* or *Exile*, since the former volumes were written during the first Palestinian Intifada, which began in 1987, a major defining event in the identity and hopes of a dispossessed people, and in response to the spectacle of the peace accords Darwish knew would follow. But more important, in these two volumes Darwish had written his *Canto General*, his *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land*, his *Omeros*, destabilizing the hegemony of myth into an inclusive, expansive humanizing lyric that soars, like a hoopoe, over a Canaanite reality and an Andalusian song, where vision is both Sufi and Sophoclean, and elegy arches over the father, the lover, and the other, as well as over a grand historical narrative and its liminal stages on this earth.

I See What I Want and *Eleven Planets* are collections concerned with vision, not image. Even their titles read as one. In the first instance of seeing, Darwish declares a singular self that creates its private lexicon of sorrow and praise and transformation into the collective: a prebiblical past, a Palestinian present, and a future where the self flies "just to fly," free from "the knot of symbols," to where compassion is "one in the nights" with "one moon for all, for both sides of the trench." In *Eleven Planets*, the self has vanished into its other, more elegiacally, and "flight" has reached 1492, the year of "the Atlantic banners of Columbus" and "the Arab's last exhalation" in Granada. The self is transfigured into "The 'Red Indian's' Penultimate Speech" and into "murdered Iraq," this most contemporary of graves, "O stone of the soul, our silence!" Throughout the two books, the oscillation between the "I" and the "we," the private and the public, is maintained in tension, in abeyance. And by the end, Darwish questions himself and his aesthetic: "The dead will not forgive those who stood, like us, perplexed / at the

edge of the well asking: Was Joseph the Sumerian our brother, our / beautiful brother, to snatch the planets of this beautiful evening from him?" It is the same beautiful Joseph (son of Jacob) who saw "eleven planets, the sun, and the moon prostrate before [him]" in the Quran, and it is the same past-future elegy of exile and expulsion, circling around to those other sadly beautiful planets "at the end of the Andalusian scene." Yet Darwish triumphs over the void with song: "O water, be a string to my guitar" and "open two windows on shadow street" because "April will come out of our sleep soon" "with the first almond blossom."

I See What I Want marks the first mature presence of the Sufi aesthetic in Darwish's oeuvre, where he will disassemble and reassemble his language, again and again, in an idea of return: wind, horse, wheat, well, dove, gazelle, echo, holm oak, anemones, chrysanthemum, or something more recognizably biographical, like "prison" in Israeli jails. In this recurrence and retreatment, in seating and unseating absence, Darwish is a prodigal between memory and history who extroverts language and the "need to say: Good Morning." Through the process, he attains illumination, not as a fixed and defined state but as the arrival at one truth constantly examined and replaced with another. "Take Care of the Stags, Father" is an elegy to his father, where the father, the "I," the grandfather, and the forefather intertwine and dissolve time, place, and identity "like anemones that adopt the land and sing her as a house for the sky." The private and psychological detail is abundant: Darwish's grandfather was his primary teacher; his father became an endlessly broken man who toiled as a hired laborer on land he owned before the creation of Israel in 1948; the horse he left behind "to keep the house company" when they fled was lost; and the "cactus" that grows on the site of each ruined Palestinian village punctures the heart.

All these details and themes and more

are a personal representation first and foremost. Yet the echo resounds a larger collective memory, Palestinian or otherwise. Darwish's fathers resembled, "by chance," the fathers of hundreds of thousand others, and his "I" also resembled another's. History is broken with an earth that "cracks its eggshell and swims between us / green beneath the clouds." And "exile" is "a land of words the pigeons carry to the pigeons," just as the self is "an exile of incursions speech delivers to speech." And the poem is ever present: "Why," "What good is the poem? / It raises the ceiling of our caves and flies from our blood to the language of doves." "Take Care of the Stags, Father" is also a praise for "chrysanthemum," an account of Darwish's profound relationship with the earth, where a different "specificity" and "dailiness" is filtered, captured, through presence and absence. Darwish was a "green" poet whose verse was shaped by flowers, trees, and animals the way people see them: "without story / the lemon blossom is born out of the lemon blossom"; as well as through the dispossessed landscape: a "return" within and without "progress."

