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INTIMACIES

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introduction

INTIMACIES

In Memoriam Mahmoud Darwish

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There are really only two subjects in literature: the human being and freedom.
(Mahmoud Darwish, in Shatz 2002: 69)

The death of Mahmoud Darwish on 9 August 2008 left a tremendous void in the global literary and cultural landscape. In a career spanning nearly five decades, the Palestinian national poet published more than thirty volumes of poetry and prose, and his work was translated into more than twenty languages. His poems speak eloquently of the Palestinian catastrophe, but also of unrequited love, of the natural world, of the writing of poetry itself. When Darwish died – like Edward Said, much too young at 67 – a period of official mourning was declared in the West Bank and Gaza. Friends and readers across the world lamented his passing in exalted terms, describing him as ‘perhaps the single most important figure during the seminal period of the restoration of the Palestinian national imagination’ (Khalidi 2008: 75) and as ‘one of the last great world poets’ (‘Mahmoud Darwish’ 2008) whose ‘whole being, his whole life, drew its meaning only in and through the poem’ (al-Azzawi 2008: 41). The South African poet Breyten Breytenbach wrote movingly:

Mahmoud is gone. The exile is over. He will not have lived to see the end of the suffering of his people – the mothers and the sons and the children who cannot know why they should be born into the horror of this life, the arbitrary cruelty of their dying. He will not fade away . . . not the voice that spoke from the ageless spaces of poetry, not the verses, not the verses, not the timeless love-making of his words. (Breytenbach 2008)

We are left without Darwish, but with his poetry, ‘an entire continent of poems whispering and singing inside Arabic’ (Antoon 2008: 5). In the outpouring of personal and critical appreciations that commemorated his passing, a pattern began to emerge, in which Darwish’s twin roles as the Palestinian national poet and as a poet of human ‘universals’ were regularly named as the defining contradiction of his life and work. Some critics, like the Lebanese poet Abdo Wazen, argued that Darwish managed to resolve the seeming conflict between these positions through his insistence on the humanitarian meaning of the Palestinian cause: ‘He felt that he had raised the cause to the level of metaphor, transforming the struggles of the past into a miraculous sign with a universal address that spoke to all those who are oppressed, those who dream, and those who wait’ (Wazen 2008: 27). But for others, the overtly collective voice of his earlier work as a ‘poet of resistance’ was at odds with his shift to a personal tone from the mid-1990s onwards; these readers tended to suggest that Darwish’s most important contribution was either political or poetic, but not both.¹

1 See especially the range of responses collected in *Banipal* 33 (2008) and in Nassar and Rahman (2008).

The terms of these different assessments are familiar from older debates about the relationship of ‘literature’ to ‘politics’, both in Arabic criticism, where the push to develop a literature of commitment (*iltizām*, a translation of Jean-Paul Sartre’s *engagement*) in the 1950s was met with an equally powerful resistance to such demands, and in anglophone criticism, where Marxist, anticolonial and/or resistance literature paradigms continue to vie with New Critical or linguistic approaches. The reasons for the exceptional prominence of the art-versus-politics disputes in Darwish criticism probably have as much to do with his extraordinary popular reach and his increasingly public voice over the past forty years as they do with our innate resistance to the cohabitation of the intimate and the politically engaged. Darwish’s own archive of statements on this topic is almost impossibly rich and varied, and his interlocutors can find support for nearly any conceptualization of his poetic practice, sometimes within the same utterance, as the tantalizingly broad scope of the epigraph above suggests.

