

When the Poet Is a Stranger:  
Poetry and Agency in  
Tagore, Walcott, and Darwish

by

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Department of English  
Duke University

Date: May 28, 2009  
Approved

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Prof. Miriam Cooke

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of Doctor  
of Philosophy in the Department of  
English in the Graduate School  
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## **ABSTRACT**

This study is concerned with the process of the making of a postcolonial poet persona where the poet is addressing multiple audiences and is trying to speak for, and speak to, multiple constituencies through poetry. The poets examined here, Rabindranath Tagore, Derek Walcott, and Mahmoud Darwish—arguably among the best-known poets of the modern world—sought to be heard by various sensibilities and succeeded in reaching them. Outside the fold of the Western Metropolitan world, they as a trio have much to teach us about how poets living under three different phases of colonial hegemony (colonial India, postcolonial West Indies, and neocolonial Palestine/Israel) manage to speak. Their presence in their poetry, or the pressure their life stories and their poet personae, becomes an essential part of reading their work. Desiring to speak themselves, the poets chosen here have necessarily had to speak for their regions, peoples and cultures, alternately celebrating and resisting the burden of representation, imposed on them by both their own people and by the outsiders who receive them. How does a postcolonial poet address changing contingencies—personal, social and political— while continuing to hold the attention of a global readership? How have their formal and esthetic approaches shifted as they responded to contingencies and as they attempted intervene in local and global conversations regarding the fate and future of their societies? An examination of the genre of poetry and postcolonial agency, this study addresses these and other related questions as it looks at the emergence and evolution of Tagore, Walcott, and Darwish as postcolonial world poets.

In memory of my father:

Ahmad Mattawa

(1924-2000)

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**INTRODUCTION:**  
**WHEN THE POET IS A STRANGER**

I grew up on the Eastern side of Libya, where people's habits of mind are tied to their vernacular poetry. Similar to their kin across the border in Egypt, the inhabitants of Eastern Libya "often punctuated their conversations with short poems" (Abu Lughod 24). Many of these poems repeated by my countrymen and women are beyond interpretation. So many of them have become metonymic for given circumstances, and so deeply codified within conversation that they cannot be reconstructed or paraphrased. Abu Lughod, who studied the poetry recited in the northern parts of the Libyan Desert (Western Egypt and Eastern Libya), found that when she "asked what a poem meant," people "either simply repeated the words or described the type of situation that might elicit that poem" (27). Using obscure vocabulary and condensed images, these short poems, called <sup>ʿ</sup>Allam, have managed to convey meaning despite, and even because of, their density. In this context the <sup>ʿ</sup>Allam poem is held in collective ownership in a semi-iconic status in which different emotions have their own poetic hieroglyphs. The question of who wrote a line or a passage is *not* a common one. In fact, querying about the poet's name is often met with surprise (Al-<sup>ʿ</sup>Ükley 18). In this part of the world, one ought to know that the <sup>ʿ</sup>Allam poem is anonymous. Reciting a poetic phrase or a passage does not invite speculations about the poet's intentions or origins, but about what the *user* of the poem means by it.

There are times, however, when the lines of poetry recited belong to someone, an author. This is rare, but it makes all the difference. In Eastern Libya one wants to always know where a person comes from “tribally,” especially in the relatively new cities of Beida and Benghazi where no one has deep historical roots, and it is important to identify oneself by tribal affiliation. Knowing who the poet is tribally adds another layer of interpretation to the poem. One should not be surprised when a Mnifi, a member of the Mnifa tribe who are known for their piety and their historical connection to the Sanussi religious movement, writes a poem with heavy religious overtones. One may hear also something like, “This poet is a Bara’assi!? But he writes against the government, while his tribe which is in cahoots with the regime!”

In the cases outlined here, authorship is placed in a tribal context and the poet’s attempt to foreground his individual presence dissolves within this context. A poet’s presence might be noted if it is clear that there is a discrepancy between the author and his tribal background. Otherwise, as °Aqīlah notes, it is to be expected that the poet’s name would disappear, as would most of the poem’s context and historical circumstances (32), and it would belong to all its users across the region. This is the normal cycle of oral composition, in which it is also likely that other poets will take up the poem and improvise upon it.

I mention the case of the °Allam song of Eastern Libya in order to probe the changes in reception and interpretation that occur when an author’s name is added to a text and when authorship is claimed by a single individual. Such an assertion changes what the poem does. It is no longer simply an encounter with the ideas or intellectual heritage of the people of a given region (not even with single tribes), but with an

individual acting on his own intentions. Why is that Bara'assi poet writing poems against the governing regime when his tribe has benefited from its relations with the government? What does *he* want?

In Libya I also witnessed efforts to place poems in their historical contexts and to recall the often heroic circumstances that brought about their composition. I used to listen to a weekly radio program called “Al-Shi‘r wal Shu‘ara” (“Poets and Poetry”) that was devoted to the classical Arab poetic tradition. The program announcer recited poems and answered questions about poetry that he received in the mail. Audience members often sent passages of poetry to the program, asking for information about a poem and the circumstances of its writing. The announcer, Muhammad El-Mahdi, would answer these requests by stating the poet’s year and place of birth, reading a short biography of him, and providing the occasion of the poem. To me, the moment this clarification occurred amounted to placing the dots on the poem’s Arab letters. Often the occasion of the poem and the lives of the poets were more interesting than the verses themselves, and added to the perceived value of the poem.

El-Mahdi’s explanations asserted that a poem is an act, that there is an element of willfulness behind it, and that it has a place in history. This is not to say that once identified, the lines of poetry lost their emblematic or perhaps parabolic power. Rather, when girded by their historical and autobiographical contexts, poems are preserved from drifting into cliché. The specificity of the poet’s life and historical circumstances—or what I will call from now his *presence*—continues to exert a discursive pressure on the poem’s use or interpretation. This context is also necessary for establishing the status of the poem. Expressing disappointment when no author could be found for a poem sent his

way, El-Mahdi seemed saddened that such a treasure lay unclaimed. In this case anonymity left a poem incomplete, less meaningful than it could otherwise be. Within a context that saw “the poet as a romantic and cultural hero” (Jayussi 37), the existence and undeniable presence of the poet, in time and circumstance, suggested possibility and the potential for individual initiative in the world.

#### A. THE POET’S PRESENCE

Certain that similar dynamics operate in other cultural settings around the world, I mention these facets because they are part of my inheritance. What’s at stake in the two approaches I experienced in Libya is the question of who gets to claim agency: the utterer/user of the poem, or the person who we know created it? Though the push and pull between users of poetry who made it their own and those who wanted to rescue the poet from anonymity by keeping his name attached to his poems is compelling, I spent most of my educational training identifying agency in neither the poet nor the user. Even before hearing of New Criticism or Hermeneutics, I was trained in making the poem/text the center of attention.

Studying a passage from the Quran, for example, one never wonders, “What does Muhammad mean by this?” or even what God meant by it. As far as the Quran was concerned Muhammad was simply a messenger, and God was beyond speculation or understanding. The Quran was God’s word and worked as an intermediary between author and reader. “What did that *aya* (verse) mean?” one asked, as if it uttered itself. The first revelation to Muhammad in the Quran was “Iqra,” recite or read, and the Old Testament started off with “In the beginning was the word.” In both cases, one was not

going to know how God became Lord of Creation or how his spirit moved across the water if one did not submit to the word as vehicle to the greater understanding that lay beyond it.

Moving on to secular texts and poems, using the methods of interpretation I still have in my possession, I read a text/poem and it helped reveal other truths: complicated class tensions, psychological complexes, notions of gender, ambivalent religious feelings, and insights about a given historical epoch. The poem was also enlightening about the nature of language and conceptual structures. The thrill I still feel reading a poem or short story in this manner comes from the poem's ability to reveal a great deal about all of us, the givens of our biology and psychology, as well as our mental paradigms and collective unconscious. In that sense a text is like an artifact from a larger and more enduring whole and in delivering its particulars it also points larger, enduring truths. The poet's intention is temporary and the reader's circumstances change. The ideal act of reading, then, was a suppression of both.

One poem that I read as I began to study literature at university posed a challenge to this reading process. In William Blake's "The Chimney Sweeper" from *Songs of Innocence*, the hero that emerged from the class discussion was "Irony," specifically dramatic irony. The other hero was the context of early nineteenth century England, the rampant exploitation that capitalism had fostered and religion's contribution to the continuation of such oppression. I could not, however, detach myself from the innocent boy who was the persona speaking the poem, a five-year-old chimneysweeper likely to die soon of black lung. Nor could I let go of Blake and my instinctive feeling that to really understand that era one needed to understand the kind of gesture this poem made.

Clearly, the poem was a sophisticated act of resistance. How did Blake go about getting himself to this discursive point? It seemed to me there was a great deal to learn about an era by adding these questions to the interpretive tool kit. What did the poet want to come of writing this poem?

As I began to be interested in writing poetry, I started to seek more of these leakages that pointed back to readers and authors—mostly authors—, and to question how poets were involved in shaping the perception of psychological, political and historical issues. Of course, poets have been involved in directing the interpretive process, and as readers who have strong interpretive skills they have benefited from these very skills in their writing. The poets have had designs on their culture and on their readers, and sometimes, I would later learn, they have had designs on other cultures and on readers outside their national circles or languages.

The relationship between the poet and his or her poem, and how that relationship facilitates the cultural resonance of a poem, is complicated to say the least. This process is layered even when the poet and the reader are from the same culture and speak the same language. In none of the schools of Anglo-American poetry (Romanticism, Modernism, Confessionalism, postmodern L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E) that I studied and that I read now does the poet forego the potential to connect with or impact the reader. Even the most experimental poets dread alienating the reader. Their poems may cause alienation, but estranging the reader is at most a technique, never a strategy. Postmodern American avant-garde poets (the language poets) argue that the difficult nature of their poems is meant to enliven the reader's experience through defamiliarization, among other

approaches. This is how the poet Ron Silliman described the techniques of his fellow language poets and what they hoped to achieve:

By the creation of non-referring structures (Coolidge, Di Palma, Andrews), disrupting of context (Grenier, Dejasu), forcing meanings in upon themselves until they cancel out (Watten..., Palmer). By effacing one or more elements of referential language (...the Russian Futurists), the balance within the words shifts, redistributes. (118)

We note here that Silliman is careful to “redistribute” the balance after it “shifts,” and does not do away with balance completely. The disorienting effects, in which the poet’s language ranges beyond ordinary syntax and sense-making, are meant to lead to a shared “field of action,” to use a William Carlos Williams term (56). Thinking “with the poem and not with a preconceived master plan, and going where the poem led him” (Mariani 540), the poet is perhaps a guide on a difficult journey with his reader, as they slog through the dissonance of the modern experience assembling meaning together. In fact, the more difficult the poetry gets, the more important it is that the poet assumes the reader is like him or her.

In this regard traces of the poet’s persona are imprinted on the poem with a texture of impenetrability: the more difficult the poem, the more we demand not only what the poem means, but what the poet’s intentions in being so difficult were. Thus, the most avant-garde poets of the metropolitan world share a similar outlook to the oral poets of my native region—by addressing the issue of audience neither group assumes that the reader will be any different from the poet. The poet assumes he is speaking to fellow citizens with whom he shares a common tongue and contingency. The ‘Allam poet sometimes addresses strangers (enemies or foes) who he expects to be listening and with whom he has a qualm, yet he still expects them to understand him. By assuming that his



context is the only context that matters, he takes for granted that only those who understand his context can make any sense of what he says. The avant-garde artist similarly anticipates that we would put a great deal of effort into her complex thoughts and elliptical phrasing. The gaps she creates in her text supposedly invite us to write our own complementary poem. Neither the ‘Allam nor the avant-garde poets anticipate a stranger’s reading; the stranger would have to familiarize himself with the work in order to appreciate it.

#### B. WHEN THE POET IS A STRANGER

What happens, though, when a poet crosses a cultural barrier? That is, when he is aware that he *must* cross it, and indeed has designs on readers outside his nation, culture and language. I put forward this discussion of the relationship between poet and poem to highlight the expectations placed on poems, in anticipation that these exertions become more complex as poetry travels among languages and cultures in this increasingly connected world. Ezra Pound argued that poetry is one of the most jealous—meaning national—of all literary genres because it is the literary practice that most challenges translation (Barnstone 87). The gap between the literal and the literary grows wider when the poetries of two languages face each other in the field of translation. Yet within the practice of cultural exchange, poetry has been a principle means of appreciating the nuances of a different society. Both those who do the appreciating and those who want to be appreciated agree on its importance. “Read our poetry,” we are repeatedly told by people from societies or nations that confound us. Often enough we are also told, “read

our poets,” with the understanding that the internal dialogue of an individual’s poems can provide insights into a society’s collective conscience. When I was in Libya last summer, a poet friend of mine urged me to translate a selection of ḤAllam poems. It would be the best way for the world to know the deep roots of our culture, he explained.

So again, what happens to a poet’s poems when he or she crosses into another territory, whether the divide is linguistic or not? How are the poems read? How is the poet “read”? The poet’s fashioning of a self-presentation that is both representative and heightened by its own mythology at the beginning of a poetic career is perhaps one of the most ecstatic moments experienced by a human being. For a postcolonial poet (who I will also call the poet-stranger), the emergence of his poetic persona is in some ways doubly ecstatic; the poet must address not only his own people, but also the outsiders who exert a great deal of power on his society. The politically disadvantageous position he and his people occupy can easily render him invisible and unheard. Speaking out he risks exposure to forces more powerful than himself, forces expert at crushing his kind of resistance. The poet must then write/speak in a manner that will assure his being heard and that will withstand dismissal. The poet has to work out how he is likely to be responded to, and then craft poetry that both anticipates and refutes all attempts to discredit it. In such a setting the poet must perform.

### C. POETIC AGENCY AND POSTCOLONIAL THEORY

This study is concerned with the presence of the poet in his or her poetry, and how the making of a poem is aligned with the creation of a poet’s persona. More specifically, this

study is concerned with the making of a postcolonial poetic persona, through which the poet addresses multiple audiences and tries to speak for, and speak to, multiple constituencies, within the same body of work and while evolving as a poet. The poets examined here, Rabindranath Tagore, Derek Walcott, and Mahmoud Darwish, who are largely outside the mainstream of the Western metropolitan world, are arguably among the best-known poets of the twentieth-century. As a trio they have much to teach us about how poets living under three different phases of colonial hegemony (colonial India, postcolonial West Indies, and neocolonial Palestine/Israel) manage to speak. Consequently, their presence in their poetry, or the pressure their life stories and their poetic personae exerts, is undeniable; it becomes an essential part of reading their work.

Desiring to speak themselves, these poets have necessarily had to become voices for their regions, peoples and cultures. Being seen as cultural specimens facilitated their admittance into the theatre of poetry and gave them their cue to step onto the world stage. Naturally, these poets have alternately celebrated and resisted the burden of representation, which has been imposed on them both by their own people and by the outsiders who receive them. Because to be on the world stage is to seek agency and to use one's time and effort for a cause that lends dignity to oneself and to others, these poets have taken on huge responsibilities that demand boldness and assertiveness. For one thing, they have had to negotiate the degree to which they might appear familiar or unfamiliar. Should a poet insist on his difference or accept his apparent exoticism and work toward neutralizing the perception of his difference? How does one address changing contingencies—personal, social and political—while continuing to hold others' attention? How does poetry remain poetry when there are so many non-esthetic demands

placed upon it as it attempts to speak across languages and cultural traditions and tastes? This study revolves around this constellation of questions as it looks at the works, evolutions, and careers of Tagore, Walcott, and Darwish.

A salient truth about the dialogue between colonizer and colonized is that both interlocutors are highly aware of the performative elements involved in their interaction. As early as the eighteenth century, we read accounts of Native American chiefs visiting England and becoming part of a theatrical display, both literally and figuratively. Joseph Roach reports that during one of their appearances in England in 1709 three Iroquois kings outfitted themselves especially for the occasion, to establish their native authenticity and their legitimacy as sovereign representatives utilizing symbolism the English public could understand. The kings, as it turned out, “performed their roles quite theatrically—literally so in that they borrowed their outfits from the playhouse wardrobe” (164), to which they were taken to dress themselves.

This episode suggests that London was—as are all metropolises of our day—ready to be visited by strangers, that it had somehow positioned itself to receive them, expected them to perform their otherness and, by all appearances, helped them stage their performance. The Iroquois kings understood this and felt no distress about outfitting themselves in whatever was available, however alien that may have been from their usual appearance. The performative dynamics that both the metropolis and the colonial subject utilized while facing each other are indeed part of the history of postcolonial agency.

The poets in this study have addressed the powerlessness and lowly images of their races and nations that accumulated over centuries of uneven interaction with the world’s centers of power. Their poetic projects attempt to re-negotiate this perception and

help identify them as speakers and representatives for their people, and as individuals at the same time. In this regard a sketchy reworking of Bakhtin's notion of the dialogic, developed by Scottish critic Robert Crawford, will be useful here. Employing the term "Identifying Poets," Crawford attempts to outline the machinations of twentieth-century poets who have self-constructed identities that allow them to identify with or to be associated with a particular territory. They are poets "who have made for themselves identities which let them be identified with, restate, or even renovate the identity of a particular territory" (Crawford 1).

The identifying poet is a poet in whose work can be discerned the formation of an "I", which is at some remove from the 'I' of the authorial producer" (Crawford 3). "It is not a piece of individual soul-bearing so much as the creation of a textual self" (4), a self that allows us to see less a historical individual than a constructed amalgam of a self. For Crawford the shaping of a poetic persona suggests "individual and personal identity depends less on a looking-in than on a looking-out" (12). The Other can be a foreign entity, a different person, or the past of one's culture—any of many potential speaking positions that allow the identifying poet to look at himself or his surroundings. Within this context, authority/agency relies on locating the border territories that one shares with the Other, in an attempt to redraw them. Crawford's use of the term "territory" in his definition of the identifying poet is largely geographical. The identifying poet is thus at the boundary of a given geographical/cultural territory, looking out, and attempting to do so with the eyes on the other side of the boundary looking at him. He creates a textual self that allows him to speak from both sides of the boundaries of self and culture.

Since this is a study of postcolonial poets attention must be paid to the dynamics of the encounter between the postcolonial subject, his community and the colonizing Other. In this regard it will be worth alluding to postcolonial theoretical thinking about the flexible nature of identity, the transmittable nature of agency, and the utility of proximity to the colonial metropolis. These concerns recur throughout my analysis of Tagore, Walcott, and Darwish.

The notion of authority/agency, vis-à-vis identity, has been seen as a layered process within postcolonial discourse. Acknowledging the dialectical nature of subjectivity formation, postcolonial theory—mainly in the work of Bhabha—has suggested that postcolonial subjectivity “is constituted through the locus of the Other, which suggests both that the object of identification is ambivalent, and, more significantly, that the agency of identification is never pure or holistic but always constituted in a process of substitution, displacement or projection” (Bhabha 162). Similarly, Gayatri Spivak has suggested that identity is never fixed; rather it is an on-going performance in which various conventions and stances are employed and transformed in everyday practice (155). In other words, identity formation takes place through interaction with an other, and since these interactions vary, the maintenance of identity demands the ability to add or to shed markers of self-identification. In essence, the process of being true to oneself demands that one assess where that truth must be revealed, to whom, and in what context. The individual or collective self has to be gathered from circumstances and contingencies in which the self finds itself.

Bhabha also suggests that postcolonial agency, like authorial intention, necessarily implies forms of solidarity, since it is inter-subjective in two principle ways.

First, just as the meaning or intention of a text is constructed through a process of negotiation between author and reader, so agency involves conception of the effects of that agency on others, who then become “authors” of that agency in the way that readers, too, might be understood to help construct the meaning of the author’s text (Bhabha 273). Second, appropriating the Bakhtinian claim that any speech text contains traces of the prior speech of others, Bhabha suggests by analogy that all agency contains traces of the prior agency of others. As such, agency works dialogically, which also necessarily involves a social dimension, and offers the possibility of solidarity.

This is as true in pragmatic matters as it is in the reading experience. The relevance of this view of agency as it pertains to poetry addresses the genre’s ability to empower whereby lyric meditations induce similar investigations in the reader. Tagore’s poems seem to fill the reader with transformative empathy, perhaps encouraging actions the reader had not previously gathered the courage to take. In Walcott the claim of agency can be seen in the early poem “A Far Cry from Africa,” in which the recognition of a divided self becomes an enabling and transformative realization. In Darwish’s early work as well, which drew on earlier poetic experimentation elsewhere in the Arab world, the empowering force of the poems is almost palpable. Agency is then transferable, or communicable, and one individual’s claim to agency can help another build upon this claim.

Finally, the poets discussed in this study have had to continuously assess the advantages and disadvantages of what Bhabha called “contiguity” to the metropolis in efforts to influence the shapes and directions of their communities. Rather than direct opposition to neocolonialist designs, Bhabha favors contiguity to the metropolis as the

most effective political position for the postcolonial subject (285-286). He also stresses infiltration of the dominant symbolic orders and systems, rather than more direct rejection of them. As some of his critics have noted, Bhabha is largely speaking about postcolonial intellectuals operating within the West, engaged in dialogue with the colonial Other, acting on behalf of a constituency largely unaware of their doings. In the concluding chapter of this study are examples of how these acts of infiltration take place in the work and presence of diasporic postcolonial poets, noting the scope and the parameters of such infiltration.

The three major poets to whom this study is devoted have had to determine the most advantageous way to speak to the metropolis, and address it. In Tagore's case, he saw that access to the metropolis was best achieved through a spiritualist discourse that rested on an authority that the metropolis had already granted to the East. Infiltration, in the sense of being an assimilated insider in the space occupied by the colonial Other, was not an option for Tagore, whose agency relied on being an outsider. It was also not an option for Darwish, who would have loved to influence the metropolises to which he was generally denied access, but whose credibility among his own people rested on this limited access. Finally, an improvised notion of the powerful outsider who is working inside the metropolis could be said to be part of Walcott's approach, granted to him because he wrote from within the same literary tradition and in the same language of the colonial Other. As the chapters on each of the three poets and the discussion of diasporic poet-strangers in the last chapter will detail, these postcolonial conceptual suggestions strike at the heart of their different experiences. All three poets have had to perform their Otherness, build on the accomplishments of a variety of others, position themselves in



relation to the metropolis and continually adjust their proximity to the centers of power, depending on what would grant them and their causes the greatest degree of agency.

