

## Introduction

In the Arab world Mahmoud Darwish is acknowledged as one of the greatest living poets. He has been awarded a number of international literary prizes, and has read his poetry to audiences in many countries around the world. When he gives a reading in any Arab country today, his audience runs into the thousands, with many people turned away for lack of space. He has so far published fourteen volumes of poetry, the first of which, *Olive Leaves*, appeared in 1964, and the latest, *Eleven Planets*, in 1993. His *Diwan*, or collected poems, comprising the first nine volumes, has been reprinted numerous times. He also has seven prose works to his name, including this one. Many poems and articles published in various magazines, as well as a number of television and newspaper interviews, have not yet been collected. Selections from his poetry have appeared in translation in at least twenty languages, but, considering his stature, he is not as well known in the English-speaking world as he should be.

This work, *Memory for Forgetfulness* (*Dha:kira li-l-nisya:n*), which grew out of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon that began on 6 June 1982, originally appeared in 1986, under the title *The Time: Beirut / The Place: August*, in *Al Karmel*, the presti-

gious literary quarterly Darwish has edited since 1981.<sup>1</sup> It was later published under its present title in Beirut and Rabat, the Beirut edition using the original title as subtitle. Aside from the addition of a few breaks, the text translated here is the one that appeared in *Al Karmel*; I have followed the Arabic as closely as I could without sacrificing fluency.

Mahmoud Darwish was born in the village of Birwe, district of Acre, in Upper Galilee on 13 March 1942. In 1948, after its inhabitants, including the child and his family, had fled to Lebanon, the newly formed Israel destroyed the village. Darwish's family, as he tells us in the book, stole back into the homeland, but too late to be included in the census of the Palestinian Arabs who had remained in the country. Until 1966 the Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel were under military rule and subject to a complex set of emergency regulations, including one that required them to secure a permit for travel inside the country. Lacking identity papers, the poet was vulnerable and was kept under constant watch by the Israeli military. Between 1961 and 1969 he was imprisoned and put under house arrest several times. He had not committed any crimes other than writing poetry and traveling without a permit inside the country: "For the first time they'd given us permission to leave Haifa, but we had to be back at night to report to the police station. . . . 'Put this in your record: I'm present!' " The rhythmic return to the poet's

1. Nos. 21–22 (1986):4–96. I have used the accepted transliterated spelling for Arabic names but for other words have adopted a more accurate system, as follows: emphatic consonants are rendered in capitals; the voiced pharyngeal fricative, with a question mark; the voiceless, with *H*; the glottal stop, with an apostrophe; the voiced dental fricative with "dh"; the voiceless palatal fricative, with "sh"; the voiced uvular fricative, with "gh"; the voiceless, with a "kh"; and long vowels, by means of a following colon.

life in the homeland, including the periods of restricted movement, forms the pole of memory in the text, while the events surrounding the invasion of Lebanon and the siege of Beirut form the pole of forgetfulness.

Nearly ten years earlier, in *Journal of an Ordinary Grief* (*Yawmiyya:t al-Huzn al-ʿa:di*: [1973], p. 94), Darwish had described Palestinian existence under Israeli rule as a paradox:

You want to travel to Greece? You ask for a passport, but you discover you're not a citizen because your father or one of your relatives had fled with you during the Palestine war. You were a child. And you discover that any Arab who had left his country during that period and had stolen back in had lost his right to citizenship.

You despair of the passport and ask for a laissez-passer. You find out you're not a resident of Israel because you have no certificate of residence. You think it's a joke and rush to tell it to your lawyer friend: "Here, I'm not a citizen, and I'm not a resident. Then where and who am I?" You're surprised to find the law is on their side, and you must prove you exist. You ask the Ministry of the Interior, "Am I here, or am I absent? Give me an expert in philosophy, so that I can prove to him I exist."

Then you realize that philosophically you exist but legally you do not.