The beautifully measured exegesis of "Truce with the Mongols by the Holm Oak Forest," and its epiphora of "holm oak," confirms the formal, thematic, and structural range in these two collections. The mesmerizing prescience in "Truce," however, is alarming. Peace is able to envision itself but, like Cassandra or Tiresias, is either punished or discredited. Thus "The Tragedy of Narcissus the Comedy of Silver" follows in monumental footsteps. Whether in its several stanzaic forms, as an early precursor of *Mural*, or in its undulation between elegy and praise, history and myth, absurdity and distress, this epic must be read with attention to its ubiquitous nuance, its "Ulysses / of paradox," its "Sufi [who] sneaks away from a woman" then asks, "Does the soul have buttocks and a waist and a shadow?" Circumstantially, as

noted, the poem is linked to the birth of the first Palestinian Intifada, "a stone scratching the sun." And if this "stone radiating our mystery" will provide fodder for many, "for both sides of the trench," who are drawn to the "political" in Darwish's poetry and life, Darwish offers a reply: "Extreme clarity is a mystery." Darwish wrote not a manifesto for return but a myth of return—where the exiles and displaced "used to know, and dream, and return, and dream, and know, and return, / and return, and dream, and dream, and return." "Bygones are bygones": "they returned / from the myths of defending citadels to what is simple in speech." "No harm befell the land" despite those who "immortalized their names with spear or mangonel ... and departed," since "none of them deprived April of its habits." "And land, like language, is inherited." And exile is "the birds that exceed the eulogy of their songs." Yet "victims don't believe their intuition" and don't "recognize their names." "Our history is their history," "their history is our history." Darwish asks if anyone managed to fashion "his narrative far from the rise of its antithesis and heroism" and answers: "No one." Still he pleads, "O hero within us ... don't rush," and "stay far from us so we can walk in you toward another ending, the beginning is damned."

Such an ending would find itself in "The Hoopoe." (And just as the two volumes *I See What I Want* and *Eleven Planets* are twins, "The Tragedy of Narcissus the Comedy of Silver" and "The Hoopoe" are twins.) Both poems are tragedies in verse. Threading the dream of return, "The Hoopoe" suspends arrival right from the start: "We haven't approached the land of our distant star yet." And despite the incessant remonstrance and the litany of pretexts by the collective voice in wandering—"Are we the skin of the earth?" "No sword remains that hasn't sheathed itself in our flesh"—the hoopoe insists on simply guiding to "a lost sky," to "vastness after vastness after vastness," and urges us to "cast the place's

body" aside, because "the universe is smaller than a butterfly's wing in the courtyard of the large heart." "The Hoopoe" is based on the twelfth-century Sufi narrative epic poem *Conference of the Birds*, by Farid Addin al-Attar of Nishapur. In it a hoopoe leads all birds to the One, who turns out to be all the birds who managed to complete the journey and reach attainment. There are seven wadis on the path to attainment, the last of which is the Wadi of Vanishing, whose essence is Forgetfulness (a visible theme in Darwish's "late" poems). Darwish transforms this Sufi doctrine about God as an internal and not an external reality, a self inseparable from its other, to address exile and the (meta)physicality of identity in a work that is nothing short of a masterpiece.

Similarly, "Eleven Planets at the End of the Andalusian Scene" and "The 'Red Indian's' Penultimate Speech to the White Man" are two of Darwish's most accomplished and beloved poems. The former commemorates five hundred years of the brutal cleansing of Muslims and Jews from Spain, then leaps toward another annihilation across the Atlantic in the latter (which was excerpted and enacted in Jean-Luc Godard's movie *Notre Musique*). In both poems Darwish writes against the perpetual crimes of humans against humanity and against the earth, with the hope these crimes won't be repeated. Darwish clings to the dream of al-Andalus (of coexistence and mutual flourishing between outsiders and natives), even if he questions the reality of that dream, whether it existed "on earth ... or in the poem" (still he asks us in "The 'Red Indian's' Speech" whether we would "memorize a bit of poetry to halt the slaughter"). "Granada is my body," he sings, "Granada is my country. / And I come from there." The "descent" is not the "Arab" laying claim to distant lands and a glorious past—a clichéd annotation; it is the grand illumination against the "cleansing" of the other, in revenge or otherwise, in the past or the future, embodied in the "dream" of al-

Andalus that could not save itself from the horrors of history.