#### D. MODELS: THE EVOLUTION OF THE POSTCOLONIAL WRITER

So far I have outlined some of the conceptual frameworks we need to consider in examining postcolonial poets as they have operated in the world. But how do they get there? How do they begin, and how do they respond to the various stages of the colonial or postcolonial experience? To truly appreciate the postcolonial poet's persona, we need to identify paradigms for the development of the postcolonial artist and intellectual that will allow us to see the poet's search for agency in the context of the evolving history and development of the colonized or postcolonial world in which he operated. Probably the best-known such model for the development of the "colonized"<sup>1</sup> intellectual is Frantz Fanon's three-stage model, proposed in *The Wretched of the Earth*:

First, the colonized intellectual proves he has assimilated the colonizer's culture. His works correspond point by point with those of his metropolitan counterparts. The inspiration is European and his works can be easily linked to a well-defined trend in metropolitan literature.... In a second stage, the colonized writer is disturbed and decides to remember what is.... But since the colonized writer is not integrated with his people, since he maintains an outsider's relationship to them, he is content to remember their past life and his. Old childhood memories will surface; old needs are reinterpreted on the basis of a borrowed aesthetic.... Finally, a third stage, a combat stage where the colonized writer, after having tried to lose himself among the people, with the people, will rouse the people. Instead of letting the people's lethargy prevail, he turns into a galvanizer of the people. Combat literature, revolutionary literature, national literature emerges. (156-157)

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<sup>1</sup> Fanon uses the term "colonized" to refer to all individuals from the native populations of colonized territories. To avoid confusion here I use his term. When I am not referring to his work, I use the term "postcolonial" to address any poem or text written from a place afflicted by colonial history, by a person who has access to language with colonial associations. The postcolonial subject is thus any native person who writes from a place and or in a language shaped by colonial history at a time that was/is not yet free from that shaping.

Following the first stage, which Fanon characterizes as a period of unqualified assimilation to the colonial mother country's culture and feeling "the same but not quite" (Bhabha 122), the native intellectual turns inward. He embarks on a search for his past, and his investigation of that past also proves disappointing, as it does not bring the intellectual closer to his people, despite his attempts to bind himself to their history and traditions. Finally, after trying to immerse himself in an unblemished past, the colonized intellectual decides to awaken his people to their reality. Elsewhere in this discussion, Fanon argues that it is the people who, with their energy for and commitment to improving their everyday life, awaken the intellectual from his attachment to the past.

Fanon developed this scheme through his study and work as a psychiatrist in North Africa (Algeria and later Tunisia) during the Algerian revolutionary struggle against French colonialism<sup>2</sup>. Perhaps anticipating the liberation of Algeria, he failed to provide a "post"-colonial phase, a vision of the writer under the newly established regime of the liberated nation. It is also important to note that Fanon's scheme is part of a longer discourse on the importance of "national culture" within each colonized "nation," as opposed to larger groupings or affiliations such as Pan-Africanism and Pan-Arabism. Such broad notions of identity demanded from diverse African and Arab populations, respectively, the restructuring of a shared ideal past. Fanon rejected these approaches because he believed they involved asserting the same stereotypes that the colonizer established as justification for colonization (149-153). Fanon wanted the colonized intellectual to join his people in a shared political context, and to struggle against the colonizer within the local and contemporary circumstances of his nation. Attempting to

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<sup>2</sup> Fanon was an official member of the FLN (National Liberation Front) of Algeria and wrote regular columns for the FLN's newspaper, *Almoujahid*.

get the colonized writer focused—he was speaking to the Second Congress of Black Writers and Artists in Rome in 1959—Fanon wanted his fellow colonized writers to get into the struggle and on to the combat stage.

Fanon’s dialectical structure, appealing at first glance, concludes with a romantic, optimistic note, and in so doing fails to anticipate several factors. For one thing, Fanon’s binary division of colonizer and colonized leaves little room for those who fall racially, religiously, and economically between those two divides. In Fanon’s own Caribbean region, complex French and British racial categorizations in which different groups were placed in a hierarchical structure of rights and privileges invariably generated various attitudes about the colonial structure and the process of its dismantling when it came about. Elsewhere in *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon anticipates a national bourgeois who would be willing to continue the hegemonic relationship with the colonial power and who would hijack the anti-colonial struggle. For the sizeable native middle classes, who were reared to identify strongly with the colonial culture and its achievements, including literature, music and religion, the emergence of a new state in which they were to be leaders meant apprehension as well as exhilaration.

Ian Almond writes that among this middle class, which produced the new nation’s intellectuals and professionals, many of whom sought national independence, a form of postcolonial melancholy<sup>3</sup> for the lost colonial object took root shortly after independence.

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<sup>3</sup> In *Postcolonial Melancholia* Paul Gilroy also refers to the Freudian concept of melancholia, but in relation to British populations in the postcolonial era and their nation’s history of colonial domination. Gilroy contends that England “has been dominated by an inability even to face, never mind actually mourn, the profound change in circumstances and moods that actually followed the end of empire and consequent loss of imperial prestige” (90). His notion of postcolonial melancholy describes the “shock and anxiety that followed from the loss of any sense that the national collective was bound by a coherent and distinctive culture” (90). Rather than working through its complex feelings, Gilroy further asserts that the UK has been

Experiencing the sadness that arises from an identity crisis, the postcolonial intellectual wishes to shed the imperial identity forced upon him by colonial powers and, at the same time, refuse “the narrow, bullying hegemony of an artificially constructed nationalism” (Almond 3). In other words, the postcolonial intellectual can still be caught between Fanon’s stages one and two long after the people have won their independence.

Also, as Fanon recognizes, a return to history and tradition may indeed be necessary in this second stage. Dismissing the past helps lead to an embrace of the present and the future. But what if there is very little past to hold onto, especially when one cannot find an ancestor to claim as one’s own? A past must exist in the first place to be overcome, and so one must either find it, or create it. Otherwise, the postcolonial is like one whose spouse, parent or child has simply vanished—in such cases, people come to terms with death much better than disappearance. The postcolonial would, then, need to be certain that the past is really dead, so that he can build a grave for it, and stop longing.

This anti-climatic angst and disillusionment, which sadly proved all too true in most postcolonial settings, does not figure in Fanon’s model. Critic Kwame Anthony Appiah, studying the postcolonial African novel, collapses Fanon’s three stages into one stage. Focusing mainly on Fanon’s last stage, that of anti-colonial writing, Appiah argues that while national realist writing recognizes a nation’s past, it also looks forward to its modernization (430-431). According to Appiah the second stage of postcolonial writing challenges the writing of the first stage, and its “nationalist legitimization” of the new

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rationalizing, denying, and actively forgetting the violent history that caused the melancholia in the first place.

state and its leadership, who in most of Africa by then had become a corrupt and dictatorial “kleptocracy” (432-433). This stage of postcolonial disillusionment had set in quickly in the post-independence period of most formerly colonized nations.

Appiah also notes that the postcolonial writer has institutional attachments to the colonial order, mainly in academia and the publishing establishment. In many former British and French colonies, universities, like postcolonial national currencies, continue to be aligned to the colonial metropolis and its educational system for the preparation and certification of the new cadre. University education in almost all fields, especially the sciences, continues to be administered in English and French in the former colonies. The second institution that remains strongly connected to the colonizing nation is the publishing establishment, with all its concomitant elements of editing, printing, distribution, and reviewing. The smaller and less literate the colony, the greater its reliance on the colonial metropolis and its satellites. Drawn to these institutions, postcolonial intellectuals are inevitably attached to the colonial metropolis.

As the fates of many postcolonial intellectuals suggest, the nascent postcolonial state has had a centrifugal effect on its artists and intellectuals, while the first world metropolis has provided the majority of the opportunities for work and professional fulfillment. In fact, it has been argued that postcolonial literature is, as such, a metropolitan product. The literature “from other zones of the ‘The Third World’... comes to us not directly or autonomously but through the grids of accumulation, interpretation and relocation which are governed from the metropolitan countries,” argues Aijaz Ahmad (44). Thus, the metropolis has played as important a role in the dissemination and redistribution of postcolonial cultural goods as it has other products, and it continues to

exert cultural pressure on the colonies, informing what they produce and placing them in an export mode until they are drawn to it, or it in-sources them, so that they produce their works closer to its lucrative market. The postcolonial cultural producer has to address the metropolis even as he attempts to talk to his own people, and in many cases, his product is an import from the metropolis.

The state of forced or self-imposed exile in which many postcolonial intellectuals have found themselves is often the outcome of the oppositional activities that postcolonial writers take on in their relations with the nascent nation-state. These intellectuals, who fall into Appiah's second stage, are, for lack of a better word, postcolonial dissidents or anti-heroes, mutations of Fanon's model for the evolution of a postcolonial intellectual. In *The Nation and Its Fragments*, Partha Chatterjee provides a range of marginal groups that the nation, after its independence, relegates to the periphery of its struggle with the colonizer, and keeps there in order to assert the hegemony of the new ruling class. The positions taken by dissident intellectuals play an important role in the postcolonial nation-state's existential reality, and in its perception of its nationhood.

Writing about the evolution of Irish writing, Ian Crump places this period of internal dissent in the third stage of the evolution of his nation's modern national literature. In the first stage, in the early 1800s, Irish writers reveled in their Otherness, reinscribing Ireland's cultural difference to unite its people against England. This embrace of Otherness, however, soon led to feelings of inferiority and dependency, and resulted in the second stage, spearheaded primarily by James Joyce, who expanded the parameters of Gaelic Ireland to a European Ireland. The third stage involved "a vigorous

demythologizing of Gaelic id” (Crump 37), which was undertaken by counter-revivalists. In the fourth and fifth stages of postcolonial Irish writing, which are simultaneous and ongoing, writers have turned their attention to neocolonialism and the double colonization of women in an attempt to undo the damage to marginalized groups similar to those outlined in Chatterjee's analysis.

Eschewing stages of evolution, in *Postcolonial Poetry in English* Rajeev Patke identifies several ongoing tensions in postcolonial poetry that have characterized the genre since its beginnings. The first tension he names manifests itself in postcolonial poets’ attempts to adhere to English poetic traditions governing diction, form and style. These models are tempting to emulate, but prove difficult to reproduce with conviction in societies outside Britain. “Early attempts led to mimicry, incongruity, and ineptness” (Patke 6), while on the other hand, “reliance on traditional features made for alternatives” (6). The combination of these realizations in English-speaking postcolonial circles resulted in a preference for free verse all over the postcolonial world. Free verse is a global postcolonial phenomenon, with poets writing in English or even in their native languages avoiding strict metrical patterns and embracing the image as a dominant feature of their work. Postcolonial poets have also adopted syntax based on, or closer to, spoken idiom, composing poems of a generally unobtrusive sound structure. These formal changes constitute a struggle over language whether writing in the colonizer’s language or in their own tongues. The adoption of free verse as an attempt to level the playing field and engage fully with the poets of the metropolis embodies contradictions, of course. How can one boldly announce a new future while only keeping up with cosmopolitan counterparts?

This is perhaps why content and form part ways. Postcolonial poets have been moved by the challenge of writing their native place, or what Patke called “ecological mimeticism” (9). This same desire to inscribe the West Indies plays an important role in Walcott’s early career. Practiced elsewhere in the postcolonial world, the idea is to inscribe a deed to one’s native land by writing a poetic inventory of its fauna, flora, and topography. This cataloging first finds expression in borrowed idioms and forms, but these soon prove incongruous in the face of physical reality. The adoption of free verse, or freer verse, registers an affirmation of life in the here and now. Writing place in time, as in the Caribbean calypso, becomes a way to write about the West Indies even as the events described take place, and it domesticates English by creating a subtext of commentary that runs beside the official gazettes and newsreels. In this manner poetry serves as a living vehicle for cultural nationalism and cultural independence.

Patke identifies the third feature of postcolonial poetry as a strong desire to revisit history. Whether in detail, as in David Dabydeen’s *Turner*, or in more clipped, aphoristic forms, the poetic re-writing of history allows the postcolonial subject to transform history into “a zone of imaginative recovery and recuperation” (10). Through imaginative recreation and revisionist readings of colonial history, poetry has helped re-name the originary epochs of colonized populations, whose histories had previously begun only with the arrival of the colonizer. In Caribbean poetry, for example, the themes of the Middle Passage, the genocide of native Caribs and Arawacs, and the suffering under slavery have had to be reconstructed through rereading colonial texts and reinvisioning the past.



Patke names exile and diaspora, and the postcolonial poets' response to it, as the fourth feature of postcolonial poetry. In the best of cases, as mentioned in the discussion of Appiah's model, institutional factors such as universities and publishing opportunities in the metropolis prove too lucrative to ignore, especially as the poet/public intellectual begins to agitate against undemocratic practices and corruption. At worst, the fallout at the end of the empire leads to negative economic and political developments in postcolonial nation-states. Over decades, collapsed economies, endemic unemployment and poverty, and civil and ethnic strife lead to waves of migration to the colonial metropolises. Mass migration, forced exile, and self-exile begin to replace the colonial dimension of postcolonial experience with the cosmopolitan and global. The latter part of Walcott's career, in which the poet begins to explore the effects of displacement and isolation, reassess his cultural inheritance, and seek venues of solidarity, can be seen as part of this process. Or, as in the case of Darwish, forced departure and exile are the result of a neocolonial experience from which the poet and his people suffer. The poet's occupation becomes helping to shape a national culture and keeping alive a national dream of statehood, through various tribulations and setbacks.

This study will be in conversation with Fanon's model and the improvisations made up on by Appiah. We also note that parts of Crump's notion of the evolution of Irish literature resonate with the varied trajectories of the three poets discussed here. Almond's reworking of Gilroy's postcolonial melancholy will be helpful in examining Walcott. Also, the concerns that Patke identifies with postcolonial poets can be found will all three poets. However, this study will not try to impose any of these models on the poets' evolutions or break down the three poets' work to fit into these schemata or

categories. Such imposition, I believe, would not be enlightening as the applicability of these tools proves limited.

For example, where ought one place Tagore's rebellion as a young poet when he lampooned his cultural heritage? Would this move fit into Fanon's second stage where the colonized writer sheds of he past? Perhaps it is a purely assimilationist move since Tagore had picked up on the idea of forgery from his readings about Chatterton, the eighteenth century wonderboy poet from Bristol who produced fake ancient poets that received much attention before he was discovered. Furthermore, Tagore in modernizing Bengal's and India's literature did engage a great many of the people's national concerns while never quite leaving the second stage characterized by dedication to one's literary inheritance and history.

Walcott, as noted earlier, perhaps fits best into the Fanon-Appiah model. Yet, as he went on to agitate outside his national culture he found history to be quite useful in placing him again inside his national culture. Finally, in Darwish's case, there is hardly any first assimilationist or second nostalgic stage. He leapt directly into the fight for national self-determination and kept being involved.

Like Walcott's, Darwish's work takes several turns toward the rewriting of myth and history as a central component of shaping a national culture. In fact, Darwish later becomes opposed to writing the sort of affirmative populist literature that he started off with and that Fanon had advocated. Darwish experiences a form of disenchantment with his national culture even as the nation seems to slip into oblivion. Finally, he begins to advocate a form of esthetic resurgence that eschews nationalism for the most part, favoring instead a universalist impulse that slightly echoes Tagore's discourse as he

became a world poet. While studying these poets, we will be aided by an awareness of the varied stages outlined above and the choices of subject matter that the poets chose, or felt compelled, to address. My analyses of the poets' works and evolutions will resort to a variety of theoretical tools to apprehend the varied mixtures of influences that contributed to each poet's assumption of agency.

It is extremely important to note that while each of these poets wrote in response to cultural and political contingencies, they also felt compelled to adhere to esthetic demands that transcend such contingencies. Each of the three poets has had to develop pliable esthetics that allow his work to endure in time and to expand beyond those who were not aware of the original circumstances that gave the work its impetus. Indeed, a national literature is borne out of contingency, but literature has to have esthetic qualities that make these same contingent works of art impact their readers beyond the moment of contingency and even without any awareness of the initial pressures that brought the work of art into being. In essence, Tagore, Walcott, and Darwish had to look forward beyond the moments that gave them their poems and that looking forward expressed itself in the esthetic and formal choices they made in their work, be in the register of the language they chose, the personae they adopted, or the motifs and tones they employed.

#### E. TAGORE, WALCOTT, DARWISH AND POSTCOLONIAL CHRONOLOGY

As this study provides individual cases illustrating the role of poetry during colonial and postcolonial experiences, it seems appropriate to discuss the poets in chronological order, beginning with Tagore. As for who ought to come next, it seemed plausible that either

Walcott or Darwish could be second. Walcott is older than Darwish, and his region's experience with colonialism was a longer one. Furthermore, the Caribbean experience with colonialism is officially complete, as almost all the islands in that region have gained their independence and there is currently no national liberation movement seeking independence.

On the other hand, Palestine, a nation/territory yet to gain independence, and one which may never gain it, is hardly a postcolonial situation. Palestine, like Tagore's India and much of Walcott's Caribbean region, was under British colonial (mandate) rule, and the British themselves withdrew, if only for another European community to establish itself there. What is most disorienting about the Palestinian situation in terms of postcolonial studies is that the Zionist settler colonial experience solidified with the establishment of the state of Israel as other decolonization processes were beginning to take shape, whether by armed struggle, negotiation, or slow disengagement. Israel/Palestine is thus a region perhaps akin to South Africa under apartheid rule, or to Rhodesia, the white-run African state that became Zimbabwe in 1980.

As such, Palestine fits rather awkwardly, as Salah Hassan correctly noted, within postcolonial studies. "The question with regard to Palestine," Hassan explains, "is not whether it is postcolonial, but whether the 1947 U.N. partition of Palestine and the 1967 Israeli occupation are recognized as colonialism or as something new and distinct, a more pernicious form of territorial conquest" (Hassan, 33). Accordingly, it was suggested to me that since Darwish was involved in an ongoing national liberation movement, a struggle fought by an indigenous population in the name of freeing its lands from exploitative foreign domination, he should be presented as the second poet in this study,

since such national liberation movements had emerged prior to the decolonization process.

The problem is not in which stage in the colonial experience Darwish falls, but the gesture of closure involved with placing him. So far, even as postcolonial discourses have evolved—ironically, with Palestinian Edward Said a leading figure—and as metropolitan political sponsorship of Israel continues, the designation of the Palestinians as a colonized people has never quite stuck in the corridors of metropolitan power. Palestine and the Palestinians occupy the contentious space of remaining an unnamed colony in the era of postcolonialism.

Partly because of that incompleteness and the lack of closure that his story brings to our understanding of colonialism and postcolonialism, Darwish fits in third, rather than second. His writing incorporates the anticolonial struggle and other phases of the postcolonial experience, including that of postcolonial melancholy. He seems to have been born in Fanon's third stage. Solidly connected to his people, we see him stretch the possibilities of that stage as he incorporates numerous approaches to shaping a Palestinian national culture. Also, I want to end with Darwish's unfinished project as a reminder to never quite shut the door on the age of colonialism, especially as powerful nations continue to occupy weaker ones for the purposes of sustaining their hegemony over the world's resources, and while the suppression of Palestinian national aspirations is still seen as a legitimate expense for such endeavors.

Starting off with Rabindranath Tagore, then, and examining his evolution as a poet at home and later as a poet in the world in the second chapter of this study, I begin by probing his multifaceted literary project, which included poetry, fiction, and drama.

Anglophile, but never quite assimilated into English ways, Tagore helped shape Bengali modernity with a wide-ranging body of work that positioned him as an educator, cultural critic, and rebel. Beginning in 1913, Tagore suddenly became a poet with world renown and tremendous access to a wide variety of audiences. Of interest is his poetry, written either directly in English or translated into it, which was instrumental in his cultivation of the notion of himself as a “Sage from the East,” a guru, a role that metropolitan settings were ready to accept.

Addressing Western readers and audiences in print and in person, Tagore dramatized a form of archaism that framed his contemporary ideas and initiatives in a rubric of ancient Eastern truths. Ironically, Tagore was known for playing a central role in modernizing the national literature of his native India, and specifically Bengali literature. The territory Tagore seemed to speak for was the East at large. While this theatrical positioning attempted to exploit or subvert Eurocentric Orientalism, and may have been subsumed by it, it was a strategic choice that was meant to advance his hopes of helping to bring about a more peaceful, democratic, and heterogeneous world order. In the chapter devoted to Tagore I outline the emergence of the performative parameters of his poetic persona in order to elucidate the ideas he hoped to convey and multiple audiences he hoped to address from this standpoint.

The second chapter focuses on Derek Walcott. Of the three poets discussed here Walcott’s career perhaps most closely resembles Fanon’s model for the evolution of the postcolonial intellectual. I see Walcott’s career as constituted by several major phases in which he struggles with a complex web of desires and challenges that include engagement, dislocation, disenchantment and celebration. Wishing to be seen as a patriot

and a worldly intellectual unfettered by regionalism, Walcott is an inheritor of both African ancestry and Western classical literature who refuses to be limited to or let go of either one of these attributes. We read him speaking to and of the people of the Caribbean as both an insider and an outsider—and to both those from the region and outside of it. His esthetics are alternately steeped in convention and fully invested in subversion.

The third chapter is devoted to Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, whose elaborate poetic persona had been a heteroglossal one, expansive enough to include his nation's aspirations while at pains to save a space for the poet apart from the burden of spokespersonship. Since many of his poems are written in the first-person plural, it is possible to assume that this collective voice is that of the Palestinian people. Other poems intersect with his autobiography, but there is a great deal of myth involved in the shaping of the autobiographical voice. He has also written poems in which the speaker is dramatized in such a way as to bear no relation to the poet. I will assess this heteroglossal approach and its contribution to Darwish's image as a national poet, or as he has been called, "the conscience of the Palestinian people." I will also examine how Darwish has dealt with this assignment—at times accepting it and at others attempting to articulate an/other self/selves he deems more authentic.

In the concluding chapter of this study, I try to bring us up to date by examining various aspects of the publication and dissemination of postcolonial poetry in the metropolitan world, with a special focus on the work of diasporic postcolonial poets working in the U.S. Making an ethnographic turn toward my own experiences in contemporary American poetry, I present three recent stories that illustrate the machinations of postcolonial agency as it is claimed by poet-strangers, perhaps another

name by which to identify poets who are strongly associated with certain regions of the world, especially those caught in conflict with the U.S. Paying specific attention to the projects of the poetic personae of Agha Shahid Ali, Dunya Mikhail, and Taha Muhammad Ali, I assess the conditions under which these poets have operated and the facets of their performances on the metropolitan poetry scene.