One of the major difficulties when reading and writing about Darwish, then, is to find a methodology that can address the relationship *between* the specificity of his commitment to the Palestinian cause and the universalized language of his pursuit of affective authenticity and artistic freedom, one which does not succumb to the temptation to see these preoccupations as

either inherently opposed or easily reconciled. What would it mean, for instance, to read Darwish as a poet of love, as he insisted on describing himself on a number of occasions? Despite the multiple references to love in his poems, and despite the openly erotic character of many of his titles and passages, few critics (with the possible exception of Angelika Neuwirth and Abdo Wazen) seriously engage with Darwish as a love poet. Even when Darwish is thought of in these terms, the idea of love is very quickly elided in favour of the more familiar themes of exile and the loss of Palestine, as the publisher's blurb on the back cover of *The Butterfly's Burden* (2007) makes clear. Once Darwish was branded the 'Palestinian national poet', such readings suggest, it became difficult, if not impossible, to address any of his work, even the most lyrical and quasi-Symbolist (such as the sonnet sequence in *The Stranger's Bed*), in a way that did not immediately assimilate his lyricism within the question of Palestine.²

A cursory glance at Darwish's titles shows him using the words 'love' and its synonyms from the start of his career. From *A Lover from Palestine* and the Rita poems to the impassioned sequences of *The Stranger's Bed* and the long lovers' dialogue in 'I Don't Want This Poem to End' ['Lā urīd lihādhi-l-qaṣīda an tantahī'], the reader sees the lands of exile covered in all the synonyms and variants of love – *philia*, *agape*, *eros*. In particular, Darwish's uniquely gentle, sustained meditation on the ethics of myriad human relationships – between enamoured self and loving other, Palestinian self and Israeli other (and vice versa), male self and female other (and vice versa), baffled self and hostile other, lost self and found other – calls for additional scrutiny, not least because of the metaphysics of care and openness to the other that they advocate, and the promise that they hold of liberation from sadly familiar political dogma.

If there is a word to be associated with Darwish on love (and Darwish in love), it should probably be 'transport', understood both as ecstasy and the separation of the poet from himself. In his remarkable autobiography, *Fī ḥaḍrat al-ghiyāb* (*In the Presence of Absence*), which stands as a sort of Palestinian iteration of Goethe's *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, Darwish's prose consistently breaks into rhyme and verse, carrying the reader to the transcendent location from which the poet speaks (Neuwirth 2008: 168). Early in the text Darwish tells us (or rather, tells his second self, the 'you' to whom the text is addressed) that he is always with himself, that he and himself are 'two voyagers ... never separated by mirror or path [*ṭarīq*], never separated except for a few hours during which they became certain of the power of the female over the male' (Darwish 2006b: 11). The erotic experience displaces and decentres the poet, carries him away, just as it displaces Adam from the Garden of Eden into human history (Darwish 2006b: 14). Love takes the form of a Rilkean angel with wings light enough to tear us from the earth, a bull that knocks us over and moves on,

2 For a rare discussion of *The Stranger's Bed* as love poetry embedded in Palestinian history, see Hadidi (2008).

a storm that erases all before it (Darwish 2006b: 132): multiple incarnations that take the poet to another orbit so that he might determine himself by himself (Darwish 2006b: 127). Love is what makes the poet's self-transparency and social triumph possible: 'No tribe was victorious without a poet, and no poet was ever victorious unless vanquished by love' (Darwish 2006b: 27).

This separation from the self becomes a line of flight towards the beloved. Far from being content with this literary trope, Darwish foregrounds his attachment to the Arabic linguistic devices that make the plural possible. Perhaps more than any writer since Ibn 'Arabī, Darwish makes a point of praising the possibilities offered by the letter 'n' (nūn, ن) in Arabic. As both letter and suffix, the 'n' signifies the dual, the plural, the feminine, the rhythms – poetic and spiritual – that animate the young Darwish, as he tells us in *Fi ḥadrat al-ghiyāb*:

The separate letter 'n' attracts you like a copper plate big enough to receive as its guest a perfectly formed full moon. It rings and longs for fulfilment but is never full, resounding endlessly no matter how far you go ... The 'n' of the feminine [*nūn al-niswā*] and the plural and the dual and the heart of the 'I' [*al-anā*] and the outstretched wings of the 'we' [*naḥmu*]. The *Sūra* of the Merciful [*al-Raḥmān*] will take you away, to faith coupled with rhythm ... And you will fall in love with poetry, and the rhythm inflected with 'n' will take you away into the white night. (Darwish 2006b: 27)

The reference to the *Sūra* of the Merciful (Q 55) recalls the 'ān' sound that returns at the end of every verse therein. Furthermore the verse that runs like a refrain throughout Q55 – 'So which of your Lord's blessings would you two deny?' [*fa bi-ayyi ālā'i rabbikumā tukadhdhibān*] – returns at the end of the poet's autobiography bearing evocations of love, poetry, flight and the Qur'ān:

Inspiration is the heart's proof of what it does not know, of what is higher
Higher and farther away. I see a bird, carrying me and carrying you, with us as its
wings, on a journey beyond the visions; a journey with neither beginning nor end,
neither aim nor goal ...