While each of the eleven sections in "The Andalusian Scene" is a stand-alone poem, the entire sequence is a love poem that embraces time and place "in the departure to one essence" and touches the deep bond Darwish had with Federico García Lorca and his "bedouin moon." "The 'Red Indian's' Speech" should also be read beyond the comparative impulse or historical allegory (Darwish composed the poem after listening repeatedly to Native American chants) and as a defense against the destruction of the earth, as a celebration of the earth: "Do not kill the grass anymore, the grass has a soul in us that defends / the soul in the earth." "Our names are trees of the deity's speech, and birds that soar higher / than the rifle," so "if our murder is imperative, then do not / kill the animals that have befriended us"; "do / you know the deer will not chew the grass if our blood touches it?" "A Canaanite Rock in the Dead Sea" retreats (into) the "father" and reaffirms "I am I" in an "absence entirely trees." The lyric begins with "my poem / is a rock flying to my father as a partridge does." In Arabic, "partridge" is also the word for "skip" or "hop"—exactly the rhythm of this poem. Ablation of myth is rewritten through the Canaanite "pigeon tower" and through the sharing of the earth.

"We Will Choose Sophocles" switches to the collective in a discourse that weaves ancient and contemporary identity, a gentle living "the taste of small differences among the seasons," where "the mallow climbs the ancient shields / and its red flowers hide what the sword has done to the name." Another significance of the poem stems from the mention of two literary characters placed in opposition: Imru' el-Qyiss, prince of Kinda, the great pre-Islamic (Jahili) Arab poet, who sought Caesar's help (to avenge his father's murder) and failed and died as consequence of this option; and Sophocles, who rejected and mocked political author-

ity and power. This coincides with the looming failure of the 1993 Oslo peace accords. Darwish's invocation of the Greek dramatist's lines—"He who makes the journey / To one in power is / His salve even if when / He set out he was free"—is haunting. His rejection of the peace façade is both firm and tender, a theme he develops in a 1996 poem, "A Non-linguistic Dispute with Imru' el-Qyss": "Our blood wasn't speaking in microphones on/ that day, the day we leaned on a language that dispersed / its heart when it changed its path. No one / asked Imru' el-Qyss: What have you done / to us and to yourself? Go now on Caesar's / path, after a smoke that looks out through / time, black. Go on Caesar's path, alone, alone, alone, / and leave, right here, for us, your language!" And again later in *Mural*, with growing disinterest that highlights the mutability of recurrence or circularity in the Darwish poem: "I tired of what my language on the backs of horses / says or doesn't say about the days of Imru' el-Qyss / who was scattered between Caesar and rhyme."

The conundrum whereby the Palestinian tragedy is not permitted to "belong to the victim's question" "without interruption" clouds the reading of Darwish's poetry for many. "I am he, my self's coachman, / no horse whinnies in my language," Darwish would say in *Exile* in 2005, asserting his supreme concern with his art, independence, and individuality. Still, in "Rita's Winter," a love poem that returns us to Darwish's affair with dialogue, the private is at its most triumphant in these two collections. "Rita" is a pseudonym for Darwish's first love, a Jewish Israeli woman who became a cultural icon in the Arabic world after the renowned Lebanese musician and singer Marcel Khalife sang one of Darwish's youthful poems, "Rita and the Rifle": "There's a rifle between Rita and me / and whoever knows Rita bows / and prays / to a god in those honey eyes . . ." "O Rita / nothing could turn your eyes away from

mine / except a snooze / some honey clouds/ and this rifle." The rifle connotes the Israeli military, in which Rita enlisted (and which perhaps reappears as the handgun placed on "the poem's draft" in the final lines of "Rita's Winter"). There were at least four more Rita poems in the 1960s and 70s. In "The Sleeping Garden" in 1977, for example, Darwish wrote: "Rita sleeps . . . sleeps then wakes her dreams: / Shall we get married? / Yes. / When? / When violet grows / on the soldiers' helmet. . ." "I love you, Rita. I love you. Sleep / and I will ask you in thirteen winters: / Are you still sleeping?" Rita would sleep for fifteen additional winters before she would make her return in 1992, her final appearance in a Darwish poem.

