IN THE PRESENCE OF ABSENCE: MAHMOUD DARWISH'S TESTAMENT

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The Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish is well known for his intertextual playfulness and inventiveness, and indeed, in one of his last books, *Fī ḥaḍrat al-ghiyāb* (In the Presence of Absence, 2006) he alludes to classical Arabic poetry, the Qurʾān, to and his own previous *oeuvre*. Drawing on a celebrated *qaṣīda* by the Umayyad poet Mālik Ibn al-Rayb as his model, Darwish composed this work as a funeral speech for himself. Essentially, it is an oration in prose, but snatches of poetry also appear in a stylistic pattern where rhetorical figures abound. Speaking from the *barzakh* between life and death, the poet reflects on his wordly existence from cradle to grave. Published less than two years before Darwish's death in August 2008, the text has the double character of prediction and testament. The thesis of this article is that the death of the author adds meaning to it not by his absence, but paradoxically, by his increased presence as an unavoidable point of reference and source of identification for the reader.

In the spring of 2006, the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish received a delegation from the Swedish Writers' Union in Ramallah on the West Bank. His first words to his writer colleagues from the north were: 'Welcome, I have just finished writing my own funeral speech'.[1] At the time this seemed to be an odd greeting and the guests were not quite sure what to make of it. But later that same year Darwish published a book with the title *Fī ḥaḍrat al-ghiyāb* (In the Presence of Absence) composed as an elegy in prose by the poet over himself.[2] And with his sudden death in the aftermath of open heart surgery in America on 9 August 2008, the strange welcome suddenly found its full explanation: talking to death was not a literary game! Facing the grave not a poetic pose! He was not joking!

In an instant, the informed reader's way of reading Mahmoud Darwish's funeral oration, *Fī ḥaḍrat al-ghiyāb,* abruptly changed. From a sombre

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[1] Personal communication with one of the members of the delegation, the poet Jenny Tunedal. The other members were Håkan Bravinger, Aimée Delblanc and Ingela Bendt.

[2] *Fī ḥaḍrat al-ghiyāb*, Beirut: Riad El-Rayyes, 2006.

fiction, the book became a terrible truth; from an open ended story about ageing, it froze into the poet's last will and testament. A similar transformation (or addition) of meaning also took place in other texts from his later production which have disappearance and death as major themes; the passing away of the author changed the impact of these writings on the reader. Darwish's two final works *Ḥayrat al-ʿāʾid* (The Confusion of the Returnee, 2007) and *Athar al-farāsha* (The Trace of the Butterfly, 2008) now read differently than before when he was still alive.

This uniting of the person Mahmoud Darwish with his work, of course goes against the notion of the independence of the literary text from its author, a notion most famously developed by Roland Barthes. According to Barthes, 'literature is that neuter, that composite, that oblique into which every subject escapes, the trap where all identity is lost, beginning with the very identity of the body that writes'.[3] Thus, to maintain the importance of the authorial subject and stress the identity of the person writing might seem hopelessly naive. But the biographical reading, to seek the explanation of the work in the man or woman who produced it, is sometimes the most natural. And in the case of autobiographical writing it, is often the whole point.

In autobiography, the word and the world are intrinsically united; in a book about the author's life the reader's knowledge of what really happened to him or her, certainly influences the interpretation. To deny the importance of the biographical dimension of Darwish's writing on the theme of his own death would therefore be as rash as ignoring the political events of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict when reading his resistance poetry. The referential is essential. Indeed, the death of the author posits new meanings to the text, but in this case not by way of his total absence, as Barthes argued,[4] but through his increased presence as an unavoidable point of reference and source of identification for the reader. *The Presence of Absence* is not only the title of a book, but also, implicitly, an instruction of how to read it.

By 1984, Mahmoud Darwish had already suffered his first heart at-

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[3] Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', *Aspen* no. 5+6 (1967). In 1967, *Aspen 5+6*, a magazine in a box, was edited, or more properly compiled by Brian O'Doherty. Within *Aspen 5+6*, none of the texts are paginated. Barthes' essay is available at: www.ubu.com/aspen/aspen5and6/index.html

[4] 'The absence of the Author [...] is not only a historical fact or an act of writing; it utterly transforms the modern text (or—what is the same thing—the text is henceforth written and read so that in it, on every level, the Author absents himself)'. Translation by Richard Howard. Ibid.

tack. According to the doctors he was clinically dead for one-and-a-half minutes before he was brought back to life with the help of electric shocks.[5] The memory of this near-death experience, or 'life accident' as the author himself mockingly calls it, in a hospital in Vienna, is the starting point for one of many discussions in *Fī ḥaḍrat al-ghiyāb* about the nature of death. Actually, death is nothing to be afraid of. It is a beautiful and painless sleep, a sense of brightness and whiteness, a blissful state beyond time and free of emotion; neither a high nor a low, neither a thing nor a no-thing:[6]

أدركتَ أن الموت لا يوجع الموتى، بل يوجع الأحياء

You understood that death doesn't hurt the dead, it only hurts the living.