Inspiration's rude harassment of the poet is a rainbow, as is the poet's enchantment with the prose of the Qur'ān:

So which of your Lord's blessings would you two deny?
And you and I are absent, and you and I are present
And absent

So which of your Lord's blessings would you two deny?
(Darwish 2006b: 180–1)

The bird described matches the earlier description of the Arabic word *naḥnu* ['we'], forging an image with which the poet points to his persistence in his task as a poet still in love with the letter 'n' and all of its connotations. In this last chapter of *Fī ḥadrat al-ghiyāb*, Darwish lists what might usefully be called his favourite things, or at least those that are closest to his heart – lines, poetry, prose, laziness, meaning, happiness, voyages, clouds, rainbows and so on – ending every paragraph and starting the following paragraph with a new element from the list. Darwish's invocation of Q55:13 redirects the question about denying the Lord's blessings to himself, or rather to both of his selves, emphasizing the blessed character of all the constituents of his poetic existence.³

Darwish's extensive reliance on the language of the sacred, both biblical and Qur'ānic, undergoes a significant evolution over the course of his career, initially being used in the register of struggle and resistance but later put to more intimate uses (Wazen 2006: 92–5; Neuwirth 2008: 179–81). Hence the echoes of both Sufism and eros in 'Sonnet 1', where a love that is both divine and human becomes the experience whereby the beloved inhabits the space between the poet's two selves:⁴

If you were to be the last of what God said to me, then let
Your revelation [*nuzūluki*] be that of the 'I' [*al-anā*] in the dual.
(Darwish 2004: 554)

In speaking of the *nuzūl* (literally, 'descent') of the beloved, Darwish extends the comparison between her and the words of God: one speaks of the *nuzūl* of a verse of the Qur'ān. The arrival/revelation of the beloved not only separates the poet from himself, it also displaces deities and mythologies through a disjuncture comparable to that of the revelation of the Qur'ān itself. Such is the power of this event that it undoes hitherto fast distinctions:

You stabbed heaven with the gazelle's horn, and the words flowed
Like dew in natural veins. What is the name of the poem
Before the binaries of creature [*al-khalq*] and Creator [*al-Ḥaqq*], between the
distant sky
And the cedar of your bed, when blood longs for blood, and marble moans?
(Darwish 2004: 554)

The flow of words, like the coming of the beloved, is a supernatural event that changes the order of everything: dew flows in veins rather than on

3 Cf. (Rooke 2008: 16) One further invocation of Q55 is worth mentioning, though there is no room for a detailed analysis here: In 'Like the *Nun* in *Surat al-Rahman*' ('Ka-l-nūn fī sūrat al-raḥmān'), where the poet remembers his grandfather teaching him the Qur'an, and constructs the image of his grandfather's children (most of whom are either dead or exiled at the time of the poem's composition) standing in a semi-circle around 'the *nun* in *Surat al-Rahman*' (Darwish 2006c: 80).

4 Cf. Abdo Wazen's gloss on the literary history of this topos, especially with respect to this sonnet (Wazen 2006: 37–8).

5 The relationship between dew, love and the genesis of poetry occurs regularly in Darwish, as in the following passage from *Fī ḥadrat al-ghiyāb*: ‘And it [love] descends upon us sometimes in the form of a night dew when a magical hand milks a passing cloud’ (Darwish 2006b: 132).