#### F. ASPIRATIONS

As a practicing poet and translator of contemporary Arabic poetry, I am interested in contributing to the study of postcolonial poetry to help my favored genre receive the attention it is due in postcolonial studies. Specifically, I want to open the field toward what Jahan Ramazani has called intercultural poetics. I welcome Ramazani's turn in this direction as a corrective to the linguistic focus that has been the fate of postcolonial research, especially in poetry. The two major books on postcolonial poetry are Ramazani's *The Hybrid Muse* (2000) and Patke's *Postcolonial Poetry in English* (2006). Ramazani excludes settler colonial literature and offers a rich reading of English-language postcolonial poetry that covers poets from India, Ireland, Kenya and the Caribbean. Patke, whose book I found quite insightful and which I have cited here, broadens to include the work of poets from European settler communities in former British colonies.

The postcolonial map Patke chooses, which was emphasized in Ashcroft, et al.'s *Empire Writes Back* (1988), has always perplexed me. I think it is counterintuitive to put together an analysis of postcolonial poetry that includes a poet from Nigeria and a poet



from Canada as if they were part of the same postcolonial experience, primarily because I find it difficult to consider a Canadian of European descent a postcolonial. Such focus on empire rather than on the nuanced and varied experiences of the people it dominated reinforces the primacy of the colonial power over the colonized/postcolonial writers. A more interesting study would have included a Nigerian poet and one from next door in Cameroon or Guinea Bissau, despite the different European languages they wrote in (if that's in fact what they wrote in).

In choosing poets who write in different languages and whose individual approaches and struggles complement each other not by their similarity, but their variety, I hope to provide a view of postcolonial poetry that arises from the poet's search for individual agency and collective empowerment through poetry. As to the choice of the genre, I believe poetry presents interesting challenges to contemporary notions of postcolonial authority within a world that increasingly depends on the exchange and movement of ideas. On one hand, the figure of the poet is a powerful, flexible, mobile representation of any given culture or group. The poet, as bearer of text and metonym of his language and collectivity, can provide to outsiders an immediate and substantive engagement with his or her culture, whether on the page or in performance. The genre provides a ready forum for her or him, and all the poet need do is speak. Whether she or he is tuned in to the community's latest conceptual gossip, or busy channeling the ancestors and the gods for revelation, the poet is still, rightly, seen as a bearer of news.

On the other hand, contemporary written poetry, especially in its free verse and experimental forms, operates largely on the margins of commodity exchange, and generally outside the centers of power (though with some capacity to intervene

strategically). The dominance of the novel, film, and television with their focus on grand narratives as the favored media of establishment discourse has left for poets a wide margin for self-invention. Armed with a genre that privileges spontaneity, precision, and linguistic play, poets are given a great deal of room to destabilize language and to both define and contradict themselves without much interruption. As such, poetry is like the genie in the lamp: powerful, enduring, and contained.

Interested as I am in the issue of postcolonial agency, I have a great deal to learn from the three major poets discussed here, and the diasporic poets discussed in the last chapter, who have demonstrated tremendous artistic range and conceptual agility as both poets and citizens of the world. Far from lacking agency, they have exercised various forms of it through the multiplicity of their evolving voices. Like the °Allam poets who attached their names to their poems, they have forced me to ask me what the poet wants, and like the late Muhammad El-Mahdi I have gone after their poems to see how they have tried to address the contingencies of the world in which they lived. How they have managed to burst out of their respective lamps of colonial obscurity, and how they have used the solitude their craft had demanded to shape responsive and enduring works of art, has much to teach us about the evolution of postcolonial agency in the regions these poets helped to identify as well as in the metropolis. These poets also have a great deal to teach us about the place of poetry in a more connected, and ever changing, world.

**CHAPTER 1:**  
**AT HOME AND IN THE WORLD:**  
**THE EVOLUTION OF RABINDRANATH TAGORE'S POET PERSONA**

A.PRODIGY

Rabindranath Tagore's initial appearance on the literary scene in Bengal in 1875 received genuine enthusiasm, though it was in fact a prank. Fourteen at the time, Tagore invented a classical poet named Bhanisimha and wrote poems that were so well contrived they passed as genuine articles. The poems were published in a separate volume and included a preface that outlined the fictional poet's life and achievements; several readers lauded the newly discovered classical poet who ended up in a Bengali scholar's dissertation in Germany in the late 1880s (Robinson and Dutt 12; Krishna 71; Thomson 10). Tagore's precocious entrance would, in many ways, characterize his long and prolific career. To start off by fooling the critics shows the kind of daring and irreverence that Tagore displayed most of his life. Yet demonstrating the ability to master a classical tradition, and in such a seamless manner, suggests deep acknowledgement of the sources of his own literary output.

For millennia imitation of the masters has been an important, sometimes required, phase in every young artist's career, used to demonstrate skill in the literary conventions of his region and to serve as a rite of passage before his or her own creative projects are

undertaken. Tagore's skill in imitation could only please the champions of tradition, and Tagore won that de facto recognition. But by duping those he wished to impress he also exhibited open disregard for their taste. The classical tradition, Tagore's fraud suggested, was so steeped in convention, so unoriginal, that a precocious fourteen year-old could easily imitate it. Tagore's dare achieved two contrary goals: it showed him to be both an inheritor of literary tradition, and a literary rebel intent on undermining that tradition.

We can attribute this sensibility to the atmosphere of the home in which he was reared and that among the elites of late 19<sup>th</sup>-century Bengal, which was undergoing a cultural renaissance. At the center of this process of renewal was the Brahmo Samaj, a reformist movement to which Tagore's family belonged and which they helped institute. Drawing on the earliest Sanskrit texts, mainly the Upanishads, members of the Brahmo Samaj, "who were the Bengali forerunners of Indian modernization" (Kopf xiv), stayed within the Hindu fold and renounced polytheism and the unquestioned authority of any scripture. Their social agenda was equally ambitious, taking on issues of caste discrimination and sati.

Tagore managed to remain an important figure in Bengali and Indian cultures throughout his life through the mix of an unwavering attachment to his origins and a rebellious streak, which he displayed until his deathbed poems. Whether in Bengal, or during his travels around the world in later years, Tagore took up various independent causes and initiatives, even establishing his own independent university with pedagogical techniques that remain original even by contemporary standards. However, Indian readers hold Tagore in high esteem mainly for upholding a well-established body of literature through his incorporation of Bengali and Sanskrit texts, as well as his role in modernizing

the tradition; they honor his contributions and inventions in all genres. Tagore produced about a hundred books of verse (much of which he set to music), dozens of dramas (many in which he acted), and dozens of volumes of prose (novels, short stories, and essays on literature, politics and philosophy). In the last decade of his life, he turned to painting and there, too, he distinguished himself.

Tagore's less-than-stellar reputation in cosmopolitan literary circles belies such accomplishments. In fact, while writing this chapter I have felt the inevitable conflict between my sense of Tagore's achievements, as sketched out above, and his standing in the eyes of the world—and by “the world,” I mean “the English-speaking literary world.” The emphasis on English is not incidental. It was the language of the colonial power that dominated his country and the language to which Tagore first translated himself, and it continues to serve as a transactional, mediating language for translations of Tagore to other tongues. In Arabic, for example, the works of Tagore that are still available in print are all based on English versions.

Readers of this study, aware that Tagore is still perceived largely as a pseudo-literary spiritual figure in the English-speaking world, will quickly notice that I hardly mention the vast corpus of spiritual, devotional poetry for which he first won adoration and accolades. I am aware that this seems odd, given that Tagore's *Collected Works* and his most widely available writing includes nothing but his devotional poems, beginning with the Nobel Prize-winning *Gitanjali*<sup>1</sup>, published in 1912, and some of his more melodramatic plays. Standing without an introduction, *Collected Works of Tagore*, reprinted many times since its initial publication by Macmillan in 1937, does not even

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<sup>1</sup> Established in 1901, the Nobel Prize was in its initial stages given to international authors based on their most recent work.

mention that Tagore wrote in Bengali, or in other genres. On the cover of a recent printing, Tagore's photo suggests he is a kind of yogi, which the poems and play reinforce. The book claims to encompass all of Tagore's poetry, denying the reader more knowledge of the work of this complex, prolific, and wide-ranging artist and author.

Given Macmillan's representation of Tagore in the English-speaking world, it is arguable that every serious discussion of Tagore is a recovery project. No critic I have encountered writing today in the West can begin to elaborate on any aspect of Tagore's work without alluding to the sudden rise of his literary star in the mid-teens of the twentieth century and the steady decline of his literary reputation thereafter. Exemplifying these recovery projects are the numerous critical volumes on Tagore published in India, which attempt to redeem this maligned giant. In the last four decades Tagore has received regular critical attention from Western scholars of India, and lately postcolonial specialists, assuring that his works will continue to be read outside of India. I aim to contribute to this slow recovery of an important poet and literary persona whose accomplishments are yet to be fully appreciated.

Because I am interested in post/colonial agency, I will pay attention to the motivations and evolution of Tagore's self-presentation as a poet, and to how that process can be seen in the poetry itself. Tagore's accomplishments in his early years granted him a degree of esteem and positioned him to influence the cultural and political life of Bengal. His self-presentation as an Indian poet, especially after he was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1913, granted him the authority to speak to all of humanity on behalf of India and the East at large, as was his aim. However, Tagore also began to rely more on his lectures and essays when addressing global social and political concerns. While his

poetry was the source of his authority, his ambitions and activism demanded that he use a more direct treatment of the issues at hand, even as he continued to consider poetry central to his mission as an artist and public intellectual.

Tagore's experience, and the agency he gained through poetry, was unlike any other poet's before him, and perhaps forever after. His assumption of the role of a global poet has much to teach us about the era in which he operated and about the potential role of poetry and poet in the world. This chapter will begin with a discussion of Tagore's beginnings and the various roles he played as poet in Bengal. The following section will outline the development of Tagore's poetic persona in his native Bengal, a development marked by a well-articulated set of esthetic and ethical values. I will address his manifold relations with his nation's literary traditions and its great poets. I will also address what I consider a strong urge toward ubiquity in Tagore, an existential drive to break spatial and temporal barriers that manifests itself in his work and in his attitude toward what literature in its broadest sense (including drama, music, and even prayer) can offer the world.

In Part C I will turn to Tagore's mental preparation to assume the role of global poet. An Anglophile though he never attended a regular English school, Tagore was well-acquainted with English literature and history and had a great deal of admiration for it, which he demonstrated through imitations of English poets in his early years and with translations of English classics in the first half of his life. Intensifying his increasingly negative perception of British colonial policies in India were two visits to London, in 1879 and in 1889. The latter visit, in particular, filled Tagore with a quiet ambivalence about the Empire under whose rule he lived. In 1911 he traveled to Europe filled with

hope that a cultural synthesis between East and West could be achieved, a mission that would characterize his activism after winning the Nobel Prize in 1913.

Section D will turn to Tagore's writings and activities from the second decade of the twentieth century until his death in 1940. Tagore's appearance on the global (Western) literary scene in 1912 was first met with boundless enthusiasm. His discovery by Yeats, Pound, and others took London and other Western literary scenes by storm. The Eastern Sage persona Tagore took on was not a prank, but as I will argue in section D, it did involve an element of performance that may have rendered Tagore a limited or one-dimensional character. Tagore's rise in reputation and his quick fall from grace among the literati, at least in the English-speaking world, took place due to many factors, some of which were outside his control. Confronted with racism and Orientalist paradigms and misunderstood by friends, Tagore also undermined his own reputation and agency by misrepresenting himself and his work, and by misreading elements of the context in which he operated.

Section E of this chapter will conclude the chapter by assessing Tagore's endeavor to be a poet of the world. Taking into account Tagore's unstated goals, his approach, his "message," and the state of the world he tried to influence, this section will attempt insight on the nature of poetic agency within the specific context of a poet from a colonized region trying to speak poetry to power, and in doing so, trying to change the shape of the world.



## B. POET OF BENGAL

### 1. Intertextual Subjectivity

From the early stages of his writing career, Tagore positioned himself as a synthesizer whose poetic expression emerged from the amalgamation of a variety of literatures, for whom making and remaking one's work or that of others becomes part of the poetic process. In the early poem "Unending Love," Tagore writes, "My spell-bound heart has made and remade the necklace of songs / that you take as a gift" (Tagore, 1985 49). The songs are to be cherished not because they are unique to the poet or even because they are made for the beloved, but because of their "merging" with "the songs of every poet past and forever" (49). The love the poet-speaker offers in the poem is only as strong as its ability to tap into love's timelessness, the countless loves that have taken place before it. The poet's love is made of "old love, but in shapes that renew and renew forever," and his poem is made up, and aims to merge with "the songs of every poet past and forever." There is no claim for uniqueness or even for a particular gift. If the poem is unique at all it is because of its assumption and awareness of other similar expressions. As such it is a powerful example of lyric synthesis, in which the poet's love and that of others, his voice and their voices combine into one. The effect of the poet's denial of his poetic prowess retrospectively makes his poetic presence resound precisely because of his capacity to produce a piece of work that is admittedly choral, but which can only be attributed to him.

In "Unending Love" we also hear resonances that remind us of Edward Said's *Beginnings*, in which the late critic writes, "a beginning immediately establishes

relationships with work already existing, relationships of either continuity or antagonism or some mixture of both.” Similarly, we hear echoes of one of Paul Valery’s descriptions of the process of artistic creation when he declares that whatever a writer puts down on paper,

we can observe that what a man does either repeats or refuses what someone else has done—repeats it in other tones, refines or amplifies it or simplifies it, loads or reloads it with meaning; or else rebuts overturns, destroys and denies it, but thereby assumes it and has inevitably used it. (*Beginnings* 18)

In Tagore’s “Unending Love” these earlier texts are not named, but the poet openly explains that he relies on what others have said and done. The relation between earlier texts and his own is that of continuity, in the same way that his declaration of love is made more powerful as it belongs to all lovers since time immemorial. The poem and the poet’s love are “heaped before” the beloved’s feet. “It has found its end in you, / The love of all man’s days both past and forever.” Intertextuality becomes inter-emotionality, whereby consciously-borrowed passages accumulate to express the poet’s own emotions and those who felt like him, whose feelings empower him as if he were a member of an alliance of lovers who have vowed to support each other in their passions. With the aid of all the past loves of the world, Tagore’s speaker presents all of love and all love poetry, past, present, and future, as evidence of his love for his beloved, and as evidence of his poem’s belonging within what had come before it and what will come after.

“Meghaduta” (“Cloud Messenger”) demonstrates a different aspect of his intertextual poetic practice. Tagore’s poem bears the same title as a poem by the ancient poet Kalidasa<sup>2</sup>, whose original is in the voice of a *yaksha* or devotee of Kubera (the God

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<sup>2</sup> Kalidasa’s biography is in dispute. It is reported that he lived somewhere between the fourth and first centuries BC.

of Wealth). After being exiled for a year to central India for some unknown transgression, the poet-speaker of Kalidasa's poem addresses a cloud and implores it to reach his beloved. Made up of approximately 111 stanzas, this long love lyric describes in great detail the cloud's journey to the devotee's beloved. The poem widens its scope, becoming an idyll with national resonance as the cloud crosses the geography of India, visiting her people, flora and fauna, her gods and myths, and allowing the poem to catalog them. The cloud dallies with country women and courtesans, releases rain showers upon jasmine gardens and parched fields, puts out forest fires, battles the *sharaba*, eight-legged beasts, with thunder and hail, pays homage to numerous shrines, and empties and replenishes itself in India's great rivers. More importantly, the cloud encounters lovers, enjoying each other's companionship in states of high passion or tranquil conversation, or suffering the pangs "caused by the flower-arrowed god" (Kalidasa 4).

In Tagore's "Meghaduta" the poet addresses Kalidasa:  
In a single day the heart-held grief of a thousand years  
Of pining, long repressed tears,  
Broke time's bonds, seem to have poured down...  
and drenched your noble stanzas. (Tagore 1985 50)

As in the poem "Unending Love," we re-encounter the idea that the poem is made of layers of sounds and language, indeed, thousands of years of pining and long-repressed tears. What was in the poet's verses before they were drenched by other voices, what power and urgency can the speaker have had without awareness of these various states of love all over India? Tagore never quite clarifies. He does suggest, however, that the poem did not "happen" as such until the echoes of other lovers entered it and gave it form. Like a replenishing thunderstorm Kalidasa's poem succeeds because it manages to "heap the misery / of all separated lovers throughout the world / Into thunderous music" (51). The

poet's job, then, is to synchronize these voices becoming rain, cloud, and vapor, the slow accumulation of water, and the electric charge that brings down relief.

Tagore, however, also wishes to interrogate his predecessor. He asks Kalidasa a series of rhetorical questions, partly to state his own poetic agenda, and to explore how a poem like the *Meghaduta* can be rewritten. He states:

Did every exile in the world that day  
Raise his head, clasp his hands, face his beloved's home  
And sing to the clouds one and the same  
Song of yearning? Did each lover ask a fresh, unfettered cloud  
To carry on its wings a tearful message of love  
To the distant window where his beloved  
Lay wretched on the ground with clothes disordered  
And hair unplaited and weeping eyes?  
Did your music, O poet, carry all their songs  
As you journeyed in your poem through land after land  
Over many days and nights  
Toward the lonely object of your love? (Tagore 1985 50)

The first eight lines of the passage above provide a more explicit version of all the lovers referred to in "Unending Love." They are in fact the subjects of love, and the poem is the recipient of their stories; the poet merely receives their longings. The poet becomes a "subject" only after getting his cue from other exiled lovers while carrying in his satchel the experience of other lovers toward the "object" of his love. It is the endowment by such voices that helps the speaker transform from object to subject, from listener to singer. Kalidasa, Tagore seems to suggest, succeeds because he has amalgamated these many voices, and that allows him to fashion his own poem.

So focused is the poet on highlighting his admiration that the first-person speaker of Tagore's "*Meghaduta*" appears only twice. The first time we encounter the first-person pronoun in the poem, the poet is cautious, as if sneaking into his own poem, and he is not

alone as we encounter him, but in the company of the poet Jayadeva<sup>3</sup> on a rainy day similar to the sort of day that serves as the setting for both Meghadutas.

The [lovers'] voices come to me from your poem;  
They sound in my ear like waves on the sea-shore.

In the easternmost part of India,  
In verdurous Bengal, I sit.  
Here too the poet Jayadeva watched on a rainy day  
The blue green shadows of distant tamal trees,  
The destiny of a sky in full cloud.

Today is dark day, the rain is incessant,  
The wind ferocious—treetops rise  
Like arms at its attack; their swishing is a cry.  
Lightning darts through the clouds, ripping them,  
Dotting the sky with sharp, crooked smiles.

In a gloomy closed room I sit alone  
And read the Meghaduta. My mind leaves the room,  
Travels on a free-moving cloud, flies far and wide. (Tagore 1985 51)

Kalidasa's "Meghaduta" has delivered the lovers' voices across time, and has proven its worth and the legitimacy of its survival as a revered work of art. In the two lines that follow Tagore's description of the action in the poem and the world outside, the only verb of which he is a subject is that of to "sit." The poet-speaker is objectified, receiving the poem and being impacted by it as if he were standing before a tumultuous shore, a force bordering on the sublime. The reminder of an earlier poet brings more than companionship as it links poet to poetic tradition and names a possible influence or idol who, as it happens, also sat through similar rainy nights watching the rain, taken in by it. Tagore's poet-speaker then asserts his aloneness; the shadow of Jayadeva leaves him. He is now without the company of tradition or literary predecessors.

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<sup>3</sup> Jayadeva is among the greatest Sanskrit poets of India. His birth year is known, but it is documented that he lived in Orissa in the 13<sup>th</sup> century AD. His best-known composition is *Gitagovinda*, an epic poem that depicts the divine love of the Hindu deity Krishna and his consort, Radha.

Nature's animation increases; the trees' branches become attacking arms, lightning rips the clouds and draws fearful images. The poet seems to hear a cry. He turns to the book for a second reading, but his mind "leaves the room, / travels on a free-moving cloud, flies far and wide" (Tagore 1985 51). With this last image we can imagine the poet turning to the free-moving cloud of his own imagination and beginning to write his own poetry. The use of a striking sequence of personification, in which trees are flailing their arms and lightning turns the sky into a backdrop for a series of twisted faces suggests that the poet is not passive at all. Rather, he seems to compete with the original text, inscribing his own descriptions of the sublime over those of the original.

We can almost see an outline of Tagore's intertextual compositional process. As such, Tagore's "Meghaduta" is what Harold Bloom called an "inter-poem," in which "any poem is an inter-poem, any reading is an inter-reading," and whereby "a poem is not writing, but rewriting" (Bloom 1976 3). By mentioning at least one other poet as well as other readers of the *Meghaduta*, Tagore openly acknowledges his position as a reader. Here Tagore is also what we might call an "inter-reader," whose experience of the poem resounds with the impact the poem has had on others before him.

He begins by reading a classic work, immersing himself in it, and tries to understand its synthetic process by noting the allusions and borrowings that the classic work has woven together. Then he begins to note the potential impact that the poem has had on its past readers and attempts to synchronize those moments of reading with those in his own time. Tagore suggests that when we read a poem we are moved not only by the writings incorporated within it, but also by all the past readings of that text. Therefore, an earlier work of art thrills us because it is able to speak to us in our present

moment and because it carries the echoes of its evocations in numerous past readings. Other writings and readings of a poem thus weave a fabric that synthesizes and synchronizes our present moment and utterance with that of others.

In his own poem the poet connects the previous text's history, in this case that of Kalidasa's *Meghaduta*, with other similar moments in Indian literary history—this is what the allusion to Jayadeva provides—and then positions his own originary moment among them, reading and writing dissolving into each other as do the present and past. Tagore's approach qualifies him as of one Harold Bloom's "strong poets," who possess a will that finds "all prior texts as opening for its own totalizing and unique interpretation" (Bloom 1976 17). The movements of Tagore's rewriting of the *Meghaduta* alternate between allusions to Kalidasa's poem and his own observations. In lines 1-26 Tagore addresses the poet and poem with open praise. In lines 26-34 the poet turns to his own surroundings. Lines 35-45 address the *Meghaduta*'s longevity and how it impacts its readers in the present. In lines 46-58 the poet refers to his own reading and compositional moment. Line 59 refers to Kalidasa's *Meghaduta*, and after that reference Tagore's speaker is released from his inheritance and begins in proper fashion, until line 96, when he turns to the rain falling around him, the scenery, and the social landscape.