The author-narrator sums up when he describes the event and remembers the intense pain of waking up to life again.[7] The voice that speaks in this way and utters these words, is a textual 'I' whom the reader identifies as the author early on.[8] But the 'you' that he directs towards himself with his speech, is also he himself. He is both the watching spectator and the watched protagonist in a seeming paradox that functions as the central narrative ploy of the work.

The first scene of the book is a funeral. It is seen and described through the eyes of a narrator who is making a farewell speech to a silent corpse laid out before him, 'shrouded in words'.[9] But the shrouded body is also he; he is both the mourning and the mourned at the same time, the

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[5] *Fī ḥaḍrat al-ghiyāb,* 112–13. Tahar Ben Jelloun, 'Mahmoud Darwish', column published on Tahar Ben Jelloun's official website, 10 Aug 2008. http://www.taharbenjellun.org/chroniques (nr. 92). Retrieved 12 Sept 2008.

[6] *Fī ḥaḍrat al-ghiyāb*, 111–13.

[7] Ibid., 113. All translations are mine except where otherwise noted.

[8] This identification is the result of an implicit contract between the author and the reader, an 'autobiographical pact' that governs the reading (P. Lejeune, *Le Pacte autobiographique,* 1975). Essentially, this 'pact' rests on an established correspondence between the details of the story and known historical and biographical facts. The appearance of real persons in the narrative also contributes: in this case, the Arab writers Elias Khoury and Emile Habibi are two such real persons that show up in the text (115, 155). The first person narrator remains anonymous throughout, but assumes the authorship for a literary production that we know has been written and published by Mahmoud Darwish, and thus the identity between them is fully confirmed. Cf. note 43 below.

[9] Ibid., 11.

addressee and the addressed.[10] Both the 'I' and the 'you' of the text appear as different sides of one and the same person in a game of double identities: 'We were born together under the China tree, neither as twins nor as neighbours, but one in two, or two in one'.[11] The narrator's sleeping, silent self is on his way to 'a second life', promised to him by language, 'in a reader that perhaps will survive a meteorite collision with the earth' while his lamenting, talking self has an appointment with death, 'an appointment that I have longed for more than once'.[12] In this passage it is not far-fetched to interpret the corpse on the bier as the symbol of Mahmoud Darwish the poet, the public persona and the national icon. The narrator-self on the other hand seems to stand for Mahmoud Darwish the human being, the private person and the lonely man behind the mask. The split between the public and the private self and the struggle between them is a problem that is explored on several occasions in the text.

The funeral scene, too, comes back, or is evoked, in the narrative many times and functions as a typical framing device. The last chapter of the text begins with exactly the same words as the first in order to close the circle:

سطراً سطراً، أُنثرك أمامي بكفاءةٍ لم أُوتَها إلا في المطالع

'Line by line I scatter you before me with an ability that I am not given except in preludes'.

As a frame story, it has many other stories embedded within it. Most of these tell dramatic episodes, such as that of the author's heart-failure, or they hinge on decisive moments in his life, like the flight from the home village in 1948; the expulsion of the PLO from Beirut in 1982, or the emotional return to Palestine after the peace agreement in 1993. Others are more like personal meditations on abstract subjects like love, exile or nostalgia.[13] The embedded stories are narrated in a rough chronological

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[10] Ibid., 15.

[11] Ibid., 18.

[12] Ibid., 10.

[13] The book is divided into twenty chapters that has the following content (brutally summarized): Chapter 1: The burial scene / Chapter 2: birth and early childhood; childhood as paradise and adventure / Chapter 3: learning to read and write; the magic of letters, the first meeting with poetry / Chapter 4: the horror of exodus, the flight from the home village to Lebanon; childhood turns hell / Chapter 5: smuggled back into Galilee, semi-illegal life in Israel / Chapter 6: childhood memories of Gypsy women, on the symbol of the Gypsy; danger-

order that begins with the poet's early childhood and ends in old age; they span his timely existence 'from cradle to grave' literally. All-in-all, the work reads as a typical, albeit fragmented autobiography in which the author sums up his life and evaluates his experiences, like a closing of accounts if you wish.