6 There is an interesting comparison to be developed between the spatial dimension of Darwish’s sonnet and Derrida’s recent reading of Celan’s ‘Große, Glühende Wölbung’: the genesis of the lyric takes place between two infinities, rather than, as older and more restrictive readings of Darwish would have it, always in relation to a specific location on the land (Derrida 2003).

leaves⁵, solids ache and the space between heaven and earth is spanned by a poem, if the word ‘poem’ could be used to name the words that come to the poet on this occasion.⁶ Most troubling of all is the opposition between Creator and creature – another staple of Ibn ‘Arabī – that has now been deconstructed by the *nuzūl* of the beloved. The poem ends with the poet declaring that nothing is as it was any more: ‘Poetry is not poetry, prose is not prose.’ Everything has been transformed since

I dreamed that you were the last thing
That God said to me when I saw you two in a dream, and the words were ...
(Darwish 2004: 555)

Here the undecidables have reached the point where they cannot be expressed in verse. The poet seems to be saying that, having seen his beloved and himself (his other self, from whom he has been transported by the experience of love) in a dream, he dreamed that his beloved was the last word addressed by God to him, thus leading to the genesis of the poem. However, the ‘you two’ could be read as referring to a vision of the beloved *and* God, and that it is this mystical-erotic vision that proves inspiring. The poem derives its lyrical force from the oscillation of meaning between the sacred and the erotic.

The sacred character of the beloved means that every love is incomparable, wholly other:

No love resembles love, and there can be no defining the force of attraction [*jādhbiyya* – attraction, gravity] that removes someone [*al-kā’in*] from his being, so that he no longer asks about his estranged self, nor does he ask about his freedom now that it has become voluntary slavery: I am yours. (Darwish 2006b: 129)

The transcendent quality of Darwish’s love derives less from idolatry than from a deep concern for and responsibility to the other, be it the beloved or anyone else. If no love resembles love, and no love resembles another love, then every love must be treated like the singular, sacred experience that it is. We are not far from Derrida’s ethical injunction that ‘tout autre est tout autre’: the loving, responsible relationship to the other is irreducible to a fixed pattern or predictable paradigm (Derrida 1999: 114–22; Attridge 2010: 63–9). The most that the loving writer can do is assume the posture of generosity and care, ever open to the other’s arrival (Derrida 2002: 363–5).

Hence Darwish’s preoccupation with hospitality, and in particular with being hospitable, as in the following diary entry:

George Steiner tells me: 'The poet must be a guest ...'
And I say: 'And a host!' (Darwish 2008: 255)

Hence, too, the many strangers who appear as visitors in his poems (Darwish 1997: 35), such as the troubling 'enemy who drinks tea in our shack' in 'As He Draws Away ...' (Darwish 2006c: 192–7). But perhaps the most moving image of hospitality, and of the loving poet as host and guest, is found in 'Love is Like a Small Café' ['Kamaqhā ṣaghīr huwa al-ḥubb']. Here the topoi of desire, concern and openness to the other combine to proclaim the unexpected and yet strangely familiar experience that goes by the name of 'love'. Love, Darwish explains, is like a small café on the 'street of strangers', its doors open to everyone (Darwish 2005: 75). The size of the café varies with the weather: it is full when it rains, and when the weather is nice people stay outside. On the particular rainy day mentioned in the poem, the poet awaits the unknown [*gharība*] beloved:

I sit here, O stranger, in the corner.
What is the colour of your eyes? What is your name? What shall I
Call you when you pass by me, as I sit here
Waiting for you?
(Darwish 2005: 75)

Inevitably, she does not come. The poet muses:

Perhaps she whom I
Awaited, waited for me ... Or for
Another man – She waited for us and did not recognize him/me
And said: I am here waiting for you.
[What is the colour of your eyes? Which wine do you like?
And what is your name? How shall I call you when
You pass in front of me?]
(Darwish 2005: 76)

The lovers have the same experience with different people. The invocation of the him/me duality returns Darwish to the possibilities offered by the lover's two selves: love does not often go where and how it is supposed to, lovers make plans to meet and end up meeting someone else, and even that someone else can end up being a second self. These variations are all accommodated by the small café that is love, always open to the strangers who frequent it only to miss each other.