In lines 96-110, Tagore turns again to the *Meghaduta* with praise for Kalidasa, but even in these moments of praise Tagore is actively engaged in rewriting the *Meghaduta*, referring to particular passages in the classical text and adding his own commentary and impressions. Tagore gave his own poem the title of the original classical text. He does not, for example, title his poem "Upon Reading the Meghaduta" as in Keats's "Upon

Reading Chapman's Homer." Tagore instead appropriates the title of the classic poem and declares himself author, or rewriter, of the earlier poem.

Despite Tagore's praise for the original *Meghaduta*, and public eulogy of Kalidasa, the central lyric moment in Tagore's *Meghaduta* is a private epiphany. He declares, "It is not of the body that brings us there, / to the bed of pining by the Manasa lake" (Tagore 1985 52). We can read these two lines as praise for the original *Meghaduta* in that it is otherworldly, surpassing the body, and possibly divinely inspired. But the poet is also praising his own journey and his own ability to be transported through imagination. Aligning himself with the inspiration for the classical poem, yet naming the gift of the poem as "not of the body," Tagore seems to suggest that he has entered the same realm as that which inspired the original *Meghaduta*, and that in fact he has found his own way to the timeless sources of the imagination, "the sunless, jewel lit, evening land / Beyond all the rivers and mountains of this world" (Tagore 1985 52).

Bloom calls this kind of move by the later poem "'Daemonization,' a movement toward a personalized Counter-Sublime in reaction to the precursor's Sublime," or in other words,

an intermediary being, neither divine nor human, enters into the adept to aid him. The later poet open himself to what he believes to be a power in the parent poem that does not belong to the parent poet proper, but to a range of being just beyond that precursor. He does this, in his poem, by so stationing its relation to the parent-poem as to generalize away the uniqueness of the earlier work. (Bloom 1973 101)

Those who are familiar with the history of Kalidasa know that he grew up with little education. A princess who had fallen in love with him, it is told, was deeply ashamed of his ignorance and coarseness. A devotee of the goddess Kali (the word Kalidasa means devotee of Kali), he sought the aid of the goddess and was rewarded with a sudden and



extraordinary gift for wit. This allowed him to become favored in the court of the fabled King Vikramaditya of Ujjan. Kalidasa's inspiration was divinely given, not self-created, unlike Tagore's poet-speaker, who claims no such supernatural assistance. More than simply secularizing poetic inspiration, Tagore hints that his poet ought to be valued more than Kalidasa's, for if not for the assistance of the gods, the earlier poet would not have written a single poem.

Tagore's allusion to Jayadeva in this poem inspired by Kalidasa suggests equal cunning. Jayadeva is Sri Jayadeva Goswami, who served as the court pundit in the rule of Sri Lakshman, King of Bengal. Jayadeva's reputation rests on the *Gitagovinda*, a scriptural work describing the intimate pastimes of Sri Radha and Govinda (another name for Krishna). Jayadeva was influenced by Kalidasa, and the *Gitagovinda* by Kalidasa's epic *Kumarasambhava* (*The Birth of a Prince*), and the aforementioned *Meghaduta* (Miller 8). The best-known story about Jayadeva centers on the composition of this text. At one point in the composition, Jayadeva was thoroughly stumped. He was writing about Krishna and what he had written seemed to be heading toward the profane, but he could not think of another way to rearticulate his idea. Setting his work aside, he decided to take a bath. Upon his return he found that his composition had been changed, and that it was in fact Krishna who had written the new and corrected passage. Given divine intervention in the cases of both Kalidasa and Jayadeva, Tagore could position his own poem as a divinely inspired gift—hence “it is not of this world that moves us thus” (Tagore 1985 52). Or he could suggest that he has managed a similar feat without need of divine help. In either case, he comes out a winner, worthy of pursuing his artistic calling.

The concluding stanza of Tagore's "Meghaduta" declares that "the vision" inspired by the act of reading has ended, suggesting that the travels inspired by Kalidasa's classic have come to an end. Sleepless and perturbed, the poet turns to his own longings and stymied desires and declares, "Why do we aim so high only to weep when thwarted? / Why does love not find its true path?" (Tagore 1985 52). The question Tagore ends with here shows that he has been engaged in an almost point-by-point *tessera* of Kalidasa's *Meghaduta*. Tessera, a term resuscitated by Bloom, means a process whereby

the poet antithetically 'completes' his precursor's work, by so reading the parent poem as to retain its terms but to mean them in another sense, as though the precursor had failed to go far enough. (Bloom 1973 66)

We see this most plainly in Tagore's poem where he ends it, with a highly melancholic gesture. He is not consoled by the imaginative leap of the speaker-lover of the *Meghaduta*, or by the cloud's (or nature's) potential to convey our longings. The speaker of Kalidasa's *Meghaduta* ends his poem with a wish for the clouds, stating "May you never be separated like this even for a moment from your beloved lightning" (Kalidasa 21). The speaker of Tagore's own "Meghaduta" is sleepless half the night, asking / Who has cursed us like this? Why the gulf" (Tagore 1985 52). Tagore is clearly dissatisfied with the last gesture in Kalidasa's poem. The fact of separation is unshakeable, and while Kalidasa's poem has provided an imaginative leap at assuaging it, it does little to lift "the curse" within which Tagore feels trapped. It is through this tension with the original poem that Tagore launches his poetic career.

Let's return to Tagore's "Meghaduta" and the two critiques it raised about Kalidasa's classic, mainly a concern with simultaneity, and a deep-seated doubt about

nature's ability to console the human spirit. The reader here will remember the rhetorical questions that Tagore has posed to the poet.

Did your music, O poet, carry all their songs  
As you journeyed in your poem through land after land  
Over many days and nights  
Toward the lonely object of your love? (Tagore 1985 49)

Tagore is asking us as readers of both his poem and Kalidasa's to consider this issue, even as he answers his own question with praise of the classical masterpiece. The classic *Meghaduta* did survive, and as it is read, it manages to capture many of the feelings of the bereaved. But that does not quite answer Tagore's question. The cloud messenger journeys across India and learns a great deal about the world and its people. But how does that knowledge about the fate of so many inform the messenger's message, or more accurately, the exiled lover who is sending his message through a cloud? In the second section of Kalidasa's *Meghaduta*, the speaker begins to describe the place where his beloved resides so that the cloud-messenger easily locates her. The lush descriptions suggest the speaker's homesickness and desire to return home. His instructions to the cloud as to how it should approach his beloved, and his descriptions of his beloved, demonstrate boundless tenderness and affection. Addressing the exiled lover's beloved, the cloud messenger says that his function is to "urge along the road a multitude of weary travelers who are eager to loosen the braids of their women folk" (Kalidasa 11). This is the only mention of the journey that the beloved hears. The rest of his message addresses the separated lovers' condition, the exiled lover informing his mate that he has been loyal and that he longs for her deeply. The journey, and the education it would have offered the speaker and messenger are not mentioned. In fact, the speaker states, "I maintain myself by means of myself alone" (Kalidasa 24). True enough, as that is the state of all pining

lovers. But what the speaker and cloud messenger have gathered from hearing all these voices is lacking, left undetermined.

We must return to Tagore's "Unending Love" to understand the gap he is attempting to fill. In that poem, our poet does not refer to Kalidasa's *Meghaduta*, but what he enacts in the poem seems to be a rewriting of that classic. Here's Tagore's "Unending Love":

I seem to have loved you in numberless forms, numberless times,  
In life after life, in age after age forever.  
My spell-bound heart has made and re-made the necklace of songs  
That you take as a gift, wear around your neck in your many forms  
In life after life, in age after age forever.

Whenever I hear old chronicles of love, its age-old pain,  
Its ancient tale of being apart or together,  
As I stare on and on into the past, in the end you emerge  
Clad in the light of a pole-star piercing the darkness of time:  
You become an image of what is remembered forever.

You and I have floated here on the stream that brings from the fount  
At the heart of time love of one for another.  
We have played alongside millions of lovers, shared in the same  
Shy sweetness of meeting, the same distressful tears of farewell—  
Old love, but in shapes that renew and renew forever.

Today it is heaped at your feet, it has found its end in you,  
The love of all man's days both past and forever:  
Universal joy, universal sorrow, universal life,  
The memories of all loves merging with this one love of ours—  
And the songs of every poet past and present. (Tagore 1985 49)

The poet stares into the past, into a history of love songs, longing, and expression of love. This is when his beloved emerges, "Clad in the light of a pole-star piercing the darkness of time / You become an image of what is remembered forever." His beloved joins a stream of other loved ones precisely because she and her poet-lover have shared the same "sweetness of meeting" and "the same distressful tears of farewell." His poem, he asserts,

is an expression of “old love, but in shapes that renew and renew.” The love of all past lovers is “merging with this one love of ours,” and the poem written for her merges with “the songs of every poet.”

Dissolution and union takes place in this passage so much that it is impossible not to feel a melancholic undertow in this flood of euphoria, causing things not to simply merge with the forces that rule the cosmos and the spirit, but to drown in them. Perhaps the attempt at lyric resolution is meant to make us rejoice when it overshoots its target, but it does succeed in highlighting the range of possibilities that fall within poetry’s realm. Tagore posits the lyric poem as an arena where polarities dissolve and vast gaps that separate past and present cohere.

## 2. Seeking Ubiquity

As much as “Ending Love” expresses affection and honors the beloved by sailing with her on an ocean of timeless love, the poem’s most remarkable aspects are not the sentiments expressed to the beloved. The challenge Tagore poses in the poem, and to Kalidasa, has more to do with his desire for ubiquity and his wish to dissolve the difference between absence and presence. The tension here centers on the speaker’s wish to disrupt the temporality of his lived moment. For him (and it is safe to assume it is a “him”), the central issue is that his love bridges future and past. The word “forever” occurs five times in the poem, and not merely as a promise that the lover will love his beloved forever. Note, too, the words “numberless,” “many forms,” “life after life,” “age after age,” “the same sweetness of meeting,” “the same distressful tears,” “shapes that renew,” “universal,” and “merging.” Even if the poem were reduced to these key words

we would sense that desire to converge, to merge in the stream of others in the present, future, and past. This poem is one of the earliest expressions of Tagore's habitual desire for simultaneity and synthesis. The speaker wants to have his private feelings strengthened by the feelings of others who have had similar experiences; he wants the other's feelings to resound with his, his feelings to join their chorus. Tagore seems to suggest the poem must be like the deity described in the *Upanishads*, "within all" and "outside all," something that "moves" across temporalities and "moves not," steeped in its own time and possessing a sense of expansion (33).

Eventually Tagore achieved ubiquity and was offered more platforms than any poet we can imagine in our own time. Much of his attraction was due to the persona he adopted, and with which he struggled. As noted, Tagore's first plunge into the literary world of Bengal was through forgery. His foray into the international literary limelight was a more complicated affair, but one that also had the feel of theatre about it. During these two stages of his career, Tagore was keenly aware that the introduction of poet to world requires an element of conscious self-presentation. Clearly, Tagore succeeded in "introducing" himself in both cases, but his self-presentation to the rest of the world, which I will assess later in this chapter, proved an equally complicated affair.

Tagore displays this awareness in an essay that accompanied the volume of Bhanisimha's poems, in which he provides an autobiography for his made-up poet. It is a tongue-in-cheek preface that seems to gloat in having fooled the scholars. In it Tagore first postulates that his Bhanisimha was born in 451 AD, then cites other sources that suggest 1689, some time after 1639, and sometime between 1104 and 1799, or "either before the year A.D. 819 or after A.D. 1639" (Tagore 2003 116). Determining

Bhanisimha's birthplace or residence was equally difficult. Tagore humorously suggests that a tombstone bearing Bhanisimha's name was found in Sri Lanka, that some evidence suggests that Bhanisimha had at some point lived in Katmandu, and other evidence that he had made his way to Peshawar. Thus Bhanisimha is left suspended, unlocatable in history or geography. Though Tagore's first book was a prank, he seems to have wanted to be caught.

There is much positive strength to be gained from adopting a persona and utilizing authorial deflection. The use of a mask is perhaps as old as literature itself. Of more recent vintage and closer to Tagore's experience are the cases of James Macpherson and the romanticized figure of Thomas Chatterton. India was not familiar with literary forgeries such as Tagore's, but his prank does echo those of Chatterton's Rowley and Macpherson's Ossian poems. Chauduri writes that Tagore was directly exposed to Chatterton's forgery and wanted to imitate the young man from Bristol (Chauduri 105). Each of the three was a young aspirant who hoped to make a name for himself. The Romantics adopted Thomas Chatterton, who committed suicide at the tender age of sixteen, as the tragic ideal of the suffering, talented artist. Macpherson's championing of indigenous literature that he himself fabricated served as a major catalyst in launching European Romanticism. India during Tagore's time was undergoing its own Romantic period, and like the Scots, Indians were re-discovering their own literary treasures to bolster their claims of contribution to civilization. These claims in turn had a political value, as they were cornerstones of Indian nationalism and calls for national sovereignty.

On the level of the individual psyche, Kaplan, adopting a psychoanalytic approach, argues that a forger is someone who needs to prove that he is not as powerless

or insignificant as he thinks he is. This applies to all three poets to varying degrees. Chatterton was a teenager with enormous talent, but was young, poor, and informally educated, and thus had limited means to break into the literary world or to reach a degree of status and esteem in provincial Bristol, let alone London, where he hoped to belong. The Rowley Chatterton invented, a 15<sup>th</sup>-century knight and nobleman, was his alter ego and had all the things the young Chatterton lacked: a patron father-figure (Chatterton was orphaned at early age), upper class status, and respect.

Macpherson's family could not afford him the best schools and he was never able to complete the Bachelor's degree he studied for at King's College in Aberdeen. Before embarking on the Ossian poems, he had become aware that he had little chance of becoming an important literary figure on the basis of his own poems. A Scotsman whose clan had fallen upon hard times after centuries of glory and power, Macpherson also saw not only his own smallness as a person, but also the smallness of his nation within the British Empire. Ossian, a Gaelic prince-hero, was meant not only to demonstrate that Macpherson was not insignificant, but also that Scotland was not as unimportant as the English thought it.

Similarly, Tagore may have found it difficult to break out of the family mold, being surrounded by several older, multi-talented brothers who excelled in literature, music, and the arts. Tagore's brothers were also formally schooled, while he, desperately shy, found formal schooling and the company of unfamiliar children his own age too much to bear. And while Tagore's father and grandfather were the leaders of the Brahmo Samaj, a reformed branch of Hinduism, the Anglophile Tagore clan was also keenly aware of their country's subordinate relationship to the British, however much their



British connections helped them to gain and maintain their wealth. Subordination was also evident in his assessment of India's cultural riches. In his introduction to the poems of Vasinavas, the precocious Rabi mocks British claims that India has no real history (Tagore 2003 113).

Tagore's reference to the hegemony of British scholarship in India has personal and national overtones. He mocks any Indian rejection of the existence of Bhanisma that is based on British scholarship. He elucidates a faux-engagement with scholarship of ancient Indian history and derides those who might contradict the veracity of his discoveries. He later derides *Ingrabhangras* he meets in London during his first visit. The dismissal of British scholarship underscores Tagore's own trepidation in encountering the English language, a language he felt he needed to master, but before which he felt powerless during his school years (Chaudari 104).

Tagore superseded his youthful prank as an artist, while the same could not be said about Macpherson and Chatterton. Chatterton, impoverished in London and unable to write publishable poems except in the voice of his invented Rowley, died of suicide by arsenic at the age of seventeen. He is remembered as the romantic figure of the youth who tried to break through high society's strictures and failed. Macpherson died well and wealthy, but the taint of his forgery never left him. As brilliant and influential as the Ossian poems were—Goethe was inspired by them; Napoleon carried his own translation with him during his campaigns—they served MacPherson only in his climb of the ladder of social and political success. He became a writer of popular histories and his work was largely dismissed by the leading figures of the day (deGategno 1989).

Tagore's Bhanisimha was a forgery that he could not and did not hide behind for long. He went on to become the most important modern literary figure in the Bengali language. Furthermore, we must not underestimate the need for a young poet who is in a disadvantaged situation to adopt some sort of poetic persona. African American poet Robert Hayden explains that the idea for writing his now canonized "Middle Passage" came to him from a Stephen Vincent Benet poem. Benet had prophesied a poet who would write a "black-skinned epic, epic with the long black spear." "I dared to hope that I might be that poet," Hayden writes (126). Similarly, Walt Whitman "decided to cast himself in the role of his own epic hero...His eyes would be turned both inward and outward, and his voice would be both personal and public" (Miller 25). Whitman wrote *Leaves of Grass* with the notion of himself as the prototypical American. Both Hayden and Whitman mythologize themselves into the role of their audiences' spokesmen. These poets do not simply insert themselves into history; rather, they emphasize that their people's history must be understood through them. Embarking on the career of a poet of the caliber that Tagore, Hayden, and Whitman envisioned themselves demands a degree of self-importance, a kind of mask. Tagore's Bhanisimha mask was thus an attempt to demonstrate the range of his talent and his ability to insert himself within the canon of Indian poetry. It was a well-chosen ruse, as it was a complex challenge and in it we find elements of esthetic and ethical values that Tagore developed over the rest of his career as a poet.

Tagore's Bhanisimha ostensibly belongs to the *Vaisnavas*, a group of poet praise singers devoted to Krishna; their name derives from "Vishnu", one of Krishna's names. Vaisnavas composed and sang songs written in Brajaboli, a literary dialect of Bengali

reserved for the exclusive use of Vaisnava poets. Their songs depicted and celebrated the love of Krishna and Radha, one of the *gopis*, the cowherd maidens that Krishna romanced and with whom he fell deeply in love. The founder of the Vaisnavas, Krishna Caitanya, was believed to be an androgyne, thus symbolizing the fusion of Radha and Krishna in a single body. The Vaisnava's songs are supposed to embody the ebb and flow of union and separation between the two mythical figures. Caitanya instructed his followers that the experience of these intense shifts is the highest form of devotion to the divine. "To experience the varied emotions of love is to be transformed, to be transported into the presence of the divine" (Stewart 2003 112). Caitanya instructed his devotees to achieve such a state in the following order:

Through poetry and song, through meditation, the devotee befriends the *gopis* [the cowherd maidens, of whom one was Radha], especially to serve Radha, love's perfect embodiment. In the early stages of this devotion, the work is in the imagination; later this love is cultivated through disciplined meditation that transports the devotee in the mythical land of Braj [the location of Krishna's and Radha's meeting]. To aid and abet Radha's affairs with Krishna the devotee must follow Caitanya's lead and become a woman in this emotional world. Because the devotee cannot presume "herself" worthy of Krishna's amorous advances, a second and instrumental persona must be adopted. The devotee enters the cosmic drama either as a teenage, even preadolescent, girl who acts as handmaiden, or as a *duenna* who advises and consoles. (Stewart 2003 103)

By assuming the Brajabuli Vaisnava voice and mindset, Tagore imagined himself to be a devotee of the sixteenth-century spiritual leader, who would have through commitment, prayer, and contemplation become a woman living in that era. Tagore as Bhanisimha explores Radha's anguish in her love for Krishna, and the poet enters this charged situation through the persona of her confidante and *duenna* Bahau.

The invention of Bhanisimha, emerging very early in Tagore's career, clearly suggests a desire to be geographically and temporally ever-present or ubiquitous.

Bhanisimha is a kind of Russian doll of characters, a male poet adopting the persona of a 16<sup>th</sup>-century poet who attempts to become a woman infatuated with Krishna, whose love equals that of the gopis, and who voices her poetry through a middle-aged confidante. Adding to the complexity is the fact that the persona he adopts is not locatable in history or local memory. The poet's voice is repeatedly deflected so as to potentially dislocate his sense of identity. Adding to the complexity is the fact that Bhanisimha is a ruse, a prank that Tagore seems to have enjoyed immensely. In the preface to Bhanisimha's poems Tagore does not openly acknowledge that he is the author, but prefers to let the invention live on. Tagore also never abandoned the text; he continued editing the early poems until the last year of his life (Stewart 6). Bhanisimha was a life-long companion, a convoluted invention that allowed Tagore to live within several personas and in several historical eras concurrently.

I will now turn to Bakhtin to help elucidate this discussion of simultaneity. This desire for simultaneity, Bakhtin asserts, represents Dostoevsky's greatest achievement and anxiety (Bakhtin 91).

The fundamental category in Dostoevsky's mode of artistic visualizing was not evolution, but coexistence and interaction... This stubborn urge to see everything as coexisting, to perceive and show all things side by side and simultaneous, as they if they existed in space and not in time. (Bakhtin 90)

Bhanisimha clearly provided Tagore with a similar opportunity to break the boundaries of time, to collapse several voices and temporalities into one, his voice the polyphony. We saw that in the earlier poem "Eternal Love," the speaker/lover seems to emphasize the non-uniqueness of his love; its power is not its departure from other mortal loves, but its conjoining with others. Echoing Dostoevsky's vision for the novel as outlined by Bakhtin, Tagore's lover wants time to stop, wants to turn time's linearity into a horizontal

panorama to which he places his love parallel. “The memories of all loves” merge “with this one love of ours / and the songs of every poet past and forever” (48). In another, later context, Tagore explores this desire for simultaneity when he states, “If I do not apprehend what is outside of me, I do not feel myself either. The stronger the sense of the world outside, the more robust is the sense of one’s own inner being” (Tagore 2001 293). Awareness of the outside world, be it the world of the poet’s present or the world of the past, helps the poet locate the self. He can only know his own feelings through the tableau of a wide range of feelings and experiences that help him define who he is.

Tagore’s later poem “Bombshell” dramatically demonstrates what happens when this desire for simultaneity is thwarted, when the poet cannot bring various parts of the world, or his world, together. This is one of the poet’s saddest and most affective poems. It was written in the last few years of his life.