The metaphorical setting of the funeral scene is highly symbolic: the transitory space between life and death that the Qurʾān refers to as *barzakh*, interpreted in Islamic eschatology as the boundary between the world of human beings and that of the spirits, the in-between where the soul rests in waiting for the Day of Judgment.[14] A more concrete interpretation of the *barzakh* is the grave which lies between this life and the next. The term appears several times in the narrative in both these senses.[15] But Mahmoud Darwish is famous for his frequent use of symbols, legends and myths from all Middle Eastern religions.[16] To classify his text as 'religious' because of the Islamic way he imagines his death would therefore be an over-interpretation of it. During one period of his life he was even a convinced Communist.[17] In his *œuvre*, the repeated deployment of Quranic allusion is more a sign of cultural belonging than of religious belief.

Yet, when recalling his first discovery of the mystery and power of the

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ous moments and chance rescues; on waiting in airports and the sense of rootlessness / Chapter 7: prison experiences; on the meaning of freedom / Chapter 8: the Israel-Palestine conflict as a struggle between myths and legends; the Palestinians as the new Trojans / Chapter 9: in exile, Cairo and Beirut; the traumatic expulsion from Beirut / Chapter 10: on autumn, autumn in Paris and autumn in life; on the meaning of exile / Chapter 11: daily routines, writing practices and poetics / Chapter 12: a praise to sleep and dreams / Chapter 13: the first and the second infarct, the nightmare of hospital / Chapter 14: on the meaning of homesickness and nostalgia / Chapter 15: on the meaning of love / Chapter 16: leaving Tunis and returning to Palestine; the first visit to Gaza / Chapter 17: the first visit to Jericho; the first visit to Galilee; the funeral of Emile Habibi / Chapter 18: searching for the remains of al-Birwa, the destroyed home village; the reunion with the mother and a visit to the father's grave / Chapter 19: the funeral scene / Chapter 20: aphorisms.

[14] Qurʾān, 32:100, 55:20 and 25:53. B. Carra de Vaux, 'barzakh' in *EI*^{2}, I: 107.

[15] *Fī ḥaḍrat al-ghiyāb,* e.g. 12, 20, 31 and 113.

[16] See e.g. Anette Månsson, *Passage to a New Wor(l)d. Exile and Restoration in Mahmoud Darwish's Writings 1960–1995*, Ph.D. thesis, Uppsala: Uppsala University, 2003. Esp. 108–11.

[17] Darwish joined the Communist party in 1961. Ibid., 15.

written word as a young boy in school, and his fascination with the magic of Arabic letters, especially the letter *nūn*, the author also mentions his strong belief in, and love of, God. It was fired by the Quranic *sūra*, al-Raḥmān.[18] The lasting importance of this Islamic imprint on him only becomes clear to the reader at the end of the book, which has a verse from *sūrat* al-Raḥmān as its final note and concluding line. It is the refrain of the *sūra*, repeated 31 times[19], *fa-bi-ʾayyⁱ ālāʾⁱ rabbikumā tukadhdhibānⁱ* ('Then which of the blessings of your Lord will you both deny'), which is incorporated into the text as a kind of *taḍmīn*, giving the enigmatic dual form of the divine word a new and very personal meaning:[20]

فبأي آلاء ربكما تُكَذّبان / وغائبان أنا و أنت، وحاضران أنا وأنت، وغائبان / فبأي آلاء ربكما تُكَذّبان.

'Then which of the blessings of your Lord will you both deny / absent as we are, you and me, and present as we are, you and me, and absent / then which of the blessings of your Lord will you both deny'.[21]

Another pertinent trans-textual relationship in *Fī ḥaḍrat al-ghiyāb* is signalled by the quotation that stands as the book's motto. It is a quote from a famous elegy by the Umayyad poet, Mālik Ibn al-Rayb (d. 56/676). Ibn al-Rayb's poem can be seen as the hypotext, the model for

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[18] *Sūra* 55, 'The All-Merciful'. *Fī ḥaḍrat al-ghiyāb,* 27. This memory from childhood is a source of inspiration that Darwish has used before, notably in the poem 'Like the letter *nūn* in *sūrat* al-Raḥmān' from the collection *Li-mādhā tarakta al-ḥiṣān waḥīdan* (Why Did You Leave The Horse Alone, 1995), Beirut: Riad El-Rayyes, 2nd ed., 73–5.