Despite his vast array of poems and texts about and around love, Darwish remains perplexed by this most baffling of events, not least because, as he

puts it, he does not know how to love (Darwish 2006b: 129). Love only seems to exist when he imagines himself in love, when he sees in his mind's eye a woman awaiting a lover at the entrance to a cinema, and he takes himself to be that lover (*fa-atakhayyal annī dhāk al-aḥad*), building a scenario of love and writing himself into it (Darwish 2006b: 134–5). In response to whether this implies that love is acting, or that he merely enacts love, he responds,

I invented love when I had to / when I walked alone by the river / Or when the percentage of salt in my body grew too high I invented the river ... (Darwish 2006b: 135)

This is, perhaps, the best that can occur when the self is left open to the other: not only love, but literary invention. The arrival of the other, or of the self as other, generates poetry (Derrida 1998: 60–1; Attridge 2004: 22–7). Darwish's encounter with the world, and his steady offerings of faith and rhythm, of love amid hostility, of caring attention amid brutality, makes good on Ezra Pound's dictum to 'make it new': a new idiom, unencumbered by slogans and party lines, capable of seeing past the intractable cycles of war and relative calm (we cannot call it peace), to promise us a better understanding of what it means to be alive, ever alert to what art and poetry can do.

The essays collected in this issue seek to explore and open up these possibilities in Darwish's writing. The contributors consider some of Darwish's most demanding pieces, many of them among his later works, in both English and Arabic. Their investigations offer a range of new methods for responding to Darwish and engaging with the artistic and political 'intimacies' of his poetry and prose. As editors, our aim is not to synthesize these approaches; instead, we seek to emphasize the contributors' shared effort to move beyond some of the more predictable or reductive strategies for understanding the intersections of activism and abstraction in Darwish's work.

Barbara Harlow's essay challenges the notion that to read Darwish's writing in terms of its political and historical reference – what she calls, after Ibrahim Muhawi, 'geography and the event' – is to fail to attend to its literariness. On the contrary, literature has a special capacity to provide evidence for worldly judgements, and to hold transgressors to account. *Memory for Forgetfulness*, Darwish's account of a day during the Israeli siege of Beirut in August 1982, is an example of just such a 'contribution to an emerging international scriptural corpus that would contribute to drafting a "judgment the Palestinian revolution deserves"', including a legal judgement of the Israeli state for war crimes. Harlow argues that Darwish's work can be seen as a 'narratological *poesis*' of twentieth- and twenty-first-century

Palestinian history, which we might read alongside official documents of human rights violations like the 2009 Goldstone Report. Such a *poesis* seizes the ‘permission to narrate’ that has been denied to Palestinians, making the work of the poet unique, as Darwish described it, ‘because it is rooted in his relationship to the actual as it unfolds’ (Darwish 1995: 64).

Patrick Williams also reads Darwish’s aesthetic as a response to the Palestinian crisis, but instead of emphasizing its evidentiary impulse, he sees it as a form of ‘late style’, after Said and Adorno: it is resistant to reconciliation and comfortable dwelling in contradiction. Darwish insisted that the political poem is ‘nothing but a harangue’ (2006a: 14), and yet some of his late work, like *State of Siege* and much of the collection *A River Dies of Thirst*, responds directly to Israeli assaults. He asserted the primacy of the aesthetic – poetry ‘has to care about itself’ (Jaya 2002) – and yet, with the cry ‘no aesthetics outside my freedom’ (Darwish 2002), Darwish subordinates his poetics to the demand for better circumstances in which poetry might be written. For Williams, *State of Siege* exemplifies Said’s characterization of artistic late style as fragmentary, difficult and catastrophic: it refuses to surrender to the forces of oppression while holding out a utopian hope for resolution. Darwish’s late engagements with the idea of exile, and with his own mortality, thus represent not simply a turn to ‘universal’ themes, but a further expression of non-reconciliation as the refusal to be defeated, even by death.