In 1971 Darwish left Israel for Cairo, where he worked for the leading Egyptian daily, *Al Ahrām*. In 1973 he joined the Palestine Liberation Organization as assistant to the director of the Palestine Research Center in Beirut, and helped edit its scholarly journal, *Shu'u:n FilasTi:niya* (*Palestinian Affairs*). Soon after, he

became the director of the center and chief editor of the journal. In 1984, while still recuperating from the heart attack he alludes to in this work, he was unanimously elected president of the Union of Palestinian Writers and Journalists. And in 1987 he became a member of the highest Palestinian decision-making body, the PLO Executive Committee, from which he resigned on 13 September 1993, when the government of Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization signed a "Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements" (otherwise known as "Gaza-Jericho First")—not necessarily because he opposed it, but because he did not want to be held responsible "for this risky accord." "My role on the Executive Committee," he said, "was that of a symbol. I was there to provide a moderating influence on the tension and to help reconcile differences. I have never been a man of politics. I am a poet with a particular perspective on reality."<sup>2</sup>

The historical background to *Memory for Forgetfulness* is the siege of Beirut ("the small island of the spirit") in 1982. For more than two months, from 14 June to 23 August, the Israelis and their Phalangist supporters surrounded and besieged the Palestinian resistance and their nationalist Lebanese allies. In 1985, three years after the Palestinian leadership were driven out and the Israeli army entered the city, Darwish isolated himself in his Paris apartment for ninety days or so, and wrote with a passionate commitment this masterpiece of Arabic literature. Its form is that of a memoir, the record of a single day on the streets of Beirut when bombardment from land, sea, and air was one of the most intensive a city had ever known. The *Sunday Times*

2. *Al-Qods Al-Arabi*, 17 November 1993.

of London for 8 August 1982 quoted a cable sent to the State Department by then U.S. Ambassador to Lebanon Robert S. Dillon: "Simply put, tonight's saturation shelling was as intense as anything we have seen. There was no 'pinpoint accuracy' against targets in 'open spaces.' It was not a response to Palestinian fire. This was a blitz against West Beirut."

Extraordinary conditions foreground the ordinary, and the heroic consists in living every moment to the full. With shells exploding everywhere, the effort to maintain the primacy of the quotidian becomes a challenge to the bombs, and an ordinary task like making coffee turns into a meditation on the aesthetics of hand movement and the art of combining different ingredients to create something new. In a conversation with me in Tunis in April 1993, Darwish said that although Palestinian writing had not dared admit to fear, his own text was an attempt to confront the fact of fear, the violence and the destruction. By calmly carrying on with daily routines, one could defy the onslaught and take hold of oneself. Sheer survival during a blitz assumes heroic proportions, and a walk on the streets of the city that apocalyptic day, 6 August 1982, Hiroshima Day, becomes an odyssey.

The book opens with the author waking at dawn from a dream and closes with him going to sleep at the end of the day. To describe his state of being in the paradise collapsing all around him, he identifies himself with Adam, the original epic hero of human history: "I didn't know my name, or the name of this place. . . . What is my name? Who gave me my name? Who is going to call me Adam?" An accomplished poet could not treat an event of this magnitude as an ordinary event, as did the news announcers on the BBC and Radio Monte Carlo whom

Darwish mocks: “‘Intensive bombardment of Beirut.’ *Intensive bombardment of Beirut!* Is this aired as an ordinary news item about an ordinary day in an ordinary war in an ordinary newscast?” Understandably, he wanted to write about it in an extraordinary way that reflected the existential situation of a people whose history since 1948 has been a nightmare from which there has been no waking.

To convey the magnitude of the invasion and the siege, the pole of forgetfulness, the poet puts the act of writing itself under siege, lest the magic power of words seduce readers into a comfortable relationship with the text, just as the Palestinian Movement itself misread Lebanon and was seduced into an easy relation with it in which the basic assumption was false: “We write the script and the dialogue; we design the scenario; we pick the actors, the cameraman, the director, and the producer; and we distribute the roles without realizing we’re the ones cast in them.” Even death is not real unless it is borne witness to in writing: “The one looking for a paper in the midst of this hell is running from a solitary, to a collective death. . . . He’s looking for some kind of participation in this death, for a witness [*sha:hid*] who can give evidence, for a gravestone over a corpse.” Existence itself in the Arab and Islamic view, as the segment from Ibn Athir confirms, is understood through the metaphor of writing: “Then God . . . created the Pen and commanded it, so that it wrote into being everything that will exist till the Day of Judgment.”