[19] Qurʾān, 55:13, 16, 18, 21, 23, 25, 28, 30, 32, 34, 36, 38, 40, 42, 45, 47, 49, 51, 53, 55, 57, 59, 61, 63, 65, 67, 69, 71, 73, 75, 77. It should be remembered that *sūrat* al-Raḥmān contains a very poetic and at the same time concrete description of the wonders of Earth, the horrors of Hell and pleasures of Paradise. These expressive images of the timely and the evanescent are of course instantly evoked by the verse in the implied Arab reader.

[20] English translation from *The Noble Qurʾān in the English Language*, M. T. Al-Hilālī and M. M. Khān, Riyadh: Dar-us-Salam, 1995. Note that in my translation I have left out the interpolation '(jinns and men)' that we find after the words 'you both' in this Muslim interpretation of the verse. Cf. Arberry's translation: 'O which of your Lord's bounties will you and you deny?' *The Koran Interpreted,* Arthur J. Arberry, London: Oxford University Press, 1964.

[21] *Fī ḥaḍrat al-ghiyāb,* 180–1. The Arabic rhetorical figure of *taḍmīn* is the incorporation of an existing line of poetry, or part thereof, into one's own poetry. See also note 31 below.

the hypertext, which is Darwish's modification of it. According to tradition, Mālik ibn al-Rayb recited his celebrated poem on his deathbed.[22] It was a dirge composed by the poet to himself that describes his own funeral. The verse quoted in *Fī ḥaḍrat al-ghiyāb* runs:[23]

يقولون: لا تبعد، وهم يدفنونني / وأين مكان البُعْد إلا مكانيا؟

'They say "do not go away", yet they bury me / but where is the place of separation if not my place (the grave)'?

The fact that this verse contains the favourite expression of the classical Arabic poets who composed dirges: *lā tabᶜad*, i.e. 'do not go away', makes it a very strong literary signal.[24] In addition to the direct reference, there is possibly also an allusion to the classical *qaṣīda* in the rhetoric structure and design itself. According to Jaroslav Stetkevych, the Arabic ode shared some features of the oratorical genres of *khuṭba* and *risāla*. The classical poem was oral and ceremonial in its essence. It had a message and was meant to influence. In practice, the poet was also a kind of orator.[25] So when the first person narrator in Darwish's text uses

[22] *Kitāb al-Aghānī,* XXII, Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-ᶜilmiyya, 1986. Mālik Ibn al-Rayb is introduced as a 'poet, killer, and thief' in the article about him in *al-Aghānī* (288–304). He is said to have lived an adventurous and violent life as an outlaw before joining the troops of the Muslim governor of Khurasan, Saᶜīd ibn ᶜUthmān. It was on his way back from a campaign together with him that Mālik died.

[23] *Fī ḥaḍrat al-ghiyāb,* 7. The translation is by S. M. Stern and C. R. Barber from Ignaz Goldziher's German translation of the Arabic original: 'Sie sagen: Entferne dich nicht und dabei begraben sie mich; aber wo ist denn der Ort des Scheidens, wenn es nicht mein Ort (Grab) ist?' Ignaz Goldziher, 'On the veneration of the dead in paganism and Islam', *Muslim Studies* 5/1 (2006), ed. S. M. Stern, 209–38 (232, n. 1). (Originally published in German 1889–90).

[24] Ibid., 231-2. According to Goldziher the verse is the concluding line of the poem. But in most versions of Ibn al-Rayb's funeral song it comes somewhere in the middle. According to a report in *al-Aghānī* (ibid., 303) the original poem was only 13 lines long, but it is not made clear which ones they are. A longer version of more than fifty verses is found in several 4th/10th century sources that form the basis for the modern editions of text. For the full poem, including an Italian translation, and a presentation of its author, see S. A. al-Tilbānī, 'Il poeta umayyade Mālik ibn ar-Rayb' *Annali* (Istituto Universitario orientale di Napoli) 18 (1968), 289–318. I would like to thank Professor G. J. van Gelder for drawing my attention to this article.