Ferial Ghazoul takes a closer look at the generic and stylistic affiliations of Darwish’s work, reading his long poem *Jidāriyya (Mural)* as a fusion of epic and lyric that gives rise to what she calls the ‘epic hymn’ – a translation of Darwish’s term *al-nashid al-mallhāmi* – or the ‘*jidāriyya-qaṣida*’ (mural-poem): a fusion of the epic narrative of a people and the private lyricism of the poet. The poem is a long meditation on Darwish’s own mortality – he thought it would be his last poem, though he lived almost another decade – that simultaneously denotes the Palestinian catastrophe, playing on Darwish’s own synecdochic association with Palestine. Ghazoul argues that *Mural* is an epic in progress, just as Palestine is a nation-state in progress: epic features (a journey to the underworld, allusions to classical, biblical and historical epic) are tempered by the use of refrains, lists and repeated motifs, which create coherence through pattern rather than through a linear narrative. This form evokes the dispossessed and diasporic condition of the Palestinian present, while striving for the epic totality that the achievement of a state would represent.

Charlotta Salmi, by contrast, challenges the tendency to read Darwish’s late work in light of his status as a national representative, an approach which she argues falters when considered against his later engagements with the motifs of exile and return. Rather than striving for a symbolic return through a literary recreation of the homeland, as in some of his early work,

in Darwish's late work – represented here by *Don't Apologize for What You've Done* – he abandons its very possibility. The effort to imagine a poetic return is figured as a form of escapism which by definition cannot be satisfactory, since it asserts an unattainable desire to recover a lost past, particularly at a time when the national movement's focus on statehood has meant that the demand for the right of return has been sidelined. But Darwish is also concerned to preserve the private significance of exile, which he posits as the condition of possibility for poetic freedom.

Finally, Tom Langley also considers the shift from the national to the personal in Darwish's late work, but he contends that the magnitude of this shift has been exaggerated, since Darwish's turn to love poetry can also be understood as part of a political project. He reads *State of Siege* in light of Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer*, now a common point of reference for those seeking to describe Palestinian life under occupation. *State of Siege* corroborates the turn to Agamben in its depiction of Palestinians' exclusion from political life and the reduction of their existence to the struggle to survive. But rather than limiting itself to documenting Palestinian abjection, the poem also links this experience to the 'bare life' of Jews in the Nazi camps. Darwish thus posits, like Agamben, the notion that 'bare life' is the modern human condition, but – also like Agamben – he sees this condition as a source of agency, not a passive expression of victimhood. It is in this context, Langley suggests, that we should understand Darwish's frequent references to love in *State of Siege*, remembering Agamben's suggestion that the state of exception is also the space of love. Darwish appropriates the space of exception as the realm of love and poetry, locating it not simply outside the law, but beyond its reach. The turn to 'bare life' is not an abnegation of resistance, but an attempt to find a new starting point for the struggle.

In 'Exile IV: Counterpoint', Darwish's elegy for Edward Said, he writes:

In a world without sky, land becomes
an abyss. And the poem, one of condolence's gifts.
And an adjective of wind: northern or southern.
Don't describe what the camera sees of your wounds
and scream to hear yourself, to know
that you're still alive, and that life
on this earth is possible. Invent a wish
for speech, devise a direction or mirage
to prolong the hope, and sing.
Aesthetic is a freedom.
I said: A life that is defined only
in antithesis to death ... isn't a life!
(Darwish 2009a: 191)

In seeking to remember and honour Darwish's life and work, we are mindful of his insistence that the 'scream' of living comes from a place of poetic freedom. But the reverse is also true: the freedom of his aesthetic is grounded in his work's origins in 'life / on this earth', in what Said would have called its worldliness. Darwish's writing commemorates the struggles and setbacks of Palestinian existence since 1948 at the same time that it 'invent[s] a wish for speech', for words that might express an idea not yet thought or conjure up a world not yet achieved. He evokes the deplorable – the abyss – alongside the possible, the prolonging of hope, reminding us more vividly than almost any other poet of the last century that poetry that speaks of politics is still, and above all, poetry. In his last book, *A River Dies of Thirst*, Darwish railed once more against the tyranny of literary limitation: 'Poetry – what is it? It is the words we say when we hear it or read it. This is poetry! We don't need any proof' (Darwish 2009b: 131).

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