What Darwish attempts is a pure gesture in which writing itself becomes the dominant metaphor. He offers us a multivocal text that resembles a broken mirror, reassembled to present the viewer with vying possibilities of clarity and fracture. On the

page different kinds of writing converge: the poem, both verse and prose; dialogue; Scripture; history; myth; myth in the guise of history; narrative fiction; literary criticism; and dream visions. Each segment can stand on its own, yet each acquires a relational or a dialectical meaning, a history, that is contingent upon the context provided for it by all the other segments of the work. As we move forward in the text, we are at the same time moving vertically through all these different kinds of writing, and back and forth in time. Thus the segment on Hiroshima creates a context for an apocalyptic interpretation of Beirut during the siege.<sup>3</sup> Although this inclusiveness reflects breakdown, it also embodies a synthesis. Suspended between wholeness and fracture, the text, like Palestine, is a crossroads of competing meanings.

Homeland is to keep alive the memory, Darwish says in *Journal of an Ordinary Grief*, and to the extent that this book accomplishes that, it too is a kind of homeland and the experi-

3. Cf. David Gilmour, *Dispossessed: The Ordeal of the Palestinians* (London: Sphere Books, 1982), pp. 223–24:

The bombardment of Beirut was one of the most horrific events of recent history. Day after day Israeli gunners sat outside the city lobbing thousands of shells into the densely packed apartment blocks. From the sea the Israeli navy pounded the coastal districts while F16 aeroplanes screeched overhead terrorizing the population and levelling whole buildings. According to the *Sunday Times* [8 August 1982] among the targets hit by the Israelis in the two months following their arrival in Beirut were “five UN buildings, a hundred and thirty-four embassies or diplomatic residences, six hospitals or clinics, one mental institute, the Central Bank, five hotels, the Red Cross, Lebanese and foreign media outlets and innumerable private homes.” Apart from the six thousand PLO guerillas in the besieged city, there were some half million Lebanese and Palestinian civilians, and every day of the bombardment about two hundred or three hundred of them were killed. Many of them were burned to death by phosphorus bombs. The Canadian ambassador, Theodore Arcand, said [*Sunday Times*, 8 August 1982] that the destruction was so comprehensive it “would make Berlin of 1945 look like a tea party.”

ence of reading it represents a return. Engaging readers directly in the creation of this meaning, the text remains, in the terms proposed by Umberto Eco, an “open work,” in which every reception is “both an *interpretation* and a *performance* [emphasis in original].”<sup>4</sup>

Meaning has no closure here, just as the historical experience of the Palestinian people in its present phase has no closure. For example, although the dream that opens the book is mysterious at first, its relevance unfolds at strategic intervals until its significance to the structure of the work as a whole is revealed. This way reading becomes a constant unfolding of meaning, and both belief and disbelief must remain suspended and open to the resolution of the various narratives woven together in the text, with a return to the homeland, the originary text and source of meaning, remaining a possibility. “In its essence,” Darwish says in the opening words to *Journal of an Ordinary Grief*, “writing remains the other shape of the homeland.”

To the extent that Darwish combines the private voice with the public, his personal experience reflects the collective experience of the Palestinian people. Our first encounter with the Palestinian paradox in this work is in the title, *Memory for Forgetfulness*. The deceptively simple preposition obscures as much as it reveals. His initial intention when he first set himself to the task, Darwish said, was to write down the recurring dream that opens and closes the work, and haunts it throughout. But to his surprise, he produced a long text about the Beirut phase of the Palestinian experience, *tajribat* Beirut. Thus writing the

4. Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), p. 49.



book was for him a recollection in tranquillity, a use of memory *for the purpose of* forgetfulness, for purging the violent emotions attached to the events described. The poet wanted to forget. But for the reader the poet's recollection is transformed into a text and his purgation becomes an act of memory, a monument, *against* forgetfulness and the ravages of history.