[25] Jaroslav Stetkevych, *The Zephyrs of Najd. The Poetics of Nostalgia in the Classical Arabic Nasīb*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993, 6–16.

the word 'speech' (*khuṭba*) to describe his own narration, this too alludes to the classical bards and their custom.[26]

By using the textual model of an honoured *qaṣīda*, the modern poet affirms his belonging and allegiance to the Arabic literary tradition and, in a sense, he shows its modernity. But he also demonstrates his independence from it by writing his own version of Ibn al-Rayb's funeral song in prose, or better, in a combination of poetry and prose. The subtitle of the book is 'text' (*naṣṣ*), a generic sign that indicates a free relationship to 'the tyranny of genre' and a subversion of the strict boundary between prose and poetry. In his elegy, the modern poet weaves together narrative and verse into one single 'text' that softly swings between the down-to-earth and the lyrical. To him this movement is also a kind of poetics: 'Prose is the neighbour of poetry and the poet's pleasure ride / The poet is the one who cannot decide between prose and poetry'.[27]

But this combination is nothing new. Even if Mahmoud Darwish is best known as a poet, he has written several works of prose before, the most acclaimed being his one-day diary from Beirut under Israeli siege on 6 August 1982, *Dhākira li-l-nisyān* (Memory For Forgetfulness, 1984).[28] Interestingly, this book is also a kind of meditation over the grave and has been described as a work 'saturated with death' where 'the author seems to be living out his own imminent death'.[29] Another correspondence between it and *Fī ḥaḍrat al-ghiyāb* is in the author's use of paradox as a rhetoric device in the title.[30] Generally speaking, the para-

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[26] *Fī ḥaḍrat al-ghiyāb*, 113, 166.

[27] النثر جارُ الشعر ونُزْهةُ الشاعر / الشاعرُ هو الحائر بين النثر والشعر Ibid., 177.

[28] The diary is a form of writing that Darwish practiced in several works. The first was *Yawmiyyāt al-ḥuzn al-ᶜādī* (1973) and the last *Athar al-farāsha* (2008), which also became his last published book. But the term 'diary' here should be understood in a wide sense meaning 'essay' too. For a close reading of *Yawmiyyāt al-ḥuzn al-ᶜādī* and *Dhākira lil-nisyān*, see 'The Poet and his Mission, Text and Space in the Prose Works of Maḥmūd Darwīsh', in S. Guth and P. Furrer (eds) *Conscious Voices,* Stuttgart: Steiner, 1999, 255–75.

[29] Boutros Hallaq, 'Autobiography and Polyphony' in *Writing the Self, Autobiographical Writing in Modern Arabic Literature,* London: Saqi Books, 1998, 193.

[30] The original title of *Dhākira lil-nisyān / Memory For Forgetfulness* when the work was first published in the magazine *al-Karmal* was *The Time: Beirut / The Place: August*. But also in this title the paradox is used to produce a destabilizing, jolting effect on the reader. On *Dhākira lil-nisyān* and its background, see the introduction by Muhawi to his English translation, *Memory For Forget-*

dox is one of Darwish's favourite methods to achieve a poetic effect and *Fī ḥaḍrat al-ghiyāb* is no exception to this. Here, the paradox occurs on all levels, from the word to the sentence to the story. As a rhetorical figure, the paradox is sometimes based on a switch of terms into a reversed proposition, then called *ᶜaks* or *tabdīl* in Arabic, or on a complete antithesis, called *muṭābaqa* or *ṭibāq*.[31] Darwish knows his craft and loves *badīᶜ* just as much as his classical predecessors did. Here are a few illustrative examples:

لم تنتصر قبيلة بلا شاعر، ولم تنتصر شاعر إلا مهزوماً في الحبّ

'No tribe was ever victorious without a poet, and no poet was ever victorious unless he was defeated in love'. (The romantic idea of the author as child).[32]

الحنين أنينُ الحق العاجز عن الإتيان بالبرهان على قوة الحق أمام حق القوة المتمادية

'Nostalgia is the complaint of truth over its inability to produce proof of the power of truth in front of the truth of persistent power…' (Said on the helpless longing of Palestinian refugees for their old houses buried beneath the settlements).[33]

إن ثلاثة عقود من غياب الذات عن مكانها تجعل المكان ذاتاً يتيمة

'Three decades of the self's absence from its place make the place into an orphan self'. (Reflection by the poet during his first visit to Galilee after exile).[34]

His paradoxes are often built on metaphorical contrasts and surprising semantic turns. Thus, young love can be described as a state of death more sweet and alive than any other (*akthar ᵓaṭwār al-mawt ᶜadhūbatan wa-ḥayā*) and old love as an absence with an intense presence (*ghiyāb kathīf al-ḥuḍūr*).[35] Another salient stylistic feature of the text is rhyme and alliteration:[36]

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fulness, August, Beirut, 1982, Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1995, esp. xii.