The sinking sun extends its late afternoon glow.  
The wind has dozed away.  
An ox-cart laden with paddy-straw bound  
For far-off Nadiya market crawls across the empty open land,  
Calf following, tied on behind  
Over towards the Rajbamsi quarter. Banamali Pandit’s  
Eldest son sits  
On the edge of a tank, fishing all day.  
From overhead comes the cry  
Of wild duck making their way  
From the dried-up river’s  
Sandbanks towards the Black Lake in search of snails.  
Along the side of newly-cut sugar-cane  
Fields, in the fresh air of trees washed by rain,  
Through the wet grass,  
Two friends pass  
Slowly, serenely—  
They came on a holiday,  
Suddenly bumped into each other in the village.  
One of them is newly married—the delight  
Of their conversation seems to have no limit.  
All around in the maze

Of winding paths in the wood, bhati-flowers  
    Have come into bloom,  
Their scent dispensing the balm  
    Of Caitra. From the jarul-trees nearby  
A koel-bird strains its voice in dull, demented melody.

A telegram comes:  
“Finland pounded by Soviet bombs.” (Tagore 1985 118-119)

It is debatable whether this poem is subtle or overt. The form of the poem immediately implies the imbalance of its content. A heavy, laden stanza almost dripping with fruit and blossoms precedes a spare couplet with devastating news.

The inevitable reaction to a poem like this one, which seems the scene of an unexpected crime, is to revisit the incidents relayed before the bombshell of the news at the end. Was anything indicative of the oncoming shelling? Was nature trying to tell us something, and if so, what was it? We see only scenes of slow movement: a bullock-drawn cart “crawls,” two friends pass each other slowly, and a boy sits fishing all day. The bhati flowers seem as giddy as Wordsworth’s daffodils, as do the friends who meet unexpectedly, one of whom has just gotten married, as if to emphasize the fact that it is indeed spring. Only birds’ cries bear ominous echoes. The ducks are seeking snails. I have never heard of this habit of ducks and find it rather unpalatable, but cannot tell if Tagore meant anything other than that nature’s creatures went on about their business. The koel-bird’s dull and demented melody is perhaps a clue, and does have a note of foreshadowing, but we cannot be certain. Like the ducks, its cry is likely to be in response to something local, as in the way everything is local and nearby in this poem. The friend is happy for his friend, the calf is tied to the cart to travel with its mother, the boy is identified by his father, whom the poet knows, and even the name of the faraway village is given to us only to show how near in fact it is.

Amidst this closed world, the birds' cries prove to be false alarms, a trick of our own minds to connect the world. Retrospective joining of the separated worlds, however, will fail us, as the poet suggests by separating these worlds into two distinct stanzas. We are faced with our desire to connect, and our foregone displacement. But the world is too much with us, and to remain at rest in such a place is to admit despair and helplessness.

The news from Finland informs us that another country has been drawn into World War II, a conflict that Tagore anticipated, noting the rise of nationalism and fascism in Europe and Japan in the 1920s, and which he vigorously opposed. We see in the poem, or rather, in Tagore's refusal to comment on the impact of this devastating news, the disappointment of a man's work gone to naught, symbolized by the utter lack of commentary. We, like the poet, are trapped in the disappointment and pain of our inability to be in two places, and to transport the peace of one place to another.

### 3. Ubiquity as Ethics and Esthetics

Tagore's urge for ever-presence, in my mind, emerges from the esthetic and ethical foundation he sought to evolve throughout his literary career. Tagore's concept of literature, its nature and function, and consequently his literary theory, "is deeply rooted in the etymology of the word *sahitya*, the Sanskrit term for literature. Derived from *sahita*, *Sahitya* alludes to togetherness, the togetherness of sound and word as well as word and meaning" (Tagore 2001 12). Tagore extends this notion to a broader theory of art in which art seeks to ensure the relationships between human beings. Literature brings them closer to one another: "the reader to the writer, one country to another, the ancient times to modern times" (Tagore 2001 12). As an interpersonal and intercultural bridge

maker, Tagore asserted, “the writer’s main target is his audience” (Tagore 2001 12). Literature does not exist in a vacuum, and sheer personal expression and unbridled artistic freedom that neglects a recipient were notions he rejected.

Tagore’s notion of artistic expression resembles in striking detail Bakhtin’s notion of “surplus of seeing.” “Man,” writes Tagore, “has a fund of emotional energy which is not all occupied with self-preservation. This surplus seeks its outlet in the creation of Art, for man’s civilization is built upon his surplus” (Tagore 1994 351-352). Similarly, according to Bakhtin, what one person sees and another does not is the first person’s “surplus of seeing’, and vice versa. No one, according to Bakhtin, has an “alibi for living” (Clark 64), yet we are all answerable for our “unique place in existence and the means by which we relate that uniqueness to the rest of the world which is other to it” (Clark 64), precisely because of that “unique place.” For Bakhtin the self is an event that happens in dialogue; it is not a passive essence. For Tagore, when the self does not apprehend what is outside of it, it cannot apprehend itself as such (293). The act of authorship, according to Bakhtin, occurs when one person, by having access to others’ surplus of seeing, can conceive of or author a whole that he could not perceive by himself (295). And once again, for Tagore, when one is immersed in literary composition,

one seems to achieve a kind of superconscious state, as though an innerself separate from my own has run off with the greater part of my consciousness, and is carrying out its task half unknown to me...The point of essence at the center of my life is a precious possession of all human existence; it is not merely an unknowable, unfamiliar fragmentary part of myself. (Tagore 2001 50)

Tagore’s description does have romantic resonances, the poet a kind of prophet surrendering to superconsciousness. What he terms superconsciousness has no supernatural association. Rather, it is one person’s voice emerging out of a multitude of



voices, synthesizing them, and being born of their union. He writes, “the one that is within me also wishes to find its own self in the many; the wealth of such self-realisation is in its multiplicity” (Tagore 2001 294). Literature and human consciousness move by accretion. “One person might push along the wheel of literature by hand, another might hitch a horse to it. It is by these means that literature is invested with sustained motion,” he writes describing the process of latching oneself to the train of literature, to the voices of the multitudes from which one’s self emerges (Tagore 2001 49).

Tagore’s oeuvre, represented by the multitudinous voices in his poetry, can be seen in the manifold nature of the interests expressed in his works. Tagore expressed a desire for ubiquity and simultaneity in his poetry, and he enacted the same desire by becoming a ubiquitous writer. He wrote in every genre: drama, musical comedy, song lyrics, short fiction, novel, memoir, essay, and verse, both formal and free. His output was enormous, though his quiet, productive years at Shiledeh were also interrupted by endless travel, back and forth to Calcutta and to other places. The years after the Nobel Prize were a whirlwind of travel that took him all over the world, a remarkable achievement before air travel. He wanted to be everywhere at the same time, and in his literary output he really was all over the place.

I believe Tagore’s versatility can be sketched in three broad roles that were the products of the esthetics/ethics I suggest above. But I want to keep the focus on Tagore’s poetry precisely because he perceived himself primarily as a poet. His other writing came in episodes. There was a particularly rich period in the 1890s in which he wrote most of his short stories, and he wrote his novels relatively late in life, as he did most of his philosophical and political tracts. But works that related to verse, be they song, verse

drama, or poetry, he wrote throughout his life. Thus, he was a poet who wrote in other genres. Broad thematic categories I want to outline embody the role Tagore attempted to play as public intellectual, and are divided between various literary genres.

#### a. Cultural Reformist

Tagore's best-known novels, *Gora* and *The Home and the World*, represent direct treatments of the sociopolitical tensions within middle class Bengali families in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Both depict Bengali upper-middle class family life, with its teeming contradictions, and explore the Indian nationalism that drew its roots from nascent Hinduism. The almost chauvinistic *Gora*, a European raised believing he was Indian, is forced to face his tenuous sense of belonging when what he believed to be his birthright and a sign of his superiority become questionable after he finds that he cannot be a Hindu because of his birth origin. He undergoes an examination of Hinduism and readjusts his sense of identity not on the basis of racial background, but on the basis of what appeals to him about the faith. Similarly, in *The Home and the World* Tagore uses the triangle of husband, wife and suitor to provide a parable about the conflicts in Bengal in the early twentieth century. Bimala, the wife, is the central figure and the novel largely revolves around her conflicting feelings for both her husband Nikhil, the reserved and dignified religious man who is not swayed by the mob mentality sweeping through the Bengal state, and Sandip, the passionate, xenophobic leader pushing for immediate gains. Standing for all of India, Bimala has to choose between Sandip's exciting and passionate nationalism and her husband's ambivalence as he attempts to nourish a sensibility based on tolerance and dialogue.

These investigations of India's destiny as she marched toward independence can also be found in Tagore's poetry. In "Earth," Tagore addresses volatile desires that underlay nationalism, expressing ideas similar to those in his two major novels:

Primal barbarity has kept its grip on your history.  
It can suddenly invade order with anarchy  
From the dark recesses of your being  
it can suddenly emerge like a snake  
Its madness is in your blood. (Tagore 1985 100)

In "Question," Tagore provides a portrait of the generation from which Sandip and Gora emerged:

I see secretive hatred murdering the helpless  
under cover of night,  
And Justice weeping silently and furtively at power misused,  
No hope of redress  
I see young men working themselves into frenzy,  
In agony dashing their heads against stone to no avail. (Tagore 1985 96)

Japanese nationalism receives equally vehement responses from Tagore. After visiting a great many military monuments while in Japan, upon being asked to compose a haiku he wrote the following lyric: "They hated and killed and men praised them. / But God in shame hastens to hide their memory / with the green grass" (Tagore 2007 32). Tagore's stance against Indian nationalism, critiqued at home, was matched by his anti-colonial stance. For decades he argued that anti-British feelings in India need not become chauvinistic and dismissive of Western culture at large, indeed, not dismissive of British culture at all. He tried to make a distinction between the English as a people and British imperialism. Still, European colonialism was to him the great ailment affecting Europe, a hypocrisy incongruent with Europe's great scientific and philosophical achievements. In the poem "Africa," Tagore addresses the utter obliviousness Europeans had regarding the effects of colonization on Africa.

Civilization's barbarous greed  
flaunted its naked inhumanity...  
Meanwhile across the sea in their native parishes  
temple-bells summoned your conquerors to prayer,  
morning and evening, in the name of a loving god.  
Mothers dandled babies at their laps;  
poets raised hymns to beauty. (Tagore 1985 102)

The Europeans' exertion of power on others will come to naught, Tagore argued. The scientific and philosophical achievements of the British will remain, but "their merchandise bearing soldiers / will not make the slightest impression / on planetary paths" (Tagore 1985 122). These positions, expressed in poetry, were supplemented by numerous speeches and essays denouncing imperialism and all forms of nationalism wreaking havoc across Europe and Asia. Tagore took a stand as a public poet ready to wield the moral voice of poetry to address the ills of the world.

That Tagore could use similar rhetoric against both the nationalists of his homeland and imperialists and fascists abroad suggests a principled kind of consistency, even though his views on given issues seemed at times inconsistent. There were times when he took anti-British positions, and on other occasions he critiqued the Indian nationalist movement. The exclusive nationalism that animated the Indian nationalist movement was "in Tagore's view, a large part of the problem with colonialism to begin with," (Hogan 10) in that both seemed to arise from similar collective drives and instincts. During his lifetime, he saw that support for independence was necessary to thwart social conflict, mainly Hindu/Muslim tensions. On other occasions his opposition to nationalism "was required for precisely the same end" (Hogan 10). Basing his belief on the principles of sadharanadharma (universal dharma) and ahimsa (restraint from inflicting pain), Tagore "could not support a nationalism that would only strengthen

hierarchies at home the moment it threw off the world of colonial oppression” (Hogan 14). Furthermore, he believed that what made colonialism wrong was not that it was a means for the British to oppress the Indians, but that it purveyed violence, and that hierarchy was “adharmic” and thus wrong, no matter who established or engaged in it (Hogan 16). Much of the credit for India’s largely non-violent struggle for independence from Britain now goes to Gandhi. Jawarlal Nehru, however, repeatedly noted the importance of Tagore as a guiding conscience. His contribution in this regard was to provide a kind of moral consistency based on Indian values, and to adhere to those values no matter the national development or political atmosphere.

#### b. Sentimental Educator

In his middle, most productive period, Tagore wrote what I think are his most enduring works. Keeping up with local and international literary developments, he produced works I consider a sentimental education for his readers. During this period he wrote in a melodramatic, Romantic mode as well as in a Naturalist one. The distinction between these modes is sometimes vague because Naturalism and its descendant, Realism, contain elements of the melodramatic. The difference is evident in the setting and background of the characters. In Naturalist writing we generally encounter the downtrodden, whose dilemmas can be situated historically and geographically. Romantic melodrama was more concerned with the philosophical investigation of humankind’s tragic condition. Naturalist writing generally focuses on how the sociopolitical state of things affects its tragic heroes, while in Romantic melodrama we generally encounter characters who are set up by fate, be it illness or natural disaster.

These two influences allowed Tagore to assert a major concern he had for his audience, one very much related to his background as a religious reformer and member of the Brahmo Samaj, a reformist Hindu movement founded by Rammohun Roy and led by Tagore's father. One of the Brahmo Samaj's main conflicts with Hinduism centered on superstition, or aspects best described as fatalism. Decidedly rationalist, the Brahmo Samaj doctrine allowed for the existence of only one god, as opposed to Hindu polytheism. Brahmo Samaj monotheism, based on the interpretation of the early Vedanta, the Upanishads, and the Brahma Sutra, does not accept the authority of the Vedas, has no faith in avatars (incarnations), and does not insist on belief in karma (causal effects of past deeds) or reincarnation. Uncertain of the infallibility of scriptures or prophets, the Brahmos believed that God speaks to man through the conscience. Divine revelation, while not denied, has to be tested by rational probing. Similarly, divine intervention cannot defy rational expectation.

Tagore explores these secular humanist strains in several of his melodramas, best exemplified in the play *The Post Office*. The melodramas exhibit the Romantic preoccupation with death and decay, and display grieving, melancholy, mournful reflection and a rather large helping of sentimentality. *The Post Office* chronicles the death of an innocent young boy who awaits the arrival of a letter in a setting of dramatic irony in which the other characters in the play and the audience members know that in fact the boy is waiting for his premature death. Similarly, the poem "Devoured by the Gods," depicts the death of a boy by drowning while he's on a pilgrimage with his mother. In the poem "Arrival," while a storm threatening to destroy his village has begun to blow, the speaker says "Drag your tattered blankets, let the yard be spread with them: /

The King of Grief and Night has come to our land with wind and storm” (Tagore 1985 72). In “Death Wedding,” a young woman asks

Why must you always come like a thief, Death,  
Death, always silently, at night’s end,  
Leaving only tears? Come to me festively,  
Make the whole night ring with your triumph, blow  
Your victory-conch, dress me in blood-red robes,  
Grasp me by the hand and sweep me away!  
Pay no heed to what others may think, Death,  
Death, for I shall of my own free will  
Resort to you if you but take me gloriously. (Tagore 1985 70)

The young woman expects no divine intervention and does not speak of another life after her death. She only wishes that death, whom she addresses as her groom, would take her gently and lovingly.

All the works cited above are morbid, relentless, and offer no hope for a second chance. Amal, the tragic child hero of *The Post Office*, dies with a heart full of hope. The child who dies on a pilgrimage in “Devoured by the Gods” is not only innocent, but dies on his way to perform a good deed. And the young woman facing death transforms her demise into an imagined meeting with her long-awaited beloved. In typical Romantic fashion, these poems tend to exalt the individual’s needs, and allow for personal expression that seems to emerge from a unique individual genius and the power of imagination. The consolation we as readers receive through experiencing the death of these innocent figures is that they died beautiful deaths. It is this secular consolation that Tagore seems intent on conveying to his audience. He does not deny the pain of these losses, nor does he deny the possibility of deliverance. Yet deliverance, as the characters discover, and as we as readers discern, is an act of willfulness, a resort to the imagination by choice. If consolation is offered it is marginal, but we cannot face these works and not

insist on finding it. In his critical writings, Tagore never acknowledges or denies the experience of catharsis, something that these works are clearly capable of evoking. “Compassion is beautiful,” he states, and “the image of beauty is the fullest manifestation of the good” (Tagore 2001 169). Thus our sympathy for these characters, and our acknowledgement of the painful truth of their deaths, is in itself enriching.

In several other poems Tagore provides Naturalist portraits that paint a mural of ordinary Indian lives. In poems such as “Bride,” “Half Acre of Land,” “The Hero,” “Highest Price,” “Deception,” “Flute Music,” “Leaving Home,” “Railway Station,” and “Recovery,” we note the kind of taut, aching tension that Joyce sustained in *Dubliners*. As in “Araby” and “The Dead,” we meet characters who encounter a state of loss or unrequited emotion they must live with for the rest of their lives. Typical of Naturalist literature, these poems depict the social environment in Bengal, dwelling particularly on its deficiencies. Possessing the somberness of Zola’s work, the conflict Tagore’s characters face is not with nature or fate, but the society in which they live.

The main character in “Deception” has to live with a lie he told his wife and his subsequent treatment of a beggar woman. When his wife dies she is content, certain that he is a compassionate man, an attribute he knows he has not earned. Upon her death he launches a mad search for the beggar woman he castigated, but his search is in vain. “Bride” recounts the life and plight of a village girl who came to the city, whose life is utterly changed, exiled as she is from her family and from nature. There is no expectation of a return, no obvious resolution to her dilemma. “Half-Acre of Land” lends voice to a farmer who is forced to undersell his land by a local landlord, and who is later arrested for stealing from his own plot of land. As he is about to be set upon by the Lord’s men,



the speaker states, “I wept, but I laughed as well at the irony of life— / For he was now the great sadhu, and I was the thief” (Tagore 1985 57).

These melodramatic and Naturalist poems are all written as dramatic monologues. Tagore seems to absent himself in them, suspend judgment, and let the narratives unfold. And as in the last lines of “Half Acre of Land,” there is also a suspension of action. No poetic justice occurs, no full resolution is provided. The middle class husband has to live with the burden of his deceit and his newly discovered cruelty; the exiled bride has to cope with her uprootedness, and the dispossessed farmer has to somehow live on. Tagore offers no solution or resolution. His aim, the aim of Naturalist literature, is to present human suffering, to place it squirming right before our eyes. These not-so-subtle calls for empathy are nothing short of a sentimental education for Tagore’s readers. But there is something to them that is particular to Tagore; to use one of Bakhtin’s terms, he finds in them his alibi.

### c. Rebel

Having developed a seemingly programmatic approach to his literary persona, Tagore surprises us once again. The poems represented in the above discussion position him as an author of universal reach. Later in life, fortified by his worldwide fame, his calls for the synthesis of East and West, and his attempts to temper India’s nationalist aspirations with compassion for its neighbors, Tagore’s poems suggest a solid, self-assured voice. But as exemplified by his invention of Bhanisimha, Tagore had a rebellious streak. Sen recounts an incident in which Gandhi wrote a dedication to young girl advising her to never break a promise. Also asked to write a dedication, Tagore wrote “Fling away your

promise if it is found to be wrong,” totally contradicting Gandhi’s advice (Sen 1997 57). Hogan argues, “a great deal of Tagore’s intellectual effort was aimed at dislodging fixed opinions. He often did not aim at establishing a particular position, but rather at disturbing standard beliefs” (Hogan 10).

Tagore’s discomfort with convention can be witnessed in the late poem “Freedom-bound,” in which the poet invites his “outcast” beloved to join him. He writes,

Frown and bolt the door and glare  
with disapproving eyes,  
Behold my outcast love, the scourge  
of all proprieties.  
To sit where orthodoxy rules  
Is not her wish at all...  
Throwing caution to the wind  
spurned by all around,  
come my outcast love, O let us  
Travel freedom-bound. (Tagore 1985 116)

The poet encourages his beloved to respond to love’s call, and to shun orthodoxy and its rules despite the disapproving eyes around her. She responds later in the poem to his call because she knows he likes his “love simple.” Tagore’s opposition to India’s caste system is well documented. He considered untouchability “one of the darkest evils,” that would only “degrade [India] in the estimation of the world” (Dutta and Robinson 309). “Everlasting shame and ignominy will be our deserved fate if we fail...to uphold all that is pure and just in the great religious traditions of our country” (309), he further argued.

His differences with Gandhi were on tactics and their efficacy, not principle. In 1931 Tagore supported Gandhi’s first fast to open Hindu temples for untouchables, but later thought that another fast would have less effect. In a moving exchange of letters with Gandhi, Tagore provided counsel to the Mahatma. British authorities had begun a policy of ignoring hunger strikes in prisons, and in some cases the strikers died. Tagore,

along with Gandhi's wife, were worried that Gandhi's fast would also be ignored, in this case by "orthodoxy," and that Gandhi would suffer physical harm and lose influence and credibility as a reformer. In the poem above, however, Tagore throws caution "to the wind" and advocates open rebellion. We see the image of the bolted doors, and though it is not a direct reference to Hindu temples, the image is certainly evocative of them. The outcast beloved decides she does not want to be where "orthodoxy rules" and "proprieties" are upheld. The poet-speaker's invitation is decisive and open-ended. To travel freedom-bound is an exciting venture, but the poet offers little detail as to where that freedom lies.

A sense of fatigue with normalcy and orthodoxy occurs in Tagore's devotional poems. In some of them he pleads with divine forces for renewal. In an early poem addressed to Shiva, he writes

Our body grows weary  
Of its law-fixed path,  
Give us new form.  
Sing our destruction,  
That we gain new life. (Tagore 1985 45)

The speaker wishes for a new life, tired as he is of a "law-fixed," conventional life, and he wishes that Shiva would "sing" his destruction. We note that the destruction is sung, or mediated by art, not sought in reality. In a later poem, Tagore sounds a challenging note to Shiva.

O Shiva, fearsome ascetic; I am heaven's conspiracy against you...  
By the impulse of ecstatic discovery that opens new leaves,  
I hurl forth my song. (Tagore 1985 89)

The poet is no longer asking Shiva for renewal. He has found his own mechanism, his own way of renewing himself, and he celebrates it. Shiva, representative of asceticism in this case, stands for all other ascetics and conventionalists. The poet celebrates the fact

that he is leading a conspiracy against them. Here, too, we ought to pause and interrogate Tagore's rebellion and the basis upon which he launches it. The poet is excited by a new power that will lead him to experience life's joys and will embolden him to take on the god of asceticism. But what is that power exactly? "The impulse of ecstatic discovery that opens new leaves" will allow the poet to speak from the standpoint of newness, taking on the proscriptive world. Tagore's power, however, is rather abstract, and unlikely to be transferable to others. What will happen after the poet hurls forth his song? Tagore makes no promises and seems unconcerned what will take place after the confrontation. He is celebrating his own creative powers, and if the poem advocates any action it is to use creativity to confront the forces of asceticism.