Seeing the invasion and the siege, which meant the departure of the Palestinian idea from Beirut, as a final attempt to ensure a collective amnesia about Palestine, the poet chose to join battle against oblivion. This choice recalls Hölderlin's line: "*Was bleibt aber / Stiften die Dichter*" (But that which remains / Is established by the poets).<sup>5</sup> It is no surprise that Darwish, as an artist, should translate the Palestinian experience of war and siege into universal terms, that he should link history and art, for as the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo explains, the work of art, in opening a historical horizon, is an enactment (a setting-into-work) of the truth: there is no truth without history. The work of art "is the act by which a certain historical and cultural world is instituted, in which a specific historical 'humanity' sees the characteristic traits of its own experience of the world defined in an originary way."<sup>6</sup>

The relationship of the book to Palestinian history is not so clear-cut, however, for the title raises the question of destiny, or historical inevitability. The title's preposition reifies the abstract nouns on either side of it and unites them in a relationship of part to whole. Forgetfulness here is not personal and private, but a fact of history, an infinite horizon of blue nothingness,

5. Quoted in Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, trans. Jon R. Snyder (Cambridge, England: Polity Press, 1988), p. 66.

6. Ibid., p. 66.

and writing is like the ship with the Palestinians aboard, making its way into an unknown and inscribing its course in its own wake. Since *memory* refers among other things both to Palestine (“And the sung beauty, the object of worship, has moved away to a memory now joining battle against the fangs of a forgetfulness made of steel”) and to the Palestinian people (“Memory doesn’t remember but receives the history raining down on it”), this reading carries fearful implications, suggesting perhaps the author’s dread that the dream of the return will not be realized, that the Palestinians may remain in exile, falling victim to history and joining the long caravans of oblivion: “I don’t see a shore. I don’t see a dove.”

Meditation on the relationship of writing to history has engaged many writers. The monumental aspect of writing also engages Eliot in *Four Quartets*: “Every phrase and every sentence is an end and a beginning, / Every poem an epitaph” (“Little Gidding”). Every segment in Darwish’s text is both an end and a beginning. In the monumental dimension of the book, which can be seen as a memorial to the resistance of the Lebanese and Palestinian people, the poet also puts his signature on the landscape of history: “I want a language that I can lean on and that can lean on me, that asks me to bear witness and that I can ask to bear witness.” The Arabic root meaning “bearing witness,” *shahida*, also produces “gravestone” or “epitaph,” *sha:hid*, and “martyr,” *shahi:d*—words that echo throughout the work. Here, writing is history’s witness, its epitaph: both *sha:hid*.

When the act of writing is conscripted as metaphor, the text loses its stability. In conversation Darwish has described his text as *mutawattir* (nervous, tense, taut, on edge). It was an attempt to get the Lebanese phase of Palestinian history, the madness

that was Beirut (*junu:n Beirut*, also meaning “possession by Beirut”), and his attachment to the city out of his system. Once he had finished, he sent it to the publisher. He has not read it since. In “Burnt Norton,” T. S. Eliot says:

Words strain  
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,  
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,  
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,  
Will not stay still.

These lines suggest what Darwish meant by *mutawattir* and describe his technique in the text.

The contingency of all life under bombardment is embodied in the words that crack and break in Darwish’s nervous text, what Vattimo calls “the shattering of the poetic word in the originary saying of poetry.” “The anticipation of death, upon which the possibility of authentic existence depends,” Vattimo explains, “is the experience of the connection between language and mortality.”<sup>7</sup> In the midst of the overwhelming actuality of death, Darwish sets down, in his poetic prose, moments of authentic existence. We may thus conceive of the text as a relation between poetic language and mortality; death, in the aesthetic transformation of reality into art, becomes a metaphor intrinsic to the work.

By restricting the frame of reference to a geographical area and a historical event, the original title, however paradoxical its equation of time and place, could lead to a misreading of the book solely in terms of the geography and the event. The pres-

7. Ibid., p. 70.

ent, more general, title discloses Darwish's method of composition and articulates the work's complex existence as a text, or memory, in relation to the world. The poet uses irony and paradox to render Palestinian historical experience in an immediate and dramatic manner: "For the first time in our history, our absence is conditional upon our total presence. Present to make oneself absent." This is reminiscent of the bitterly ironic "present-absent," Israel's label for internal refugees, away from their villages at the time the state was established, whose lands it wanted to confiscate. Palestinians, present in their absence, are themselves a memory preserved against forgetfulness. Like Palestinian existence, the book itself may be described as an extended oxymoron.