As I said, *Mural's* significance stems from a great artist's engagement with death in his late years: the simultaneity of art and mortality, the objective and the subjective, on two parallel lanes of what is left of time in a body or, as Theodor Adorno termed it, "the catastrophe" of "late style" (an ironic expression for a Palestinian). *Mural* begins a period of elusive abandon in Darwish's poetry, an ease with what language may bring. He puts it another way in "I Don't Know the Stranger," a poem from 2005: "The dead are equal before death, they don't speak / and probably don't dream . . . / and this stranger's funeral might have been mine / had it not been for a divine matter that postponed it / for many reasons, among them/ an error in my poem." This righting of the poem's wrong life—this potential philosophic "error" (which also shadows the eleventh-century Arab poet-philosopher al-Ma'arri) upon which Darwish embarked—was a chronic concern for him. In *Mural*, certain elements of his youthful aesthetic, namely dialogue and more casual diction, return and are now redeemed by age. Pithy narrative stitches the lyric epic into drama on the stage. Monologue belongs to several

voices. Darwish's dramatic theater (of "The Tragedy of Narcissus" or "The Hoopoe") incorporates several styles of dialogue and quotidian settings. For example, the terse, concise line-by-line chat between Darwish and his prison guard toward the poem's end is a continuation of the conversational tone that resurfaced in short lyrics in *Why Did You Leave the Horse Alone?* (1996), was mastered in *Don't Apologize for What You've Done* (2003), and became fully available in the lyric epic in *Exile* (2005).

Mural rotates setting and scene in three major movements between a hospital room, Death, and the poet's visions and conversations. The poem opens with the nurse and the poet's "horizontal" name, Darwish's awareness of his death, his ensuing search for meaning and existence. He becomes "the dialogue of dreamers," a bird, a vineyard, and a poet whose language is "a metaphor for metaphor." But the nurse swiftly returns and interrupts him in an important moment that heralds the full realization of the name in the final pages of *Mural* (when the "horizontal name" becomes vertical abecedary). For now, however, a woman nurse says: "This is your name, remember it well! / And don't disagree with it over a letter / or concern yourself with tribal banners, / be a friend to your horizontal name, / try it out on the dead and the living, teach it / accurate pronunciation in the company of strangers," "a stranger is another stranger's brother. / We will seize the feminine with a vowel promised to the flutes." Then Darwish is reunited with his first love, his first goddess and first legends, his stranger self, his "other" and "alternate."

Early in the poem Darwish (who was shy, generous, and modest) is quite aware of the unfolding play that has become his life, between perception and illusion, the private and the public, poem and being: "Am I he? / Do I perform my role well in the final act?" "or did the victim change / his affidavit to live the postmodern moment, / since the author strayed from the script / and the

actors and spectators have gone?" Characters (including "echo" and "Death") enter and exit the lyrical fantasy of the poet. He is "one who talks to himself" and one who "sang to weigh the spilled vastness / in the ache of a dove." And he arrives at an essential truth of his art: "my poem's land is green and high," a celebration of being alive, and of the earth, because "there is no nation smaller than its poem," and "the earth is the festival of losers" to whom Darwish belongs (perhaps as the absented poet of Troy). And he returns to his poem's features: "the narcissus contemplating the water of its image," "the clarity of shadows in synonyms," "the speech of prophets on the surface of night," "the donkey of wisdom ... mocking the poem's reality and myth," "the congestion of symbol with its opposites," "the other 'I' / writing its diaries in the notebooks of lyricists ... at the gates of exile," and "echo as it scrapes the sea salt / of [his] language off the walls." The nurse reenters, and the poet catalogs visions and dreams induced by sedatives: memories of his father's death, his mother's bread, his exile from his language and place, and his kinship to dead poets and philosophers. He realizes he is still alive, that his "hour hasn't arrived," and summons his favorite goddess, Anat, to sing since "life might come suddenly, / to those disinclined to meaning, from the wing of a butterfly / caught in a rhyme."