Tagore's most remarkable poem in this vein was one of his last. The poem's title is "My Birthday," and the reader will quickly ascertain its irony if they know the poem was written while the poet was on his deathbed. The poem, nonetheless, does declare a kind of birth, a desire for renewal through the explosion of language.

Today I imagine the words of countless  
Languages to be suddenly fetterless—  
After long incarceration  
In the fortress of grammar, suddenly up in rebellion,  
Maddened by the stamp-stamping  
of unmitigated regimented drilling.  
They have jumped the constraints of sentence  
To seek free expression in a world rid of intelligence,  
Snapping the chains of sense in sarcasm...  
In my mind I imagine words thus shot of their meaning,  
Hordes of them running amok all day,  
As if in the sky there were nonsense nursery syllables booming—  
Horselum, bridelum, ridelum, into the fray. (Tagore 1985 124-125)

In the last two poems we saw the poet "hurl his song," pray for "destruction," and throw "caution to the wind." The action in this poem happens within a bastion of language in

which words have ignited with “rebellion.” Earlier in “Birthday” Tagore explains that language was “born of the gusty turning / of the earth first outbreathing” and as such is part of humankind’s coexistence with nature, dating to when words “were akin to the wild torrents / that pour from the mountains” (124). Language was always subversive, the poet asserts. In the past, words slipped “like robbers into realms of fantasy...free of barriers.” Words could become “tenuous, loose, arbitrary / like a dozen puppies bawling.” But at least “their bites and yelps” carry “no enmity.” In the modern world where man “quickened / the pace of time’s slow clocks,” words are like soldiers or prisoners caught up in a cycle of endless drilling or incarceration. No longer “robbers” drifting into realms of fantasy or “puppies” yelping harmlessly, words are residents of the totalizing institutions of grammar and syntax. Their rebellion in the poem is more ominous. They snap their chains, shoot out of their meanings, and run amok.

Tagore’s poem is a celebration of the explosive potential of language, but also bears a warning. Though the machines of the modern world have driven words into a regimented existence, Tagore does not call for a return. In fact, he seems to delight in his anticipation of the release of words from control. As expected from a poet who desires ubiquity, the poem covers a long span of time and addresses changes in all languages and cultures. Tagore is noticing a worldwide development that has its roots in the past, and would have worldwide consequences. He positions himself as witness to the future.

We also note in these poems that Tagore is drawn to speaking for others, or for a particular type of other. Hogan explains that Tagore’s refusal to offer consistent support for Indian nationalism and his abhorrence to untouchability emerge from a “politics of otherness” that Tagore adopted, whereby “one’s deepest commitment is not to those of

one's own group" (17). Hogan notes that many of the most developed characters in Tagore's novels were figures who "do not act for their own nation or class or caste, but for others...and whose commitment is to members of other socially reviled groups—a commitment for which they are often reviled themselves" (17). Tagore continually demonstrated an inclination to oppose all forms of stasis or consensus, and disrupting them in this manner seems to have been a lifelong passion. Contrarian as it may have seemed, Tagore's activism was principled by *ahimsa*, or non-violence, which allowed him to remain poised even as he fiercely took up causes. This inclination was channeled mostly into writing and other intellectual endeavors, such as his interests in education and performance arts.

Tagore's restless energy seemed to increase once his post-Nobel fame afforded the opportunity to operate on a world stage. In some ways what Tagore attempted to achieve in the world differs little from what he had attempted to achieve at home. His first rebellion against Bengali classicism implied a re-examination of long-held paradigms, even though his colonized nation was in the process of coalescing around its proud heritage. Tagore warned then that what a nation gains idolizing its treasure can come at a cost for future generations. Informed by a global perspective, his activities during the last three decades of his life, and in particular his lectures, continued in the same cautionary tone, though changing "nation" to "the world."

Before we turn to the phase of Tagore's life when he assumed the role of global poet, it is important to analyze the forces that prepared him for that mission. It would not surprise us that Tagore the Anglophile felt a great deal of ambivalence about the empire of which his country was a colony. And perhaps typical of intellectuals and artists

working under a colonial power, Tagore felt increasingly compelled to influence events not only in his nation, but also in the heart of the empire itself. When Tagore did make it to London in 1911, he anticipated that he would gain the influence later granted by the Nobel Prize. Nonetheless, by then he had lived with his ambivalence about the British Empire for so long, he felt he could maneuver in spite of it, and that perhaps the ironic shield it offered would even aid him. Tagore, picking up on a discourse of East-West synthesis that had been in the making for several decades, felt emboldened and ready to offer a solution that would honor both the spirit and the intellect, the powerless and the powerful, and the new and unknown, as well as the established and esteemed.

## C. POET AND EMPIRE: AMBIVALENCE AND ENTHUSIASM

### 1. A Tale of Two Visits: A Troubled Relation with the Empire

Tagore's third visit to England, in 1912, was not his first encounter with the West. Tagore's English was a readerly one, gleaned from exposure to British and American literature. His caution about approaching "the West" as such has a long history; as a child he resisted all attempts at regular schooling. Though from a rich and well-known family, Tagore simply did not fit into the Indian environments that had become Westernized and almost exclusively Anglophone. According to his biographers, until 1911 Tagore had made little contact with foreigners, and had no English friends living in India (159). Other evidence suggests that he did not try to make an impression upon the English people he met, never mentioning to his nephews' English visitors that he was a writer, attempting to draw no attention to himself. Coomaraswamy and Ajit Chakraborty translated a few of Tagore's short stories and poems into English, but with little cooperation and no apparent interest from the author (Dutta and Robinson 164).

Nonetheless, as some critics have noted, Tagore was an Anglophile (see James and Hawthorne). His grandfather had changed the family name, Thakur, to Tagore, reflecting the way the elder Tagore's English associates pronounced it. At home, the young Rabi studied English along with Sanskrit and Bengali, and was exposed to a range of European literature. He read Dante in translation and Goethe in the original German. We know that he read Byron's "Child Harolde's Pilgrimage," Moore's Irish Melodies, Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and *The Tempest* in English. He translated some of these works into Bengali, including all of *Macbeth*, in fact, in his teens (Dutta and Robinson 62).



Familiar with England, in a manner of speaking, Tagore first visited in 1878, at the age of eighteen.

In a photograph of young Rabi in England, he appears hatless, dressed in long coat and tie, his face clean-shaven. In a photo taken in 1889, during his second visit to England, he stands rather glum, his face encircled with a full, shaggy beard, a fez atop his head. Facial hair shaven in a current style suggests compliance with the fashion of the time, but a fez with a suit and tie, attire developed in Istanbul, represents hybridization rather than outright assimilation.

Accounts of Tagore's two first visits to London differ in his experiences and impressions of the country and its people. On his first visit, Tagore stayed with an English family, whom he joined on many merry social occasions. Tagore's biographers report that his host family invited guests to be charmed by the young Indian man's conversation and wit, and to be entertained by his familiarity with English music. Tagore is reported to have fancied a young English woman and the encounter has a poem to back it up. So taken was young Rabi by the pleasures of English life that he failed to begin work on the barrister's diploma he had hoped to earn.

Tagore's second visit, after his marriage and the birth of his second child, held no such rewards. He found England inhospitable; his visits to the friends he had made in the first visit were futile, as everyone seemed to have moved on. Without the adventurousness he had in his late teens, and without a sense of self-confidence or accomplishment, he felt thoroughly displaced. He cut the visit short and booked his return three weeks earlier than planned.

Photos of the Tagore brothers taken in India in the 1880s show some of them dressed in suit and tie while others wore long collarless shirts and loose silken trousers, suggesting that the Tagore brothers, at least in their twenties, mixed it up as far as clothing was concerned. In a photo of Rabindranath with the leaders of the Indian National Congress taken in 1890, a few months after his second English trip, he is the only one among the seven-person group dressed in traditional attire. He stands in the middle wearing a prominent turban. The only person who deviates from the strict western dress code adopted by this group merely adds a fez to his dark suit and tie, the same outfit Tagore appeared in while on his second visit to England.

Other photos of the Tagore family suggest comfort with their controlled adaptation of Western ways. Firmly affiliated within the Brahmo Samaj, the Tagores stood for increased incorporation of Western ideas into Bengali culture, while maintaining a great many of their traditional habits, including the controversial ones such as holding on their Brahmin caste status. For Tagore and many middle and upper class Indians, familiarity with Western culture was a way to ingratiate oneself to Westerners, particularly Englishmen, something that an Anglophile Indian who admired the English would naturally wish to do. Tagore's putting on traditional clothing for good after his second visit suggests his awareness that passing is impossible, and that one should simply get comfortable in one's skin.

Tagore recounts with amusement some of his encounters with English people, and how these encounters made him aware of the low esteem in which he and his people were held. Standing before a photographer's shop, a gentleman walked up to him and proceeded to explain that these things, called photographs, were made by a machine and

not drawn by human hand. As this lecture went on, a crowd of onlookers gathered to witness the education of this dark simpleton. In a watch shop, the attendant simply assumed Tagore did not know what watches were and began to explain them to him (Dutta and Robinson 71). Tagore writes of an incident in which an English physician bluntly told him that “[he] simply cannot imagine that an Indian can be educated” (Dutta and Robinson 72).

Other experiences from his second trip to England further affirmed Tagore’s shift toward a more authentically Indian sense of identity. He had imagined England “such a small island and its inhabitants so devoted to higher culture that from one end to the other, it would resound with the strains of Tennyson’s lyre” (Dutta and Robinson 67). This sounds naïve enough for an ordinary colonized person visiting the imperial capital for the first time, but coming from an Anglophile who was also well read, it suggests a deeper kind of disappointment. Tagore also made a larger political discovery about the depth of his Anglophilia. The young Tagore was so convinced of Western ideals and in the uniformity of their application that he made the following pronouncement: “We believed with all our simple faith that even if we rebelled against foreign rule we should have the sympathy of the West” (Dutta and Robinson 71).

On his second visit Tagore quickly realized no such sympathy was possible. He was laughed at on the street at the sight of his *purgee* (a kind of turban). He noted in response to the incident, “If we black chaps wear western outfit, people don’t find it strange. When girls laugh at me in the street my pride in my appearance just vanishes” (Dutta and Robinson 72). The issue is not only a dapper young man’s bruised ego. He had chosen his appearance carefully, incorporating familiarity with the West while

acknowledging his origins. The combination of authenticity and modernity were meant to bring admiration, but he received derision instead. The use of the term “black chaps” seldom recurs in Tagore’s letters, but it is significant to see him place himself within an English racial hierarchy, and in that sense as one among millions of the empire’s darker citizens.

Coming to England on his second visit, Tagore may also have expected admiration for what he had accomplished. He had gone to London simply “along for the ride with a brother and a friend, with no ulterior purpose” (Dutta and Robinson 71) and no prior preparation. Still, by then Rabi had begun work on an academy of Bengali letters, along the lines of the Academie Francaise, to compile authoritative technical terms in Bengali and to assist in the growth of the language, a mission he supported for the rest of his life (Dutta and Robinson 83). He had set the foundation for this school in Jorsanko, edited a children’s magazine for several years, served as secretary of the High Church of the Brahmo Samaj, and written several articles and reviews critical of Hindu orthodoxy, particularly with regard to child marriage and the caste system; he had attempted to include non-Brahmins as ministers in the Brahmo Samaj, written several important volumes of poetry, and translated Shelley, Mrs. Browning, Christina Rossetti, Swinburne and Victor Hugo to Bengali. Tagore may also have expected the legacy of his grandfather to rub off on him. When the elder Tagore visited England a few decades earlier, he dined with Queen Victoria, had an audience with the prime minister, met Charles Dickens, stayed in London’s best hotels, and was awarded the Freedom of Edinburgh. Nothing remotely resembling this kind of grand reception was afforded Rabi even though he had become one of Bengal’s most distinguished cultural figures.

On both visits Tagore encountered *Ingrabhangras*, affluent Anglophone Bengalis, who, according to him, had divided the world into three types of people: Englishmen, Bengalis, and Anglophile Bengalis. When an Ingrabhangra meets an Englishman, “the weight of courtesy in his words is like a burden making his shoulders droop; in debate he is the meekest and mildest of men,” Tagore wrote in a letter (Dutta and Robinson 73). An Ingrabhangra had nothing but scorn for his fellow Bengalis, and when it came to other Bengalis in England, “one who has lived three years in England will regard himself as infinitely above one who has spent a mere one year” there (Dutta and Robinson 73). Tagore saw that such forms of extreme Anglophilia resulted in self-loathing and wanted nothing to do with them.

What had been slightly amusing during the first visit became depressing and daunting during the second. A few weeks into the second trip he began feel a deep sense of melancholy and homesickness and could not wait to go home. “Today is the 5<sup>th</sup>,” he wrote his niece, “five more weeks to go!” (Dutta and Robinson 83). Once home he resumed his work as zamindar for his family estate in Shiledah. There Tagore presented himself to his tenants in traditional clothing, the basic attire of a flowing robe and full beard, the image he presented to the world in 1912, and the image that became his basic portrait, and which adorns the cover of his Macmillan *Collected Works*.

## 2. Refashioning the East, Imagining Synthesis

What Tagore returned to was not a rejection of westernization. One of the leading intellectuals of the Brahmo Samaj, he saw no conflict between rationality and the sources of Hindu belief, since what conflicted with the intellect could not be accepted in any case.

Modernity, in the sense of a greater reliance on the rational as a guide to human action, was to him not intrinsically Western, but an approach that any civilization could adopt. “We all know the intellect and that it is impersonal” (*Nationalism* 20), he writes, and goes on to state that the ability to “reason unmoved by the vicissitudes of life, and to burrow into the roots of things seeking a law of nature, is a power which fulfills some particular needs for man” (20). But it is not all that is needed and it is not all that there is. The West’s capacity to discover more of nature’s laws and to use them to its advantage has allowed it to dominate other races, but with man’s mental and material power “now far out-growing his moral strength” he has become “like an exaggerated giraffe whose head has suddenly shot up miles away from the rest of him.” I should note here that Tagore only says “man,” not “Western man,” suggesting that this ailment has infected all of mankind, regardless of where it has struck. The West, however, “seems to have been blissfully unconscious...of this present disharmony” (21) between man’s intellect and the rest of his being.

Returning from his disappointing trip England ever more aware of his own society’s ills, Tagore became firmly convinced of the need for cultural synthesis that would combine the best of what the East and West had to offer. He saw the potential for Western reliance on science as a force that would render mankind a greedy, materialistic lot. On the other hand, the East was too steeped in superstition and vacuous rituals that robbed people of the use of their own intellects. East and West, both ailing from entrenched traditions and conventions, would assist in complimenting each other. With the East more attuned to human spiritual and psychological needs and the West more

adept at science and logic, the two could combine to create a universal world culture based on the best of both sides.

Strains of this discourse, which was not Tagore's invention, had been flowing about India for at least two decades by the 1890s, and were later adopted in other colonized territories (see Aydin 2007). In 1866 the religious reformer and once-prominent member of the Brahmo Samaj, Keshub Chunder Sen, advocated mutual education between England and India, through which India would "learn from England practical righteousness, and England learn from India devotion, faith, and prayer." (Sen A., 5). The same discourse also sounded in Europe, heralded most enthusiastically by famed Orientalist Max Mueller (see Mueller's *India and What It Can Teach Us*, first published in 1881). Eastern spirituality coupled with Western rationality, so the argument went, could help lead to a worldwide spiritual and humanistic renaissance. Tagore's own words on this subject, written at the age of seventeen, contained the genesis of the ideas he later advocated on the world stage:

If the remnants of Indian civilization were to become the foundation on which European civilization is to be built, what a most beautiful sight that would be. The European idea in which freedom predominates, and the Indian idea in which welfare predominates; the profound thought of the Eastern countries and the active thought of the Western countries; European acquisitiveness and Indian conservatism; the imagination of the Eastern countries and the practical intelligence of the West—what a fullness will emerge from a synthesis of the two. (Hay 21)

We see in the passage not only the young man's naïve enthusiasm, but also the degree to which he had imbibed certain Romantic ideas. In later years, after having lived in the countryside of Bengal, Tagore would add the binaries of rural/urban, natural/artificial, and agricultural/industrial to his critique of the modern world, where Europe is associated with an urban, industrial-based, and largely superficial way of life (Hay 30).

That would be the message that Tagore would carry to Europe. Tagore's articulation of this almost ready-made East-West synthesis, however, has a longer history in which Rammohun Roy figures prominently. As we can see in the outline provided by Tagore above, the call for an East-West solution suggests a colonized native's need for genuine reform of his own culture and a desire to advance his situation to the point of equality with the colonizer. Roy conducted business with the East India Company and benefited financially from his business dealings. Originally from a high caste, he rose in stature as he grew in wealth. If one were to outline Roy's project it might be seen as a four-pronged process. Critiquing his own faith, Roy advocated and helped establish major reforms in Hinduism and Indian cultural practice. Yet he also demonstrated a great deal of pride in the spiritual wealth of his nation and Asia at large. As far as the colonial Western system and culture was concerned, Roy willingly adopted and called for the adoption of many Western ideas and practices, but also reserved the right to critique the West and Westerners.

In playing a major role in initiating the Brahma Samaj movement, Roy saw bringing to India "a worldwide interest in a purer form of deism," as a purification of India's own spirituality. Roy's own efforts fall into earlier neo-vashnavist efforts, which had advocated the worship of Vashnu as the one supreme God. Though Roy and other Brahma Samaj reformers were accused of Christianizing Hinduism, he found the basis of his reform in Hinduism itself. Relying mostly on the Upanishads, the Brahma Samaj creed for which Roy sowed the seeds rests on the concept of "a world soul," or Brahmin, the sum total of all that ever was or shall be. Similar to the monotheist god, Brahmin was transcendent and immanent, absolute and infinite, but possessed no limits, including



those of being and non-being (Klostermaier 437). The links with monotheism are evident, however, as the first temple that Roy and the other early Brahma Samaj leaders started was named Brahma Sabha, or The One God Society. Roy's emphasis on the Hinduism of the Upanishads served to advance both a sense of humanism as well as a unified Indian identity (Kopf 12). Given that the supreme spirit of the universe exists within one's self, the ideas advanced by the Brahma Samaj also introduced a veneration of the individual as well as the creator (Kopf 12).

Though the "Asiatic" world needed to be reformed there was no denying Asia's spiritual riches or that the continent had been the historical source of human investigation of the divine and eternal. Speaking to an English audience, Rammohan instructed his listeners that "all the ancient prophets and patriarchs venerated by Christians...were Asiatic," reminding them that were indebted to Asia all along and urging them to seek their origins in the East (Hay 21). Keshub Sen would pick up this idea as well, and Tagore would also repeatedly remind his English audience that Jesus Christ was an Asiatic. The claim for Asian spiritual superiority would be found useful for many anti-colonial activists throughout the world (Ayden 2007), as well as for migrants seeking citizenship in the US.

Roy saw contact with the West as highly beneficial to the East an opportunity for advancement would help alleviate poverty, ignorance, and social inequality, a point of view that Roy's many and highly powerful contacts found very pleasing to hear. More importantly for Roy, however is that the cultural challenge from the West would help the East forcing it to unfetter itself of all that lacked a rational basis. This was the basis for his promotion of Western education for Indians. As such Roy was practically in

accordance with the policies advocated by Macaulay in famous minute, which called for the creation of native race to do the colonizer's bidding. But as far as Roy was concerned, Western education would serve the native toward his needed reformation, a project that has more to do with serving his own needs than those of the colonizer.

In addition to helping the native advance his own society, religious and cultural reform would enable him to stand on equal footing with the colonizer. Roy's vision, as articulated in his inception of the Brahmo Samaj, is itself a reflection of Roy's hybrid education. Moved by the Gospels and by his study of Islam, Roy adopted a strong stand against idol worship and articulated a set of ethics for his fellow reformers (Kopf 48). But he refused to become a Christian, though many of his English friends told him he already was one, because he believed Christianity had become materialistic and cold. Roy objected just as strongly to the Christian trinity and to Christ's deification as he did to Hindu polytheism (Hay 16). He finally estranged both Christian missionaries and devout Hindus with *The Precepts of Jesus: Guide to Peace and Happiness*, a pamphlet he published in 1801. Both groups accused him of advancing the other's religion at the expense of theirs (433). He believed that what was evolving in Hinduism through the Brahmo Samaj needed to happen in Christianity as well. With this final claim, Roy had set the stage for a synthesis. His East was on its way to spiritual reform as the West was becoming increasingly corrupted by its general lack of spirituality and by the persistence of distorted forms of it.

A century later, as he grew older, and as the anti-colonial struggle grew in power and urgency, Tagore, being one of Roy's intellectual descendants, began to envision an enlightened East that he could present to the world and that would serve to promote the

emancipation of both East and West. He saw speaking truth to Western power and reforming his own culture as fulfilling the same objective. During and after the First World War, Tagore began to see the necessity for this synthesis as an urgent solution to global concerns. Europe had provided the world with science, but what the world needed now was not more science or a great command of material resources. In 1916 he summed up his message to Japanese and Chinese audiences thus:

I feel that Asia must find her own voice. Simply because she has remained silent so long the whole world is suffering. The West has got no voice. She has given us nothing that could save us—that which gives immortality. She has given us science—a great gift no doubt—which has its special value, but nothing that can give us life beyond death. Her cult of power is based on pride and greed and the deliberate cultivation of contempt for other races... I do feel that if Asia does not find her own voice, humanity will not be saved. (Tagore 2007 756)

With racism, greed, and pride, along with a propensity for violence, as witnessed in the Great War and in colonialism, Europe had lost any claim to moral and intellectual superiority. Asia needed to answer, to guide the world with the authority of her long spiritual and religious history.

Tagore imagined that the East could be modernized, but believed it need not become Westernized, and certainly not obsequious or sycophantic toward the West. “Be not ashamed, my brothers, to stand before the proud / and powerful with your white robe of simpleness,” he addressed fellow Asians in a poem in 1901 (*Nationalism* 159). He would later argue that modernity, if modernity meant a greater reliance on the rational, was not a new thing, and was in fact part of the engine of civilization and human progress (Tagore 2000 189). Tagore continued to advance the idea of an East-West synthesis and attempted to bolster Asian self-confidence; during the Bengal-separation agitation, World War I, and the Japanese invasion of China, he repeatedly insisted, “patriotism cannot be

the final refuge for my soul” (Nandy 7). By the time Tagore had become a major world figure, the Brahma Samaj was more of a cultural influence, a form of discourse that enabled Hindu intellectuals to reconcile their religion with the modern world, and less of an active organization. Tagore, however, continued to articulate its ideas as he spoke to audiences around the world.