During the shelling the extent of the entire Arab homeland shrinks—to Lebanon, to the city of Beirut, to a quarter in that city, to a street, to a building which has just been hit, to a room within that building (say, the author's study), and finally by implication to the printed page where these events are taking place in the reader's imagination: "What am I searching for? I open the door several times, but find no newspaper. Why am I looking for the paper when buildings are falling in all directions? Is that not writing enough?" In this ironic exchange of roles, the text becomes the world, and the world, the text. The page is here equated with the landscape and becomes the mimetic space where negation is negated and forgetfulness is to be forgotten by means of writing. Thus the print medium also acts as a metaphor, the printed page as an icon of the action, as if the exploding shell burst into fragments of discourse on the page, just as the actual shell reconfigures the city's landscape.

Considering the paucity of material resources available to

the defenders of Beirut, the ironic mode is the only available answer to the overstatement of the bombs falling on the city during the siege, a response that pits one kind of power against another. By an exercise of the imagination the poet equates the unequatable, words and ordnance: "I want to find a language that transforms language itself into steel for the spirit—a language to use against these sparkling silver insects, these jets." This aspect of the work is carried in the title preposition's suggestion of an exchange, as in *blow for blow*—as if the author were saying, "You give me bombs, I give you a text"; "You give me forgetfulness, I give you memory"; or "You give me history, I give you writing."<sup>8</sup>

Appropriately, metaphors of explosion and fusion recur in the text: memory fusing into forgetfulness, which in turn forgets

8. The ironic view of Palestinian history is not limited to Mahmoud Darwish. Emile Habiby, the major Palestinian novelist, is also ironic in his vision, as is clearly illustrated by the title of his most important work, "The Strange Events Concerning the Disappearance of Said ('The Happy One') Son of Misfortune, the Optipessimist." This work is available in English as *The Secret Life of Saeed, the Ill-Fated Pessoptimist: A Palestinian Who Became a Citizen of Israel*, trans. Salma Jayyusi and Trevor Le Gassick (New York: Vantage Press, 1982).

Edward Said reflects on Palestinian history from the same perspective. In a recent article he says, "What to many Palestinians is either an incomprehensible cruelty of fate or a measure of how appalling are the prospects for settling their claim can be clarified by seeing irony as a constitutive factor in their lives." To speak of recent Palestinian history in the aesthetic terms of irony, he affirms, "is by no means to reduce or trivialize its force." More specifically, Palestinian history is characterized by "irony and paradox" in its relation to the Arab states—an aspect of Palestinian existence to which Darwish devotes some of his most trenchant comments in this work. And, most significantly in terms of Darwish's project in *Memory*, Palestinian history is also characterized by irony in the encounter with Israel: "Here, then, is another complex irony: how the classic victims of years of anti-semitic persecution and Holocaust have in their nation become the victimizers of another people, who have become therefore the victims of the victims." See Said's "Reflections on Twenty Years of Palestinian History," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, no. 80 (Summer 1991): 5, 15.

itself and bursts into memory: "If only one of us would forget the other so that forgetfulness itself might be stricken with memory!" In time, fusion is one thing and explosion, another, but at the moment of creation fusion and explosion unite, giving birth to the text and the present. The threat of imminent death collapses time to the interval between two shells, which is shorter than the instant "between breathing in and breathing out." These "moments/spasms," instants of creation when time and space collapse into each other, are also moments for the maximum release of energy.

The erotic element in the book, which metaphorically equates love and death, is a necessary counterpart to mortality that, as we have seen, also generates metaphors for the activities of writing and reading: "The obscure heaps up on the obscure, rubs against itself, and ignites into clarity." To spark this clarity, the text characteristically places the reader at a meeting point, a point of reversal, a juxtaposition, whether of two segments of the text or two (or more) perspectives. For example, in the first two sentences of the book the discourse shifts from direct statement to dialogue (I have indicated these shifts with italics). Immediately thereafter comes a reversal of ordinary assumptions about birth, love, life, and death: "Because you woke me up when you stirred in my belly. I knew then I was your coffin." To be born is to die. Memory is *for* forgetfulness; it exists to be forgotten.