"And I want to live," he declares to begin the second and perhaps best-known movement of *Mural*. This vivid and occasionally humorous dialogue with Death is timeless writing. Darwish is neither waiting for Godot nor bargaining with Faustus. He leaves us his will (which he knows will not be followed when he dies), perhaps to authenticate the separateness of his private self from what the larger collective perceives it to be (though in death, the gap becomes narrow): "Death! wait for me, until I finish / the funeral arrangements in this fragile spring, / when I was born, when I

would prevent the sermonizers / from repeating what they said about the sad country / and the resistance of olives and figs in the face / of time and its army. I will tell them: Pour me / in the *Nu`n*, where my soul gulps / Surat al-Rahman in the Quran," and "Don't put violets on my grave: violets are / for the depressed, to remind the dead of love's / premature death. Put seven green ears / of wheat on the coffin instead, and some / anemones, if either can be found. Otherwise, leave the roses / of the church to the church and the weddings. / Death, wait, until I pack my suitcase: / my toothbrush, my soap, / my electric razor, cologne, and clothes. / Is the climate temperate there? / Do conditions change in the eternal whiteness / or do they remain the same in autumn / as in winter? Is one book enough / to entertain me in timelessness, or will I need / a library? And what's the spoken language there: / colloquial for all, or classical Arabic?"

With irony and resolve, Darwish embraces and humanizes the self and others, where he is simultaneously a lyrical letter in the Quran and "at ease with the Old Testament's narrative" as the beautiful Joseph, whose vision is of abundance and fertility in "seven green ears / of wheat." Even Arabic is an "I" indivisible from its "other," an "exterior" within an "interior." And as Darwish goes on in this wonderful dialogue with Death, paradox and parody ("Death, wait, have a seat," "perhaps / the star wars have tired you today?") grow into exultation ("all the arts have defeated you") and provocation ("you are the only exile, poor you," "How do you walk like this without guards or a singing choir, / like a coward thief"). But this frivolity does not last long, and the poet comes clean with Death because the two of them "on god's road / are two Sufis who are governed by vision / but don't see." Still, Darwish insists, despite Death's indifference, on meeting by the sea gate, where the poem will eventually close, in Akko, the port of his childhood, seven kilo-

meters from his razed village, al-Birweh, in Galilee. And as with the hospital scene and the name, "this sea" will eventually become present to announce the poem's end.

The third movement begins as the nurse reappears and "the death of language" has passed. In one of the poem's more memorable stanzas, in a recurring scene between patient and nurse, she says to him: "You used to hallucinate / often and scream at me: / I don't want to return to anyone, / I don't want to return to any country / after this long absence ... / I only want to return / to my language in the distances of cooing." In this extreme moment of personality disconcerted with geographical "return," in the artist's tremendous and volatile gripping of his medium, "the distances of cooing," their quietude and serene imagination, paradoxically affirm "return" to a region beyond the political or historical, therefore more lasting, more durable. The poem remains "green and high," and the poet writes it down "patiently, to the meter / of seagulls in the book of water," and "to the scattering / of wheat ears in the book of the field." Again he praises: "I am the grain / of wheat that has died to become green again. / And in my death there is a kind of life ..." And as is Darwish's custom of uniting art with life, he tells us of what he has fathered: "I preferred the free marriage between words ... / the feminine will find the suitable masculine / in poetry's leaning toward prose ..." Between "the sentimental" and "thousands of romantic years" the poet carves "a tattoo in identity" where "The personal is not personal. / The universal not universal ..."

Darwish returns to myth, the mirror image of the poem's first movement, a circular aesthetic. Anat, the Sumerian and Canaanite goddess, reappears, scriptures persist, but new characters and subjects also appear: Gilgamesh, Enkidu, Osiris, King Solomon, and the Book of Ecclesiastes. He meets his boy self, his girl love, his prison guard, and his childhood horse. With each

encounter Darwish rewrites anew what he had written in the past (as in the story of his imprisonment) or what he would rewrite in the future (as in the horse that guided his family back to an unconscious boy Darwish who fell off it one wild night when he took it out for a ride). Perhaps "the horse" exemplifies the excessive reading that frequently goes into Darwish's "symbols," whereas in fact these "symbols" are often private memories. Perhaps it is the same horse who saved Darwish's life that the poet addresses toward the end of *Mural*: "Persist, my horse, we no longer differ in the wind ... / you're my youth and I'm your imagination. Straighten / like an *Aleph*," "You're my pretext, and I'm your metaphor / away from riders who are tamed like destinies." Perhaps it is an appeal to that elemental bond that granted him life once that it might grant it again, in a delightful dance between the pastoral and the postmodern: "Don't die before me, horse, or after me, or with me / on the final slope. And look inside the ambulances, / stare at the dead ... I might still be living."