As we examine Tagore’s emergence on the world stage, it is important to emphasize the “complex hybrid culture of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengal” (Radice 200 26) from whence Tagore had come. I have noted how his reading varied from Western to Indian literature, and that he engaged both traditions with equal depth and range. In this Tagore was not alone. He belonged to a family that adhered to a reformist movement begun by one of the leading figures of India. Advancing an East-West synthesis had been the work of the generation that preceded his. He had become convinced that the synthesis should go both ways, and that all societies, not Europe alone, should contribute in the shaping of human civilization. With that enthusiasm, he arrived in England in 1911.

### C. POET OF THE WORLD

Rabindranath Tagore was the first literary superstar of the twentieth century. A few decades before Tagore received the Nobel Prize, Charles Dickens and Oscar Wilde traveled to America and became well-known celebrities, but only really in the US. Mark Twain's visits to Britain were equally media-grabbing events, but only in that country. The most remarkable thing about Tagore's stardom was the extent to which he crossed linguistic and cultural borders. Renowned in India as a poet, novelist, playwright, and lyricist, Tagore grew in stature at home after the Nobel Prize, and his popularity continued to increase as he traveled the world. Much of Tagore's reputation outside India initially rested on the freshness of *Gitanjali*, published in 1912, and his fame spread after his lecture tours to thirty countries on five continents, through which he elucidated his vision for a world based on cultural and religious diversity and mutual respect. Tagore became the voice of India's spiritual heritage, and for India, especially for Bengal, he became a living institution.

I should perhaps mention that *Gitanjali* was my first Tagore. From beginning to end, I was astounded by what I can only call the purity of the lyricism. Many other poets came to mind, and many love poems and prayers. In the first two paragraphs of the first poem, "Thou hast made me endless...At the immortal touch of your hands" I heard strains of Sappho's "To me he seems like a god and I can say nothing as my tongue cracks and slender fire is quick under my skin...." In the phrase "Drunk with joy" I heard Rumi and Omar al-Khayyam. In his pleading tone I heard Muhammad's prayer at Tayif, as well as Maribai and St. John of the Cross. Tagore seemed to be all of these, yet as Valery

suggested, he seemed so original that “we cannot trace the hidden transformations that others underwent in his mind.” *Gitanjali* also helped me place some endeavors made by such modern Arabic poets such as Adonis in his *Mihyar Al-Dimashqui (Mihyar the Damascene, 1957)* and Fadhil al-Azzawi in his *Al-Shajara al-Sharqiya (The Eastern Tree, 1967)*. In *Gitanjali*, Tagore, like the classical mystic poets mentioned above and the Arab poets after him, attempted to join the body and the spirit, offering the sweetness and mystery of faith without the strictures of religion and dogma. The poems unite lover with beloved, uniting them, offering the temporal body imaginative access to eternity.

*Gitanjali* struck me as cyclical rather than repetitive, and although it begins very well, I still can open to any page and start, or even read it from back to front. However, repetitiveness creeps into *Fruit Gathering*, and I sensed a discomforting preciousness and imprecision in the volume that followed, *The Crescent*. Yet *Gitanjali*'s influence would not easily dissipate, and I sought more of Tagore's work. I found *Gora* a compelling read, and realizing that it was a re-writing of Kipling's *Kim* gave me a thrill. Knowing that Satyajit Ray had made a film of *The Home and The World* also excited me. I never had access to the film, but being familiar with Ray's directorial style through the Apu trilogy helped frame the novel. I was thoroughly moved and haunted by the characters in Tagore's short stories, and reading Tagore's plays in his *Collected Works* still redeems that volume, even after learning how much it contributed to Tagore's misrepresentation. Finally, reading Tagore's essays and two biographies about him confirmed his immense importance and compelled me to write about him. None of this would have happened without *Gitanjali* as an entry point, and I still believe the book is an important gateway to his work.

Presumably, the writing of the English-language *Gitanjali* took place in 1911 as Tagore convalesced and could neither write “something serious” nor stop writing. On the sea voyage to his third visit to England he finished translating the manuscript. Months later, within a week of meeting Tagore in London, W. B. Yeats set to work selecting and arranging the poems, and making pencil corrections for Tagore to consider (Dutta and Robinson 165); the book came out shortly thereafter. Yeats nominated him for the Nobel Prize and to everyone’s surprise, Tagore won it.

The English *Gitanjali* is selected from three books of poetry, among which is the Bengali *Gitanjali*. Because the selection process of these poems was not well documented, we may still wonder why Tagore decided to launch his career with strictly devotional writing. One factor is obvious and seems natural: Tagore wanted to share his most recent work. This is a common-enough phenomenon among poets, writers, and other intellectuals. However, that he was engaged in selecting from among several of his more recent works, and given that these latter works were all devotional in nature, suggests that he was interested in offering a partial version of his work, and in launching a poetic persona around such partiality. The books he released directly after *Gitanjali* contributed to his image as Oriental sage, or guru, which Macmillan’s *Collected Works* has preserved.

Tagore’s presence on the world stage persisted, and thrived even though he was maligned shortly after winning the Nobel, especially among the Anglophone press and literary and cultural establishment. For better or worse, Tagore had become a powerful cultural agent whose authority rested on spiritual poetry that allowed him to speak to audiences in powerful nations. The limitations on his effectiveness were created by

historical conditions beyond his control, the involvement of other equally ambitious agents, and his own practical and conceptual failings.

### 1. Modernist Misreadings: Yeats and Pound

Reading the poems in *Gitanjali*, we can see why the Anglo-American Modernists were drawn to them, and why the spiritualist stamp would be difficult to wipe off. In his introduction to *Gitanjali*, Yeats recognized that a resurgence was underway in Bengal, quoting an unnamed interlocutor whom he tells, “A new renaissance has been born in your country” (Yeats 6). Seeking and orchestrating a renaissance in Ireland at the time, Yeats was naturally curious. Ezra Pound, who was working at the time at Yeats’s secretary, and who was directly influenced by Ernest Fenellosa’s work on Chinese poetry, had been engaged in a kind of Orientalist revival as well. For the senior late-Romantic poet turned Modernist and the dynamo of Anglophone Modernism Tagore was a thrilling prospect.

When Pound and Yeats met Tagore they had already been studying and borrowing from Eastern sources for inspiration and for the development of their Modernist ideas. Pound’s study of Chinese characters was instrumental in his development and articulation of Imagisme, whereby the poet takes language back to concrete particulars to develop a poetics of “direct treatment,” presentation rather than description (Kenner 136). Pound’s own style before his immersion into non-European texts was at best “anarchic”<sup>4</sup> (Kenner 159). Pound championed the long-forgotten

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<sup>4</sup> Kenner reports that in 1912 Pound visited Ford Maddox Ford, a writer the American expatriate greatly admired, and showed him his poems. Ford reacted by rolling on the floor in mock agony in response to Pound’s overwrought poetic language (Kenner 159).



Provençal poets from whom T. S. Eliot would later borrow. His hope for literature was based on another kind of synthesis, of modern sensibility and classical poetic expression, an idea Eliot would later express in his famous essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent.”

Pound’s theory of literary renaissance came to be based on an idea of synthesis not all that different from the one advanced by Tagore and his predecessors. “A great age of literature is perhaps always a great age of translation, or follows it,” he wrote (Pound 193). His translations of Chinese poetry appeared in 1915, not long after his meeting with Tagore. In 1914, two years after he came into contact with Tagore and after he had immersed himself in studies of Asian poetry, Pound launched Imagisme and published *Des Imagistes*, an anthology that contained the works of H.D. and William Carlos Williams, among others.

Pound applauded Tagore’s *Gitanjali* in a review published in the *Fortnightly Review* in 1913. In *Gitanjali* Pound found much of what he admired in earlier European poetry, comparing Tagore’s language to that of the Greeks, and *Gitanjali* to Dante’s *Paradiso*. We hear the first articulations of Imagisme when Pound advises Tagore’s readers to approach the content of the poems directly, without the dissonance of decades of obfuscated reading. “You must see these poems not as you see stars on a flag, but as you have seen stars in the heaven,” he wrote (Chaudari 110). Most importantly, he cited the book and its style as a “balance and corrective to an exhausted strain of European humanism that began with the Renaissance” (Chaudari 112).

Pound’s embrace of Tagore was more sophisticated than many of his contemporaries’, but he too left Tagore to fend for himself a few years after he was

awarded the Nobel. How much Tagore influenced Pound and helped to usher in Modernist literature cannot be ascertained exactly. Clearly, Tagore fit into a paradigm of literary rejuvenation that Pound was pursuing; literary crossbreeding was a central component of the renaissance he hoped to instigate. He further argued that all arts would have to borrow if they wanted to renew themselves, a call that was heeded by the Cubists in their borrowing from African art. Amid the sonorities of the Modern machinery before which a century of pastoral poetry stood powerful, Pound believed that Tagore was bringing “a saner stillness” into the world of European culture.

Unlike most of his contemporaries, Pound found affinities with modern art in Tagore’s work (and in Bengali poetics more broadly). Tagore’s Bengali verse sounded to him like a combination of troubadour poetry and “the sound-unit principle of the most advanced artists in (French Symbolist) *vers libre*” (Booth 81). Pound considered Tagore’s verse a potential model for Modernist poetry precisely because it used “a specific word for everything” and was free from “lusciousness” and “over-profusion” (Williams 133). Along with Yeats, Pound had become aware that Tagore opposed both British imperialism and Indian “nationalist chauvinism” (82). Pound was convinced of Tagore’s importance based on this complex political position and felt Tagore was someone “the hacks of empire were unable to comprehend” (82).

One of these hacks, however, may have been Yeats himself. In his introduction to *Gitanjali*, Yeats recognizes Tagore’s power to assimilate a multiplicity of voices, a power that I elucidated in a previous section. He writes, “At every moment the heart of this poet flows outward to these without derogation or condescension, for it has known that they will understand; and it has filled itself with the circumstance of their lives” (Yeats 8). He

goes on to describe Tagore's major achievement: "A whole people, a whole civilization... seems to have been taken up into this imagination" (8). What Tagore had achieved in integrating the old and new became part of Modernism's recipe for success as the Anglo-American poets defined it, and as echoed in T. S. Eliot's essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent." Yeats comes close to recognizing an element of the Modern in Tagore's verse. The poems in *Gitanjali* impressed Yeats not because of the strangeness of the civilization from which they emerged, "but because we have met our own image, an image of ourselves" (Yeats 7), that can be traced to a contemporary moment, "as though we had walked in Rossetti's willow wood, or heard, perhaps for the first time in literature, our voice as in a dream" (14). At another moment Yeats finds in the *Gitanjali* poems a kinship with modern European philosophy, "as though they held the doctrine of Nietzsche that we must not believe in the moral or intellectual beauty which does not sooner or later impress itself upon physical things" (Yeats 10).

Convinced perhaps that his own literary heritage (European and Irish) had lost its connection to the present, Yeats sees Tagore's poems as representative of a civilization that has remained "unbroken," "not, as with us, broken into a dozen minds." While at some point he likens Tagore to Chaucer, he finds that

Rabindranath Tagore, like Chaucer's forerunners, writes music for his words, and one understands at every moment that he is so abundant, so spontaneous, so daring in his passion, so full of surprise, because he is doing something which has never seemed strange, unnatural, or in need of defence. (12)

Essentially, he suggests that Tagore's poems are not the work of an artist consciously revolutionizing his language and culture, but of a kind of innocent singer unaware of the sophistication and originality of his song.

This envy of Tagore's unbroken culture, expressed in what I am sure was meant to be praise, becomes derisive in stereotypical Orientalist fashion. After the passage quoted above Yeats goes on to emphasize the child-like quality he perceived in Tagore's work, "an innocence, a simplicity that one does not find elsewhere in literature makes the birds and the leaves seem as near to him as they are near to children" (Yeats 13). Based on the statements of an unnamed source, Yeats recounts a number of anecdotes that position Tagore as a kind of absent-minded mystic whose spirituality is inherited, rather than an individual achievement. Like his father ("the Maha Rishi!") who sat in contemplation in his garden for days at a time, Tagore supposedly "sits immovable in contemplation, and for two hours does not awake from his reverie upon the nature of God" (Yeats 13). As for Rabi's brother, the philosopher Dwijendranath, he would sit in such deep contemplation that "squirrels come from the boughs and climb on to his knees and the birds alight upon his hands" (13). Yeats reports in an anecdote that on a river journey Rabi "fell into contemplation because of the beauty of the landscape, and the rowers [who] waited for eight hours before they could continue their journey" (13).

Yeats's discourse is the facile Orientalism it appears to be, but reflects the long tradition of Irish nationalist thought in which Orientalism played a role. Irish Revivalists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century had subsumed Orientalist motifs into their vision of ancient Irish life (see Lennon 2004). Adopting Orientalist ideas about the East as sensual, despotic, irrational, backward, incoherent, to his own Irish people "Yeats often repeated similar stereotypes and tropes, but in contrast to English imperialists he usually treated such traits as positive" (Lennon 248). Yeats had held from the beginning of his career that Celtic

culture was akin to the Orient in that it was “not modern, not industrial, but imaginative and sensual” (248).

However, Yeats’s Orientalism, and that of other Irish Revivalists, was constructed to serve a specific purpose. Whereas English and French Orientalisms evolved as a defense of colonization and continued European hegemony in Asia and the Near East, Irish Orientalism, and Yeats’s adoption of Orientalist elements in his work, was meant to advance an anticolonial agenda, mainly the creation of an Irish master narrative that pit Celtic heritage against British imperialism (251).

Well-meant as they were, Yeats’s and Pound’s views of Tagore arose from their own agendas, which differed markedly from his. Having failed to appreciate Tagore’s efforts to modernize his literary heritage, Pound and Yeats, though they were his best potential audience, left him to face sometimes hostile, occasionally enthusiastic, generally misguided audiences. Both the hostility and enthusiasm were the products of the same constricted vision, and in neither could Tagore be anything but a mystic from the East.

## 2. The Orientalist Stacked Deck

After the publication of *Gitanjali*, Tagore published several poetic works in a similar vein. A selection of his short stories, *The Hungry Stone and Other Stories*, appeared in 1916. Tagore’s stories received mixed early reviews in English, some applauding them, others finding them of negligible quality. A review in *The New York Times Review of Books* praised the stories for their “practical mysticism” and described the author as “an idealist finding meaning of man’s spiritual life in union with the oneness of the universe,

a mystic seeing beyond the subtleties of man's mind and inhabitation of man's soul by his god." (NYTRB 6). A reviewer in *The North American Review* described the short stories as "fascinating in their varied charm, but unprofitable as subject of analysis" (NAR 837). Seen as alternately shallow and impenetrably deep, hardly anyone in the West recognized the influences of Naturalism and Realism on the stories, or that they were the work of an artist addressing the real-life concerns of his people. The novels did not fare any better, even though they addressed contemporary political tensions in Indian life that alluded to the colonial order of the time. By the time *Gora* appeared in translation in 1919, the image of Tagore as an Eastern sage was too well established to provoke a fresh reading of his work. A review in the *The New Leader* said about the novel, "A wonderful series of visions of the Indian soul...it kneels in prayer, like some gaunt saint in an early Flemish painting...If Thomas a Kempis had written a novel, it might have been something like this gracious and beautiful book of Tagore's" (Sen 1966 9). It is doubtful that the reviewer had even read *Gora*, but the point is that there was an air of familiarity about Tagore, an image of him that allowed others to project a great many false and stereotypical notions.

Tagore's physical appearance also became a blank slate for false Western stereotypes. To his amusement, during his travels in Europe Tagore was mistaken for a fortuneteller several times. On his first visit to Germany in 1921, his publisher and friends played this priest-prophet aura to the hilt to a ravenous press that covered Tagore's travels on a daily basis, and to audiences that physically fought for tickets to hear the great poet (Kampuchan). During one of Tagore's recitations, as a translator began to read the German version of a poem, "the crowd cried out, 'Don't translate. We

have understood everything” (Rothmund 22). A French reviewer, writing in 1921, saw in Tagore the image of Christ, “le visage de Jesus Christ...en lui tout le fatalisme et tout le mystère du pays ou il es né” (Sen 1966 11). Tagore attracted a great many admirers who saw him as a symbol of “the strange, exotic, inaccessible Eastern mystical thoughts—the impenetrable enigma which is nevertheless enchanting for its foreign flavor” (Sen 1966 11).

Tagore was convinced that Europe needed a spiritual fix to heal it from “pride and greed and the deliberate cultivation of contempt for other races” (Tagore 1997 20). Intent as he was on being a conduit for this healing, Tagore was not a pioneer in accepting the role of Eastern sage, as he was not the West’s first encounter with an Eastern prophet come to heal Europe’s damaged soul. By the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century many Indian intellectuals, following in Rammohun Roy’s footsteps, had adopted the conviction that the East was spiritually superior to the West. Variations of this notion would continue to have currency among both modernizing and traditional intellectuals in colonized territories, helping them in the articulation of their nationalist discourse and in the process of national identity formation (see Ayin 2007).

Seen among colonized subjects as perhaps the only advantage they had over the West, this pigeonholing of the East into the spiritual realm had, unsurprisingly, Orientalist roots, and had been going on for more than a century before Tagore’s Nobel Prize. The first generation of English Orientalist philologists, mainly William Jones, Charles Wilkins, and Nathaniel Halhed, had first approached their studies of India with a linguistic focus that soon turned into an interest in religious texts and religious beliefs. These Enlightenment scholars seemed to believe that the “ancient Hindu, Greco Roman,

Persian, and Nordic past constituted a free-floating combinatorium for a conjectural history, whence epic, law, religion and literature could be beautifully synthesized and presented as the ur-tradition of all traditions” (Aravamudan 31). Seeking specific common denominators among these ancient cultures, especially those that would resonate with Western myth and history, was the next logical step. By the time of Jones’s death, the search for ancient cultural synthesis, seeking to show similarities between the Bible and ancient Hindu texts, had been adopted even by local “unidentified scribes, translators, and native scholars” (Aravamudan 33).

The paternalistic sympathy toward the East exhibited by Jones and the first cadre of Orientalists would not last long; soon emerged a new generation of India specialists such as William Bentick, Charles Revelyan, and Thomas Macaulay, who famously wrote in 1813 “that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia” (Macaulay in *Modern History*). James Mill’s *History of British India* and its attack on Jones and other Asianists who sought to find Asian roots in European culture was so powerful that it discouraged a generation of British scholars from pursuing Asian studies, ceding the field to German Orientalists (Burrow 42-49).

Yet even among the early group of Orientalists, spirituality, the East’s strongest attribute, had long been designated a weakness that tacitly legitimated European subjugation of that part of the world. Accepting the notion of the noble savage (Singh 28), Jones also “believed in the Enlightenment notion of the two faculties of the human brain and was happy to concede the ‘Asiatic’ the domain of the imaginative and exotic because it did not fit the Cartesian world of rational discourse” (Sengupta 161). Jones’s



translations of Kalidasa's *Sakuntala*<sup>5</sup> and Jayadeva's *Gitagovinda* received a good deal of attention and popularity in England, forming the main stereotypical images of India held by the West. In Jones's hands the *Sakuntala* becomes a portrait of "primitive innocence, of simplicity and naturalness" (quoted in Dingwaney Needham 162). Jones's portrayal sidelines the intricate rituals and manners of Indian court, which would have been indicative of a complex civilization, to emphasize the simplicity and naturalness of Indians and India. To further highlight the *Gitagovinda*'s spiritual element, and perhaps to prove the notion of a pre-existing, originary monotheistic religion in India, Jones grouped his selection from the Hindu sacred text with Muslim Sufi poetry. In the *Gitagovinda* the high erotic register of interaction between Radha and Krishna helps articulate the divine nature of their relationship, and provides a culturally specific and complex view of the divine and the erotic combined. In Jones's hand, "the highly erotic, intensely poetic lyrics of Jayadeva became devotional prayers steeped with mysticism," and as such are "denuded of their richness and variety to make this poem conform to an 'image' acceptable to European taste" (Sengupta 161). Living in the post-*Orientalism* era we have plenty of evidence at hand to suggest how this sort of Orientalist reproduction of native text was instrumental in legitimizing imperialistic discourses, be they British or French.

By the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, however, the call for a cultural and religious East and West syncretism had taken root in India, despite the abandonment of such an effort by the leading British scholars (and administrators) of India at the time. Taken up by Asian

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<sup>5</sup> In Hindu mythology Sakuntala (source of history: Sakuntala) is the mother of Bharata, the head of a long race of kings, who has given his name to India (Bharatavarsha), and the wife of Dushyanta who was the founder of the Pauray Dynasty. Her story is told in the Mahabarata and dramatized by the poet Kalidasa in his play *The Recognition of Sakuntala*. Jones rendition of Kalidasa's work was the first English translation of a Sanskrit text.

intellectuals who began to express their views on Western shores, the idea of East-West synthesis began to incorporate Orientalist stereotypes of the East, turning them into attributes of spiritual strength. To some extent these responses were attempts to stall Christian missionary activities in India, which had intensified over the second half of the nineteenth century (see Ali 1965). When Keshub Chunder Sen claimed Jesus Christ was an Asiatic he was attempting to fend off Christian missionary activity by asserting India's familiarity with Christ, a knowledge that stemmed from India's long and varied religious experience. We also hear a challenging note in Sen's assertion, mainly that Asia (that is, India) has given Europe its religion, and need not be converted to something it already knows.

On this point Sen's defensiveness converges with the work of German Romanticist Orientalists such as Arthur Schopenhauer and Max Mueller, whose admiration for India's rich contribution to theology effectively essentialized the country. Reinforcing the notion that the East is uninterested in and incapable of addressing the material world, Sen and the German Orientalists of his time would soon turn this incapacity for science and industry into a criticism of the West, whose energies were focused only on greed-driven rationality, militaristic domination, and material acquisition (Aravamudan 64-65).