The rhythm of reversal that weaves the text together is rooted in historical experience, reflecting the departure of the Palestinian leadership from Lebanon in 1982, and the earlier exit from Palestine in 1948. With that exit, which turned a settled population into refugees, reality itself was reversed and the

words became hollow shells without meaning in the Arab wasteland (the “desert” and “wilderness” in the text), forcing the Palestinians to reverse the process of intellectual, political, and spiritual degeneration that has taken hold of the Arabs: “From now on we have nothing to lose, so long as Beirut is here and we’re here in Beirut as names for a different homeland, where meanings will find their words again in the midst of this sea and on the edge of this desert.” In the text this rhythm of reversal emerges in a whole lexicon of words born from other words (nouns, verbs, verbal nouns), all meaning “exit” (e.g., *kharaja* and its variants). The departure from Beirut; the exit from Palestine; the birth of the dream from the dream, of the text from the dream, of the words from each other, and of the textual segments from each other are all united in this rhythm. A subsidiary rhythm based on the use of symbol also emerges as words like *rain, wave, sea, island, desert, birth, death, graveyard, knight, horse, poem, white* are repeated to give a mythic dimension to events. The wave that propels the Palestinian ship in its journey to the unknown, for example, also joins Beirut and Haifa—two jewels on the sea—for which the author harbors an inordinate love, and Palestine and Andalusia, two “lost paradises,” or loci of meaning.

As we have seen, Darwish’s artistic purpose in this work is in part to revitalize language by bringing meaning back to the words, or by endowing them with new meanings. The invasion ultimately will mean yet another journey for the Palestinian people, a journey across the sea—*al-baHr*. But *al-baHr* is also the word used for the meter, or poetic measure, of Arabic prosody. When a fighter wants to know the difference between the sea in poetry and the actual sea, the poet answers, “The *sea* is the sea.”

The sea is itself; it is also poetic measure. Poetic measure is itself; it is also the sea. Further, there is no difference between them. Language, like Palestine, unites what can't be united, and meaning cuts across the boundaries separating world and text.

The man of politics, or the poet? In the shift from the original to the present title the poet signaled that the book is to be read as a work of literature, a "setting-into-work of truth," that opens out a horizon on the history of the Palestinian people through the optic of an invasion meant to negate their identity and the facts of their history. To the extent that it does this successfully—that is, to the extent that it succeeds as a work of art—it is a supremely political document, and not the other way around, as many of his readers would have it. That he had long been acclaimed as a leading writer and the national poet of Palestine he himself acknowledges in passages of this book: "And if we complain of the general inability to perfect a language of the people in creative expression, that should not prevent us from insisting on speaking for them until the moment arrives when literature can celebrate its great wedding, when the private voice and the public voice become one."

Darwish insists on his identity as a poet, albeit one who has espoused the Palestinian national cause. His early poem "Identity Card" was his way of saying, "I exist," despite his lack of papers. The poem shot him to prominence among the Palestinians in Israel and in the larger Arab world as well and, along with other early poems, earned him the simplistic label of resistance poet. As he is about to go to sleep at the end of that endless day of bombing, in the moments of reverie that bring the book to a close, he recalls that poem: "... an old rhythm I recognize! ... I recognize this voice, whose age was twenty five ...



'Put this in your record: I'm Arab!' " Here, past and present melt into each other: "This outcry then became my poetic identity, which has not been satisfied with pointing to my father but chases me even now."

Clearly, the question of this identity—that is, how he is read—has haunted Darwish. For many years now he has made it his task to kill this "father," to combat the critical straight-jacket into which he has been forced by Arab as well as Western critics who have consistently (mis)read him politically as a resistance poet, or as a poet of the (Palestinian) Resistance, rather than a poet whose major concerns are national. In an interview first published in *Al Karmel* and later in *Al-Qods Al-Arabi*, he addresses this issue again:

A poem exists only in the relation between poet and reader. And I'm in need of my readers, except that they never cease to write me as they would wish, turning their reading into another writing that almost rubs out my features. I don't know why my poetry has to be killed on the altar of misunderstanding or the fallacy of ready-made intent. I am not solely a citizen of Palestine, though I am proud of this affiliation and ready to sacrifice my life in defending the radiance of the Palestinian fact, but I also want to take up the history of my people and their struggle from an aesthetic angle that differs from the prevalent and repeatable meanings readily available from an unmediated political reading.<sup>9</sup>