The plethora of actors and dialogue accelerate, and gather, suspense in a radiance that lends itself to the imagination on the stage. And in preparation for the finale, Darwish announces that "as Christ walked on the lake, / I walked in my vision. But I came down / from the cross because I have a fear of heights and don't / promise resurrection. I only changed / my cadence to hear my heart clearly." This declaration of his fragility goes on to speak the most delicate assertion of his poetry: "The epicists have falcons, and I have / *The Collar of the Dove*," the wings of love that would return him to Akko's port, as he had mentioned in an earlier poem, "Ivory Combs," where his "mother had lost her handkerchiefs"; or maybe it is as he retells it in *Mural*: "I might / add the description of Akko to the story / the oldest beautiful city / the loveliest old city / a stone box / where the dead and the living move / in its clay as if in a captive

beehive." Darwish begins the final ascension of *Mural* and recounts what is his, starting with Akko's sea, his semen, and down to the two meters of this earth that would house his 175-centimeter horizontal body, and his return to his horizontal name, now loosened into vertical lines whose alliterative luminosity will remain the privacy of his language, the language of the *Dhad*, impossible to translate otherwise. And the simply complex notion of his existence, and of anyone's being, becomes an eternal calling: "I am not mine / I am not mine / I am not mine."

Six years and three books after *Mural*, in 2005, Darwish was still writing, still searching for the self within its others, through new lyric form. *Exile* is a play in verse that "neither linger[s] ... nor hurr[ies]" in a mature prosody like "life's simple prose," even if intransigently lyrical and giddy in parts. *Exile* has its "bridge" and could simply be "the cunning of eloquence" or "the backdrop of the epic scene." And "return" is "a comedy by one of our frivolous goddesses." If dialogue or dialectic and its supporting cast were spontaneous and major expressions in the totality of Darwish's language in *Mural*, they became a more purposeful aesthetic of the theater of the lyric epic in *Exile*: four quartets, each with a setting and at least two characters, palpable or spectral, named or unnamed (of which the "I" is constant among them); choral modes or interludes are regularly introduced (especially in the first three movements); memory and vision stand in for scenes within each act; the entire sequence is a dialogue that alternates between the absurd and the expository. *Exile* walks in strata or polyphony: of love and pleasure ("If the canary doesn't sing / to you, my friend"); of place ("What is place?" "The senses' discovery of a foothold / for intuition"); of time (where one and his ghost "fly, as a Sufi does, in the words ... to anywhere"); and of art (where "aesthetic is only

the presence / of the real in form," "a freedom" that bids "farewell to the poem / of pain").

The first quartet finds the poet strolling on a Tuesday when "the weather is clear" "as if [he] were another." After remembrance and forgetting, and wonderful discursiveness, he meets his lover. ("My lexicon is Sufi. My desires are sensory / and I am not who I am / unless the two meet: / I and the feminine I," he would write in *The Dice Player* in 2008.) Unlike Rita, the "feminine" in "Tuesday and the Weather Is Clear" is not named, yet the personal detail is equally intimate, if not more so. And as the two part, the poet continues to walk until he finds himself in the throes of his private language and conducts a brilliant appeal to it, almost a prayer: "O my language, / help me to adapt and embrace the universe"; "My language, will I become what you'll become, or are you / what becomes of me? Teach me the wedding parade / that merges the alphabet with my body parts. / Teach me to become a master not an echo"; "For who, if I utter what isn't poetry, / will understand me? Who will speak to me of a hidden / longing for a lost time if I utter what isn't poetry? / And who will know the stranger's land?..."