[31] As a rhetorical figure 'paradox' can be defined as 'an assertion seemingly opposed to common sense, but that may yet have some truth in it' while *antithesis* is 'opposition, or contrast of ideas or words in a balanced or parallel construction' (http://www.uky.edu/AS/Classics/rhetoric.html#7) [Accessed: 22 Dec 08]. On the Arabic terms see W. P. Heinrichs, 'rhetorical figures' in *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature*, ed. J. S. Meisami and P. Starkey, vol. 2, London: Routledge, 1998, 656–62.

[32] *Fī ḥaḍrat al-ghiyāb*, 27.

[33] Ibid., 125.

[34] Ibid., 154.

[35] Ibid., 126, 130.

[36] Ibid., 92, 132, 154.

المنفى، وهو سوء تفاهم بين الوجود والحدود
'Exile, which is a misunderstanding between existence and the borders'.
إمرأة، حسية مرئية، ملموسة محسوسة
Or: 'a woman, who is sensual and visual, touchable and perceptible'.
الصباحُ نظيفٌ ربيعيّ مشمشيّ مشمسٌ سَلِسُ التدفّق
Or: 'the morning is clean, like spring, like apricot, sunny and smooth in its outbreak'.

A third rhetoric tool, lastly, is repetition: of words and phrases, syntactic structures, images and scenes. This stylistic feature frequently includes different kinds of parallelisms, analogy and the use of synonyms instead of antonyms. Perhaps the best example of Darwish's conscious use of this device for aesthetic purposes is found in the last chapter of *Fī ḥaḍrat al-ghiyāb*. It consists of fifty gnomic sayings varying in length from one line to five. Each saying is separated from the next by a stroke (/) followed by a blank space. The last word of each paragraph is picked up and repeated by the next where it becomes the first word and subject of a new aphorism, like in a verbal relay where the movement forward never stops. Here is an example:

ألحكاية أنك هندي أحمر/ أحمرالريش، لا أحمر الدم، أنك كابوس الساهر/ الساهر على كشّ الغياب، وعلى تدليك الأبد /
' ... / the story is that you are a Red Indian / red-feathered, not red-blooded, that you are the nightmare of the sleepless / the sleepless from the recoil of absence, and from the rub of eternity'.

Not all sayings have the force of a proverb or a maxim. Sometimes they read more like poetic images not unlike the many 'one-liners' that are sprinkled through the text as a whole. Still, when gathered together, as if they were outside of narrative, in a chapter of their own, they give a joint impression of solemnity and weight. Some feel almost 'testamental' in their terse and concentrated form. This impression in further strengthened by the inclusion of a verse from the Qurʾān as the last link in the chain (see above). In relation to the normal structure of a contemporary autobiography this chapter may seem strange, but connected to the underlying *qaṣīda*-model it makes more sense: It is a typical closure of the Arabic ode to end with an excursus, such as a string of epigrammatic maxims.[37]

Besides, wise sayings (*ḥikam*) are an established art in Arabic litera-

[37] Stetkevych, op. cit., 6.

ture where they are recognised as a genre of their own.[38] As a rhetorical exercise, *gnomai* also featured in ancient Greece, and proverbial maxims are typically found in the Hebrew Bible, not least in Ecclesiastes and the Book of Proverbs. Indeed, in the *Jidāriyyat Maḥmūd Darwīsh* (The Mural of Mahmoud Darwish), a long autobiographical poem published in the year 2000, the author included a long paraphrase of Ecclesiastes.[39] This epic *qaṣīda* was written in 1999 immediately after Darwish had undergone complex heart surgery in Paris, which was another frightful experience and memento mori to him. It is perhaps not surprising therefore that here are many parallels between this work, *Jidāriyya* and *Fī ḥaḍrat al-ghiyāb*. The obsession with death and its variables is an obvious one: the words 'death', 'dead' or 'die' occur 55 times in the poem.[40] The resigned and pessimistic tone is another. Moreover, when writing the text, the author thought of it as being his last will and poetic testament.[41] Examples of intertextuality also occur on the verbal level. Similar descriptions of after-life as a white sleep in a white place are found in both texts.[42] And the lamenting narrator in *Fī ḥaḍrat al-ghiyāb* one place cites a line of poetry about the city of Acre that his double has written, a line which is taken from *Jidāriyya*.[43] In addition, an essential quote from the Arabic translation of Ecclesiastes found in *Jidāriyya*, echoes on in *Fī ḥaḍrat al-ghiyāb*: 'Meaningless! Meaningless! Everything is meaningless'.[44]

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[38] See further, Dimitri Gutas, 'Classical Arabic Wisdom Literature: Nature and Scope', *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 101/1, Oriental Wisdom (1981): 49–86.