When I asked him whether he thought the text was poetry or prose, Darwish replied that the poet is always a poet; he re-

9. *Al Karmel*, no. 47 (1993): 140; *Al-Qods Al-Arabi*, 12 February 1993.

mains true to himself whatever he does, in life or letters. He pays attention to rhythm and other verse values in all his writings. Therefore, he, Darwish, does not distinguish aesthetically between poetry and prose and takes equal care in the form and content of all his writings. So although the work belongs more properly to poetry than to prose because it was written by a poet, we can say, since its form is prose, that it partakes of the nature of both: with the exception of the segment on literary criticism, it is a collection of prose poems. Darwish himself gives us a clue to this effect in his description of Beirut as "a musical name which can flow smoothly into a verse or a prose poem," and in his reference to his friend the older poet who was the first writer to write the prose poem in Arabic.

To help him with this scheme, the author draws upon the grammar of the language. Reading in Arabic is not the same process as it is in English, where the movement of the attention from left to right is unhampered. Because diacritical marks, or vowelings, are normally not inserted in printed Arabic texts, grammatical relationships are not immediately apparent. Meaning is deferred, and readers are forced to move back and forth within the same sentence. This in part explains Darwish's practice of writing long ambiguous sentences, with multiple levels of meaning. Further, because Arabic has no tense as such, grammatical time is not, as in English, defined in relation to the moment of speech, a process that interjects an implied subject in every utterance. Arabic prose does not have to maintain the consistent pattern of tense sequence required in English. Hence it is easy for Darwish to scramble time, removing the action from the temporal sphere and placing it in a dreamlike realm. In the

translation I adopted the author's journey on the streets of Beirut, in the present tense, as the reference point for the action.

In his attempt to make the work a perfect portrait of Palestinian experience, Darwish needed a form that could free him from the constraints imposed by form itself. He therefore combined the manner of presentation and the resources of the language in such a way that readers, in reaching for the content, were plunged into the midst of a discourse that was not chronicle, journal, history, memoir, fiction, myth, or allegory but all of them together. The prose poem can embody all of these. It allows the poet to experiment with the form of the sentence, in which the image vies with the syntax, sometimes pushing it beyond its limits. Writing of this sort makes lively reading, but is difficult to translate, and can sometimes lead to obscurity, as in the following example:

A building gulped by the earth: seized by the hands of the cosmic monster lying in ambush for a world that human beings create on an earth commanding no view except of a moon and a sun and an abyss, pushing humanity into a bottomless pit in peering over whose edge we realize we didn't learn to walk, read, or use our hands except to reach an end that we forget, only to carry on our search for something that can justify this comedy and cut the thread connecting the beginning with the end, letting us imagine we are an exception to the only truth.

In some of Darwish's sentences, which as we can see here are arranged in complex rhythmic patterns that may turn back upon themselves, there is constant tension between the poetics of the

image and the politics of the sentence. The image here propels the sentence toward disintegration into a syntactic arabesque of pure pattern, but is held back by the syntax itself.

It is not only a question of pattern, however. When we put this sentence back in its context, where the poet is describing a large building that had been leveled by a powerful bomb, we can comprehend that the purpose of the complexity is to reach for the sublime by expressing rage through restraint. This art is classical in its impulse and modern in its practice. In my translation I have made every effort to duplicate the poetry of the original prose, even though that may sometimes have stretched the limits of comprehensibility. As Darwish himself says in the book, “On borders, war is declared on borders.” The borders here are not only those between Israel and the Arab countries, but also those of writing itself.

Although *Memory for Forgetfulness* belongs to Arabic (and now to world) literature, it is also a Palestinian text, rooted in the history, culture, and struggle of the Palestinian people. Darwish’s writing here is liberationist in its impulse and represents an honest attempt to free himself and the reader from all coercive practices, be they political or aesthetic, including those whose boundaries are defined by the processes of reading and writing. As I have tried to show, the domains of the political and the aesthetic are so interwoven in Darwish’s text that freedom from aesthetic coercion represents on his part a conscious act aimed at freedom from political coercion as well. I hope the translation does full justice to the original, with its playfulness, power, and depth, its music and bittersweet humor.