In the second sequence, the self moves into its masculine other "on the bridge," where fog competes with vision at dawn. A dialectic, where "a thing cannot be known by its opposite," dominates "Dense Fog over the Bridge," which pushes the limits of obsession and rumination until it delivers perhaps the last intense lyric spell in Darwish's poetry, a dream approaching "fever" in sixteen successive quatrains that speak of jasmine and "every -ology" until the "I" reaches "the land of story." "Dense Fog" certainly invokes the Jericho Bridge (formerly the Allenby Bridge, after the British general who conquered Jerusalem in 1917). The bridge has become iconic for Palestinians and continues to serve as an oppressive checkpoint for those crossing between Jor-

dan and the West Bank. It was on this bridge, for example, that Darwish was recently interrogated and asked, as the famous poet, to recite some of his poems, to which he replied: "A prisoner does not sing to his prison warden."

Darwish managed to transform this subjugation into a more profound dialogue in his poetry, where the physicality of the bridge, and of those on it, is and is not itself. (Like "river," the manifestation of "bridge" in Darwish's late poetry is worthy of independent study. See, for example, "We Walk on the Bridge," or the occurrence of "river" in poems like "A Cloud from Sodom" or "A Mask ... for Majnoon Laila.") Recurrence simply seeks "the thing itself," or, as he said in "The Southerner's House" in 2003, "the transparency of the thing." And the journey home becomes more beautiful than home: "On the bridge," the mystery that was "extreme clarity" in "The Tragedy of Narcissus" becomes "neither mysterious nor clear," "like a dawn that yawns a lot." And Jericho (which was one of the first cities handed over to "Palestinian control" under the "peace agreement") is simply exposed: "Don't promise me anything / don't give me / a rose from Jericho." Darwish was looking "not for a burial place" but "a place to live in, to curse" if he wished it so. Short of that, he would continue to rotate on "the bridge," between entry and exit, interior and exterior, "like a sunflower," while absence is still "wearing trees." And he would be content with the "work [he has left] to do in myth."

And walking farther, toward this new task in myth, Darwish stumbles onto his ghost, his shadow, the archetypal exile, the wandering human, personified in the pre-Islamic Arab poet Tarafah Ibn al-Abd (who is also mentioned in *Mural*, and paired with "existentialists"). The title of the poem, "Like a Hand Tattoo in the Jahili Poet's Ode," draws from the opening line of Tarafah's famous ode, which describes the ruins of the beloved's dwelling that "sway

like the remnants of a tattoo on the back of a hand." The poem is suspended between two shadows of the same self, one that urges the other to "drop metaphor, and take a stroll on the woolly earth," while the other is deceived by "a cloud [that] knits its identity around [him]." This paradox is held in balance between "two epochs": the first "imagination's return to the real," the relics of "an ancestral notion," and the second "a butterfly trace in the light." (Thus "Hand Tattoo" is significant as an *ars poetica* that combines two major aesthetics of the history of Arab poetics in one poem.)

Darwish's easing of the lyric intensity takes hold in "Hand Tattoo" (and prepares the reader for "Counterpoint," the final quartet). The poem addresses the marginalized account of the Palestinian narrative in more personal and informal speech. "And as for anthem, the anthem of happy finale / has no poet." A third voice is eventually introduced. It grounds dialogue between the two, like "a bulldozer / driver who changed the spontaneity of this place / and cut the braids of your olive trees to match / the soldiers' hair." Governed by silence and absence, pointed dialogue follows. The struggle to break free from the shackles of identity in "Hand Tattoo" remains as it was in "The Hoopoe": "Place is the passion." And flight "in the words ... to anywhere" also persists. Still the "I and I" seek to "make amends" with their relics, since "in the presence of death we grasp only the accuracy of our names," a quotidian existentiality that is sieved through the mystery of identity. However, in time, "I and I" "found not one stone / that carries a victim's name," "a lewd absurdity."

Darwish does not resolve the poem and takes myth into the satiric final lines, which expose the eroticization of a place and its people, no matter how language subverts the plot of power. If Darwish had previously attempted to upend myth and history, through the affirmation of the ancient (Canaanite) self, and through

fraternity with a larger human narrative, he now comes full circle to the "lewd absurdity" that turns a victim into a new fascination of a "foreign tourist who loves [the native's] myths" and would love "to marry one of [his goddess's] widowed daughters." It's a startling ending of a very serious poem, a determined "frivolous" conclusion, in fact, and it returns us to the poem's beginning, when the poet wished his name had "fewer letters, / easier letters on the foreign woman's ears," a spoof and an almost elegiac reverberation of the nurse's instruction to Darwish regarding his name at the beginning of *Mural*.