[39] *Jidāriyyat Maḥmūd Darwīsh*, Beirut: Riad El-Rayyes, 2nd ed. 2001, 85–91.

[40] ^{c}Abd al-Salām al-Musāwī, 'al-Mawt min manẓūr al-dhāt', in *^{c}Ālam al-fikr,* 4 (2007): 99-135 (104). *Jidāriyya* is 'completely devoted to death', according to al-Musāwī (103), who has counted these words and others related to death in the text (e.g. 'grave' and 'funeral'). The Arab critic Abduh Wāzin similarly chose 'The Taming of Death through Poetry' as the title for his analysis of *Jidāriyya* in the book *Maḥmūd Darwīsh. Al-Gharīb yaqa^{c} ^{c}alā nafsihi,* Beirut: Riad El-Rayyes, 2004.

[41] al-Musāwī, op. cit. p. 100, quoting an interview with Darwish published in *Akhbār al-adab*, no. 396, 11 Feb 2001.

[42] Cf. *Fī ḥaḍrat al-ghiyāb*, 112 and *Jidāriyyat* Maḥmūd Darwīsh, 10.

[43] *Fī ḥaḍrat al-ghiyāb*, 163 and *Jidāriyyat* Maḥmūd Darwīsh, 98–9.

[44] باطل الأباطيل، الكل باطل *Fī ḥaḍrat al-ghiyāb*, 156 and *Jidāriyyat Maḥmūd Darwīsh*, 87, 88, 91.

In summary then, Darwish fully knows and freely uses the heritage from many traditions in his creative writing, both in terms of intertextuality and literary technique. But he is not a traditionalist poet, nor a manufacturer of political slogans: 'All beautiful poetry is... resistance. / The living heritage is what is written today ... and tomorrow' he says in his last book to those who would have it to be otherwise.[45]

What poetry is and is not, what it can do and cannot, what the poet's mission is and is not, are issues that are inseparable from Mahmoud Darwish's life trajectory as it is narrated in his auto-elegy. Poetry plays a part in his everyday life in its most intimate and trivial details. To him, getting up in the morning, shaving and getting dressed are part of the routines of writing, 'the hobby that became a profession, and the profession that has remained a hobby'.[46] The author presents an image of creative writing as being not just a matter of inspiration, but also of discipline and hard work. There are other famous Arab poets as well, who have written autobiographies built around this theme of 'literature and myself'.[47] However, to Darwish, it is not a theme developed for its own sake, but rather it serves to allow deeper probing into the riddles of identity. Who am I/you *except* the poet? That is the real question. What is the purpose of my/your life on earth? What does it mean to be a human being? In this way *Fī ḥaḍrat al-ghiyāb* is a more existentially worried work than most of its kind.

But poetry of course can be existential too. When existence is unjust, when existence is incomprehensible, when existence is tough, then poetry is a way to set the balance right: 'Isn't poetry an attempt of sorts to correct a mistake?' the author-narrator asks his double.[48] And further on in the monologue he states:[49]

الخيال قرينُ الكائن السريُ ومُعينُهُ على تصحيح أخطاء طباعية في كتاب الكون

'Fantasy is the secret companion of the being and his help to correct the misprints in the book of existence'.

In this sense, poetry is a way to protest and take revenge. As a young

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45 كلّ شعرٍ جميل...مقاومة / التراث الحيّ هو ما يُكتب اليوم...وغداً *Athar al-farāsha*, 225.

46 *Fī ḥaḍrat al-ghiyāb*, 98.

47 Perhaps the most well known one is Nizār Qabbāni's *Qiṣṣatī maᶜa al-shiᶜr* (Beirut, 1973), but also Adonis has written a work in this genre: *Hā anta ayyuhā al-waqt. Sīra shiᶜriyya thaqāfiyya* (Beirut, 1993).

48 *Fī ḥaḍrat al-ghiyāb*, 100.

49 Ibid., 163.

man, the poet felt that poetry had some sort of power to rectify the disaster that had befell his family and people. And subsequently this feeling gave rise to his political poetry in order to reclaim the lost land.[50] Poetry, Darwish writes, is an act of freedom and makes the invisible visible.[51] In this context, the title of the book, *In the Presence of Absence*, may also be interpreted as a reference to the spiritual presence of the Palestinians, manifested in their words and songs, even in those places in Israel in which they are physically absent after 1948.

The role of poetry is to keep memory alive, the author explains, first and foremost from the threats of extinction by the enemy, but sometimes also from the threats of denial from within the own ranks. Watching the historical handshake on television, he describes his negative reaction to the peace agreement between the PLO and Israel after the Oslo Accords. He felt that the sufferings of the Palestinian victims of the conflict were not respected enough. His direct poetical answer was the collection *Limādhā tarakta al-ḥiṣān waḥīdan* (Why Did You Leave The Horse Alone? 1995), a work he comments on like this:

> What can the poet do against the bulldozers of History except to protect the trees by the old roads and the springs, both the visible ones and the invisible? And to protect language from the feebleness of retreat from its metaphoric particularity, from the emptying of it from the voices of the victims who demand their share of tomorrow's memory, on this earth where the struggle stands and concerns far more than the power of weapons: the power of words.[52]

In ancient Greece, the soul of a dead person was possibly associated with the butterfly. The classical Greek word for 'butterfly' and 'soul' or 'breath' is the same: psyche.[53] In Greek mythology, Psyche was a personification of the soul and a lover to the god, Eros. Symbolically, she was represented as a butterfly. Is it because of this that the butterfly has such a strong symbolic meaning in Darwish's inventory of metaphors? To the author as a boy the butterflies were like little sisters. Their fluttering colours in the air made him want to fly and taught him the art of solitude.[54] Indeed, he himself was a fluttering butterfly before he was brought down

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[50] *Fī ḥaḍrat al-ghiyāb*, 162.

[51] Ibid., 64.

[52] Ibid., 142.

[53] Jan Bremmer, *The Early Greek Concept of the Soul*, Princeton: Princeton UP, 1987, 82 and 123. According to Bremmer, the association of the butterfly with the dead perhaps goes back to Minoan times, but the evidence is debated.

[54] *Fī ḥaḍrat al-ghiyāb*, 20.

from his flight by the 'heavy question of identity'.[55] In the text, butterflies are associated with happiness and innocence, boldness and imagination. To the author as an adult the butterfly is a reminder of childhood and a symbol of Galilee.[56] 'Butterflies are scattered thoughts of mind and emotions flying in the air', he says, perhaps with a nod to the Greek connection.[57]

As previously mentioned the title of Mahmoud Darwish's last published book is *Athar al-farāsha* (The Trace of the Butterfly). The phrase is taken from a short, simple poem in this undated diary. The poem begins and ends with the same verse:[58]

أثرُ الفراشة لا يُرى أثرُالفراشة لا يَزولُ

'The trace of the butterfly cannot be seen / the trace of the butterfly never disappears'.

What, then, is the final message of Mahmoud Darwish's funeral speech, *Fī ḥaḍrat al-ghiyāb?* The author-narrator eventually asks the same question to his shrouded corpse and finds that 'indeed, you do not leave any testament except the ban on exaggerating interpretation'.[59] The reader concludes that is the will of the poet that his text remains open, as open as he liked life itself to be, as open as identity. In the poetry collection immediately preceding *Fī ḥaḍrat al-ghiyāb* there is a poem where the poetical self addresses absence in a predictive verse: 'Tell absence: I have missed you / Now I have come, to make you complete!'[60] In the same collection, *Ka-zahr al-lawz aw abᶜad* (Like Almond Flowers or Further, 1995) one also finds a long farewell poem by Darwish to his friend Edward Said. It is part of a suite called 'Exile' and has 'antithesis' (*ṭibāq*) as its telling subtitle. The contradictions of the great intellectual were in fact also those of the great writer, and the words of this poem could very well stand as an epitaph of both:

And in the free travel between cultures
Researchers looking for the essence of man perhaps will find
Room enough for everybody.
Here is a margin advancing, or a centre retreating.

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55 Ibid., 39.

56 Ibid., 157.

57 Ibid., 156.

58 *Athar al-farāsha*, 131–2.

59 أجل، لا وصيّة لك إلا النهي عن الإفراط في التأويل *Fī ḥaḍrat al-ghiyāb,* 168.

60 *Ka-zahr al-lawz aw abᶜad,* Beirut: Riad El-Rayyes, 1995, 19.

The East is not exactly the East
Nor the West exactly the West
Because identity is open to multiplicity
Not a fortress or trenches.[61]

ففي السفر الحر بين الثقافات
قد يجد الباحثون عن الجوهر البشريّ
مقاعدَ كافيةً للجميع.
هنا هامش يتقدّمُ. أو مركز يتراجع
لا الشرقُ شرقٌ تماتاً
ولا الغربُ غربٌ تماماً
لأنّ الهويّةَ مفتوحةٌ للتعدّد
لا قلعةً أو خنادقَ

61 Ibid., 185.