This amusement and irreconcilability, this "late style," is a highly developed form of aesthetic resistance ("Every beautiful poem is an act of resistance," Darwish later wrote). It is fitting, therefore, that in the final movement of *Exile*, Edward Said appears, side by side with Darwish, where, on the one hand, "the intellectual reins in the novelist's rendition," and on the other, "the philosopher dissects the singer's rose." The two protagonists converge and part over exile as "two in one / like a sparrow's wings," in diction that seems like talk over coffee or dinner. Identity is exposed as "self-defense" that should not be "an inheritance / of a past" but is what its "owner creates": "I am the plural. Within my interior / my renewing exterior resides." And Darwish's final lines, his "farewell to the poem / of pain," embrace "the impossible" and "the suitable," "words / that immortalize their readers," one of the legacies he leaves behind and entrusts to us.

For the longest time I have been drawn to a passage on "intention" in Theodor Adorno's *Minima Moralia*. He talks about film, image, and reproduction, but the passage also brings to mind the "use" or "function" of poetry: "True intentions would only be possible by renouncing intention," Adorno says, and this "stems from the [am-

biguous] concept of significance." Significance hits the mark when "the objective figure, the realized expression, turns outward from itself and speaks"; equally, significance goes astray when "the figure is corrupted by counting in the interlocutor." This "danger" must be undertaken in a work of art: "Significant form, however esoteric, makes concessions to consumption; lack of significance is dilettantism by its immanent criteria. Quality is decided by the depth at which the work incorporates the alternatives within itself, and so masters them."

This seems to me a profound account of Darwish's work. Intention in his poetry gives way to language, in lyric form, without ever losing significance, despite the hazardous paradox of public appropriation of the work, which Darwish always guarded against by engaging several other selves; a spherical form, or an "orbit I never lose," as he said in "Hand Tattoo." "There is no love that is not an echo," Adorno says in another entry, and so it is for Darwish. Echo is return. Echo is reciprocity, and also the distance necessary for the "I" to reach its "other," for the "other" to recognize its "I." At a book signing for *Like Almond Blossoms or Farther* in Ramallah, 2005, Darwish wrote: "The Palestinian is not a profession or a slogan. He, in the first place, is a human being who loves life and is taken by almond blossoms and feels a shiver after the first autumn rain," "and this means the long occupation has failed to erase our human nature, and has not succeeded in submitting our language and emotions to the drought desired for them at the checkpoint." "Words are not land or exile" but the "density of a stanza that isn't written with letters" and "the yearning to describe the whiteness of almond blossoms."

Darwish would not neglect "the poem's end," he would leave "the door open/ for the Andalus of lyricists, and [choose] to stand / on the almond and pomegranate fence, shaking / the spiderwebs off [his]

grandfather's aba / while a foreign army was marching / the same old roads, measuring time/with the same old war machine." He clearly merges East and West (where "the East is not completely East/and the West is not completely West"), and the repetitive processing and expansion of lexicon and memory stand for a philosophy. The list of great writers who inform his poetry (or coincide with it, and he with theirs) is not merely a reflection of influence but an assertion of the shared well of human knowledge and spirit. "A poet is made up of a thousand poets," he used to say. He became deeply enmeshed in the complex, rich history of Arabic literary thought as he wrote a language for his time. His treatment of dialectic, metaphysics, mysticism, recurrence, form, duality, among other things, and deserves more advanced study than I can offer, but it also demands a daring, unapologetic openness to life, humanity, and the world: "If I were another I would have belonged to the road", "become two / on this road: I ... and another"; "If I were another I would leave this white paper and converse with a Japanese novel whose author climbs to the mountaintop to see what predator and marauder birds have done with his ancestors. Perhaps he is still writing, and his dead are still dying. But I lack the experience, and the metaphysical harshness"; "if I were another / I might still be myself the second time around."

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