Before Tagore's Nobel Prize, the most successful emissary of India's spirituality was the sensational and charismatic Swami Vivekananda. Though he was not among the invited guest-speakers at the World Parliament of Religion in Chicago in 1893, Vivekananda stole the show, making a great impression on audiences. He went on to teach and lecture on Hinduism in England and the US until very shortly before his death

in 1902 at the age of thirty-nine. Taking up the “meticulous reversal” (Aravamudan 65) of Orientalist stereotypes and turning it into sublime advantage, Vivekananda embraced the material / spiritual division of labor between West and East that he believed to characterize the world at the beginning of the twentieth century. “When an Oriental wants to learn about machine-making,” Vivekananda stated, “he should sit at the feet of the Occidental and learn from him. When the Occident wants to learn about the spirit, about God, about the soul, about the meaning and mystery of this universe, he must sit at the feet of the Orient to learn” (“My Master”). Even before his success in America Vivekananda was so convinced of India’s potential role as spiritual guide to the world that he proclaimed to an Indian audience, “Up, India and conquer the world with your spirituality! The world wants it or the world will be destroyed” (*From Colombo* 194).

The combination of Western scholarship that defined India as a “mystical” civilization and the preaching of native Indians (Sen and Vivekananda—two figures reared in his own Brahma Samaj), provided the rigid framework in which Tagore would be perceived. The perception would persist, as the poet himself was not keen on challenging his hosts ‘and promoters’ fixed impression. What I have called a “stacked deck” in the title of this section is what Mahasweta Sengupta called “an existent repertory of discourse defining the alterity of the East” (Sengupta 165). In other words, English-speaking and other Western audiences had been socialized to otherize the East and the Easterner, and were saturated with notions of India as a mystical, effeminate, childish, uncivilized nation. Tagore faced this already-established discourse as he headed to England in 1912.

Empowered nonetheless by his belief in a cultural synthesis that would bridge Eastern mysticism and Western materialism, Tagore must have also felt encouraged by a century of religious and cultural reforms advocated by the Brahma Samaj. He had in mind a leaner, more theistic East, one unfettered by reliance on divine intervention or any mediation between men and their creator, or on anything resembling superstition. The strong impression that Sen had left on the young Tagore is well documented (See Dutta and Robinson, and Hay), and certainly Sen's and Vivekananda's success, resembling both Rammohun Roy's and that of Tagore's own grandfather, must have confirmed to him that the West was not only receptive to, but ripe for change.

But Tagore must have also known that Eastern advocates of this cultural synthesis or of Eastern spirituality had had a lasting influence. In any case, he would quickly learn how much Eastern prophets like him were distrusted in the West, which was as wary of East-West syncretism as it was thirsty for spiritual healing. Hardly a year after the Nobel Prize, reaction to Tagore's writings mocked his ineffectual mysticism and "general Eastern insipidness and irrationality" (Sen A., 12). *The Nation* magazine in the US, along with numerous other publications, echoed this view in several reviews of Tagore's work. Other critics responded to Tagore's critique of Western civilization by asserting that he was himself a product of Western influence. "We have the right to say, if he is nearer to us, it is because he has assimilated something of our standards and of the spirit of our literature," one critic argued (Sen A., 4). Another critic bluntly stated,

Tagore is not a typical Eastern poet; he is not a messenger bringing to the materialistic West the unknown doctrines of the mystical East. He is rather one of the first results of the modern Europeanized education and the intelligent Hindu... He is one of [those] who returns to us what we have already lent. (Sen A., 6)

Written almost a century later, the critiques above echo Macaulay's chauvinism and allow the Easterner no outlet. If he is authentic he is mysterious and ineffectual; if he is "modernized" then he is a mere minion with a modicum of undigested Western education, and therefore has little to add to the Western world since everything he has learned came from the West in the first place. Like a re-fashioned wrestling move, what Aravamudan called the logic of "meticulous reversal" returns to trap Tagore in an irresistible grip.

Unlike his Eastern Sage predecessors, including even the philosopher-poet Sri Aurobindo, Tagore first received attention on the basis of his literary achievements. And it was on this basis that many of his critics sought to undermine him, or at least dismiss him, as in the case of Yeats (Jelnikar 2008). Poetry granted Tagore access to Western audiences and was his main claim to agency. Tagore the Poet, aided by an exotic aura, was welcomed to give lectures and speeches on myriad topics, topics on which he, I should add, spoke brilliantly for the most part. Tagore's post-Nobel Prize publication track and travels suggest that he thought spiritual, accessible poetry would help place his cultural and political agenda on the fast track. Facile examples of what Aravamudan called Guru English, much of Tagore's poetry "began to have considerable appeal with multiple audiences without necessarily having to posit the particular medium of communication as a coherent foundation" (Aravamudan 9). Poetry is rarely a medium of immediate communication, but it must have a coherent foundation based on rich figurative language, musicality, and social and philosophical relevance. Poetry demands our attention, exposing us to specificities of experience even as we seek universal implications for the thoughts, actions, and feelings explored.

Tagore's poetry as presented to Western audiences, especially after *Gitanjali*, began to arrive in "prepackaged way[s] that merge with their analogs or cousin ideas in the host language, thereby preempting self-conscious reflection" (Aravamudan 10). That these watered-down English versions of Tagore's originals were themselves translated to other languages in a similarly watered-down fashion only contributed to their loss of depth and coherence. Perhaps such feelings of impenetrable exoticism and uncomfortable familiarity would have been destabilized had audiences been exposed to a wider range of Tagore's poetry, or to his short stories and novels. But perhaps it was too late and dissonant spirituality had become too powerful, and too useful. In the following section I will discuss how Tagore directly contributed to the pre-packaging of his own poetry and to his own image as a guru, and what effect that had on his agency as a poet-turned-public intellectual.

### 3. Translations and the Limits of Expediency

The question of how Tagore got himself branded as a guru has been the focus of much of the criticism that addresses his work. One hardly encounters an article on Tagore now that does not decry the way he is misconstrued and underappreciated in the West, and especially in the English-speaking world. This biographical piece is a central part of Tagore's legacy and of his aggregate poetic persona, as opposed to the poetic persona I outlined in the first half of this study. The release of *Gitanjali* in English and the subsequent "spiritual" volumes circumscribed his oeuvre into a narrow, message-laden focus, shifting his poems, with their ambiguous religious feeling, from literature to vague, semi-commercial spirituality. We are well aware of the institutionalized Orientalism,

what Sengupta called “the established discourse,” that relegated Tagore’s works to the self-help shelves no matter what he wrote. But we can also surmise by the choice of books and poems he made accessible to his worldwide audience that Tagore had gone about the business of self-presentation with some deliberation.

Tagore’s anti-nationalist antipathy may have led him to pursue a kind of writing that crossed national borders and cultural specificities. Tagore’s understudy, the Lebanese Kahlil Gibran, who was dubbed by his publisher the Syrian Tagore, would do exactly that in the late 1920s, and proudly so, even after establishing a reputation as a modernizer of his native Arabic literature (Gibran 367-372). Tagore’s East-West syncretism (also adopted by Gibran), with its generalized view of both poles, disregards the cultural specificity and variety within “Eastern” and “Western” cultures, and fails to take account of Africa and Latin America altogether. Shortly after he received the Nobel Prize, Tagore, knowingly or unknowingly, seems to have embarked on a reductivist course, sacrificing poetic and cultural precision for the immediacy of communicating his message to as large an audience as would listen.

We find the most compelling evidence for this reductive approach in Tagore’s translations of his own poems. He remains one of the few major poets to have translated his own works, which in itself suggests that he wanted to be fully in control of what went under his name in English. As to how he translated his own poems, beginning with *Gitanjali*—therein we find the most compelling evidence of his conscious shaping of the cumulative poet-persona that he presented to the rest of the world. Tagore did not so much translate his own poems to English as he produced them in simplified English prose versions.

Before addressing the implications of this choice, I want to acknowledge that Tagore's approach to revision is not surprising. Wordsworth's 1850 *Prelude* is quite different from his 1800 version; Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, in its subsequent editions, included revised versions of earlier poems. In our era the contemporary American poet Robert Lowell revised his poems repeatedly, until it became difficult for him to determine which version to publish. Poets are constantly revising their work, and usually do so when they reissue it. It would not be unusual for Tagore to "revise" his poems when he "rewrote" them in English.

As for Tagore's self-translations, the examples of Samuel Beckett and Vladimir Nabokov switching between languages (English and French, and Russian, German and French, respectively) as they wrote, and that language change inevitably demanding rewriting, suggests that interlingual composition is a highly complicated, opaque part of the creative process. As Perry notes, when "the writer himself is the translator, he can allow himself bold shifts from the source text which had it been done by another translator, probably would not have passed as adequate translation" (Perry 181), thus making each self-translation a new composition.

Of concern here is that the "bold shifts" that occur in Tagore's translations (of poems, short stories, and plays) took place for practical rather than esthetic reasons, precisely because he wanted to simplify his literary output to a readership who had no patience for him, or who expected him to be simple-minded. Furthermore, Tagore also granted his co-translators the same freedom for such bold shifts and excisions to help simplify the works (*Letters* 495). We have ample reason, therefore, to be concerned about Tagore's choice to gain political and cultural agency at the expense of his poetry.



Tagore had been disappointed by what he saw as the anti-intellectual bent of English life and English people, whom as a young man he had assumed would as be passionate about their poetry as he was. Most English people, he discovered, were unfamiliar with their own literature. As he translated his poems to English, Tagore worked with that perception of English people in mind. Explaining his translation strategy, he writes, “English readers have very little patience for scenes and sentiments which are foreign to them; they feel a sort of grievance for what they do not understand, whatever is different from their familiar world” (*Letters* 310). Tagore attempted to give his English readers something they could understand, and to facilitate this “understanding” he “discard[ed] what [was] beyond the powers of expression...and circumvent[ed] areas that offer[ed] resistance” (Bose 23).

Tagore does not say “my powers of expression” “offer resistance to English readers.” He attempts to make this transaction normative, as if powers of expression are an objective, universally agreed-upon facility, and as if areas of resistance can be discerned and located without a specific audience in mind. Tagore knew that the English “can” or cannot “understand” is not a mere cognitive propensity, as well as he knew that the Germans and the French were more willing to translate “Oriental” works (Wolff 124). What he did not recognize, and for which he could not be faulted, was that the English failure to understand was the result of decades of social conditioning regarding the relation of their country to India. Naturally, they would refuse any new information about that part of the world that might challenge their stereotypes and the basis for their imperialist presence there.

Decades later, Tagore admits that he “timidly avoided all difficulties, which has the effect of making them [the poems] thin” (*Letters* 254). One obvious source of timidity had to be Tagore’s awareness that his English, perfectly useful for writing prose essays, was not strong enough to account for the complexity of his Bengali poetry. Early on, as the first translations were released, Tagore felt that his incomplete knowledge of English was advantageous to his translation process. He wrote that,

since the melody and rhythms of the Bengali language cannot be transferred into English, the inner beauty of the poem only comes if one translates the essential substance in simple English. This task is easy for me, because I cannot but write simple English... There is an advantage in having incomplete knowledge of the English language. (Dingwaney Needham 117)

But Tagore’s simplified versions of his poems in English do not account for the fact that he helped shape a new literary language in Bengal by incorporating Sanskritic language and also by de-Sanskritizing Bengali at the same time. Similarly, Gibran, who wrote his famous *Prophet* in English, conceded to the image of himself as a “shepherd boy” simpleton, despite his own perception of himself as cosmopolitan artist, and his undeniable effort to modernize his own literature.

As such, the translations of Tagore’s work to English, and subsequent translations to other languages, end up suffocating these prior acts of agency and rendering the poet’s texts non-generative of agency, for their readers have denuded them of any revolutionary association. Perhaps the choice to be translated in this manner, and in Gibran’s case, to write in this mode altogether, is an example of what Spivak called strategic essentialization, in which the Easterner temporarily stands his spiritual ground, affixing himself in ahistorical and pure turf, as opposed to the Westerner, whose mind, though empowered by science, is battered by ever-changing existential and spiritual storms.

The hope was that this temporary posturing would come to an end, and that eventually collaboration based on mutual needs would take place between the scientific, but spiritually unstable West and the technologically stagnant but spiritually vibrant East. Even years later Tagore continued to take a pragmatic approach toward his poetry, and remained emphatic about rendering the substance of his message at the cost of the artistic vessel in which it came about (Chatterjee 37). The substance would have to be a consistent, uncomplicated idea, unburdened by the nuances of poetry, easier to deliver to people who “would not understand” otherwise the depth of their spiritual crisis, and who needed a simple approach to learn of the spiritual riches that lay in other civilizations.

With these expedient concerns in mind, let us return again to the “timidly” phrase in Tagore’s passage above. The phrase, contradicting his earlier pragmatic enthusiasm, was written in retrospect, twenty-three years after winning the Nobel Prize, an acknowledgement, possibly, that the poet had paid dearly for his access to English readers. He describes his translations of the *Gitanjali* poems and the volumes that followed as “a career of falsifying [his] own coins,” something that he had done in a play (*Letters* 254). Shortly before his death, assessing his translations of his own work and his leap into international prominence, Tagore wrote to his friend William Sturge-Moore,

I ought never to have intruded into your realm of glory with my offering hastily giving them a foreign shrine and certain assumed gestures familiar to you. I have done thereby injustice to myself, to the shrine of the muse which proudly claims flowers from its own climate and culture. There is something humiliating in such an indecent hurry of impatience clamouring for one’s immediate dues in wrong times and out of the way places. (*Letters* 451)

Tagore knew that his translations were compromises, the poems so transformed that they became unrecognizable (see Sarkar 2008). An introspective person, he may have felt that he approached his career “with an indecent hurry of impatience clamouring

for one's immediate dues," and thus had to pay for his lack of humility with humiliation, shaming himself and his culture of origin rather than honoring them. I called Tagore's self-presentation to the West as a spiritual sage a kind of Faustian compromise, and I believe it was so, but I think it is impossible to ignore the fact that the English language and its speakers' resistance, a resistance based on decades of imperialist socialization, simply would not offer Tagore a different platform.

#### 4. Assessing Tagore's Westward Venture

At the time of his letter to Sturge-Moore, Tagore was probably one of the most famous people on Earth, and certainly one of the most revered authors in the world, beloved by a diverse population though reviled by the literati of his own empire. We cannot know what would have become of Tagore had he not taken that fateful trip to London in 1912, and had he not become a renowned, Nobel Prize winning author. But we can certainly ask what he, his people, and many other colonized populations gained from their access to the colonizers in his lifetime.

Tagore positioned himself as a synthesizer whose poetic expression emerged from the amalgamation of a variety of literatures, an amalgamation that he felt was capable of transcending geographical and racial separations, and it was in promotion of that transcendence that he reached out to the world. Though he continued writing literary texts, Tagore's major occupation on the world stage was that of a lecturer promoting ideas of inclusion and tolerance. One of his major intellectual contributions, even before WWI, was that he saw through India's colonial experience, and advocated, increasingly as he got older, a vision of India not based on European models of nation building.

Raised on the teachings of the Brahmo Samaj, Tagore saw great potential in inter-religious connection and thus could not tolerate sectarianism. Championing the Mughal Akbar, he preferred dilution to purity. And we see in retrospect that his resistance to joining the Indian nationalist movement was for fear that a monocultural, nationalist India would smother its minorities. He rejected the Bengali nationalist movement in the first decade of the twentieth century because he saw that it required from the Muslim minority a greater sacrifice than was being asked of the Hindu majority, and that the Hindu leadership had no intention of delivering equality to the minorities (Hay 17; Ray 93-95).

Tagore also refused to join the anti-British chorus, sensing that the nationalist discourse appealed to racial pride rather than to a broad humanism. He simply could not join a wholly dismissive critique of the West that would discourage the synthetic, amalgamative approach he preferred. According to his own terms, Tagore was an Indian patriot, holding fast to a politics of diversity and interdependence, one of the basic paradigms of Indian civilization. At the beginning of the twentieth century Tagore had declared, “if God had so wished he could have made all Indians speak one language... the unity of India has been and shall always be a unity in diversity” (Tagore 1991 1521). India, Tagore believed, “has never had a real sense of nationalism. Indian nationalism as advocated by Indian nationalist in the anti-colonial movement, is based on ‘lessons from history contrary to the lessons of their ancestors’” (153). To attempt to build an India on the European nationalist model would be “attempting to take into [India] a history which [was] not the outcome of its won living” (153).

When Tagore did join the anti-colonial movement it had much more to do with his critique of Western nationalism than with an embrace of Indian nationalism. Colonialism, according to Tagore, was a product of European nationalism, an “offering” of “human sacrifices to national self-seeking” (Tagore 1999 209). The dark-skinned victims suffered from European parasitism, but this “forcible parasitism which [Europe] has been practicing upon the two large continents of the world must be causing to her moral nature a gradual atrophy and degeneration” (Tagore 1999 9). One of colonialism’s most insidious effects on Europe is that its people “live under the delusion that [they] are free,” when in fact though they are merely “powerful,” they are completely, prearranged cogs in an inhuman machine (Tagore 2001 210). Following the European nationalist model would only lead India to the same tragic “logic of egoism” (Tagore 1999 211).

It seems hard to reconcile this uncompromising stance with the familiar exoticism of his spiritual poetry and his image, and one is almost tempted to see the poetry as a decoy for a larger, more pragmatic course of action. In his lectures around the world, Tagore emphasized the same message of plurality, with a promise of secular deliverance in one hand and a stern warning about the militancy he saw the world racing toward in the other. A few years before invading China and embarking on their own imperialist enterprise, the Japanese heard this message from Tagore. He advocated a pan-Asianism based on the humane aspects of all Asian spirituality, and warned the Japanese against falling into a nationalism based on the European model that would express itself in expansion and in the subjugation of their neighbors.

His reading of the European body politic at the time, and his prediction—he had anticipated this in the mid-twenties—that it would lead to societies of technically

competent, wealthy individuals utterly subjugated to the modern state and its institutions and affiliates, was right on the mark. His message of inclusion and cultural exchange was consistent throughout his literary life. India could not fulfill its civilizing potential if it relied on a narrow definition of itself; Europe's nationalist enterprises are even more harmful as they have served as legitimating paradigms for the subjugation of others, and for a great deal of violence, he argued. For Tagore the problem was essentially the same, and had the same underlying ethical component (*Nationalism* 15). The solution lay in thinking in terms of universalism, an idea to which Europe needed to adhere in order to cease its rampage through the world, and an idea for which the East, and particularly India, had laid the intellectual and spiritual foundation.

By the time Tagore was touring the world delivering his lectures, he had largely been dismissed as a poet in the West, particularly in England and America. As noted in his analysis of European nationalism and colonialism, the message he was delivering forced his European audiences to take a deep sniff of the carnage their leadership of the world had caused. His message, though aimed at the best of human potential, derived its energy from a keen awareness of sociopolitical and economic injustices occurring in the world. It is possible that he had hoped Europeans would see through the ethnocentric framework they had established and that he had decided to work within and would eventually give him a hearing, but the attacks came from the whole European ideological spectrum. The Marxist critic Georg Lukacs dismissed him as an apologist for the middle class and an enemy of proletariat revolution. Mussolini unleashed his hired pens to respond to Tagore's critiques of fascist repression. Most of the influential figures in the English-speaking Western world, even the more liberal, felt uncomfortable with his call

to level the intellectual playing field for Easterners. On the other hand, people in Latin America and other parts of Asia and the Middle East received him with open arms.

Despite its mixed results, Tagore's self-made poetic persona drew an energy that helped him launch his poetic career, affording him the opportunity to exercise his intellectual drive toward synthesis and ubiquity. On the chronological plane, he wanted to "break time's bond," as he says in "Unending Love," to see a continuity between present and past, not a retrenchment in the past that adhered to inherited ideals without questioning them, and not such focus on the present as to ignore the humanizing influence of these same ideals. On the geographical plane, he wanted to reach out across the globe, delivering a message of "Universal joy, universal sorrow, universal joy," fulfilling what he had demanded of Kalidasa, that personal feelings encompass "the love of all man's day both past and forever," and that poems journey "through land after land / Over many days and nights / Toward the lonely object of your love" (Tagore 1985 49). In sober reflection, and decades later, such poetry still has the power to move us, urging us to be better than ourselves.



**CHAPTER 2:**  
**DEREK WALCOTT:**  
**ODESSEYAN AGENCY “HERE” AND “ELSEWHERE”**

The U.S. release of Derek Walcott’s *Collected Poems* in 1986 marked an important event in the poet’s career, firmly establishing him as a major figure in English-language poetry. *The Collected Poems* includes poems from as early as 1948, when he started writing in his native St. Lucia, to his then latest collection, *Midsummer*, which included poems that find the poet in Warsaw and Chicago, Trinidad and Europe, a roving lyricist with an international reputation. Much of the acclaim Walcott received at this point came from US poet-critics who were not familiar with Walcott’s background, but were impressed by his poetry. Bruce King reports in his biography of Walcott that Robert Lowell, the veritable dean of American poetry from the late fifties until his death in 1979, continued to think that Walcott was from Trinidad rather than St. Lucia, even though the two first met as early as 1963 (B. King, *Walcott* 191). Both the poetry establishment in the US (by which I mean mainly New York and Boston) and creative writing in the academy had neither interest in postcolonial literature, nor the means to contextualize Walcott’s work.

Nonetheless, there were plenty of reasons for the poetry establishment to embrace Walcott, as he emerged during a time of intense struggle between neo-formalists and the proponents of free verse. The older generation of formalists, such as Anthony Hecht and John Hollander, and their younger followers found in Walcott a kindred spirit

because of his admiration of the great English poets and his commitment to formal verse. That Walcott sided with the highbrow in the culture wars of the late seventies and that he had little to say about the emergence of a multicultural discourse, along with the fact that he was seen as “black” by his new American friends, made him a great find indeed, a prized ally, safe, if at times cantankerous. For a more aggressive generation of formalists, or the neo-formalists, such as Robert Richman, Walcott’s formalist prosodic practice seemed a vindication against any claim that formal prosody is by nature reactionary (Sadoff 11-12). For ethnic poets within the establishment such as Peter Balakian, an Armenian American, and Edward Hirsch, a Jewish American, Walcott’s appeal lay in how he managed to voice the tensions inherent in the experience of a “divided child” (see Balakian and Hirsch). On the other hand, African American poets were not as enthusiastic. Novelist and poet Alice Walker found little she could connect to in Walcott’s work, deeming it too highbrow and too indebted to traditional, patriarchal prosody and values (Walker 6). Less-polemical Rita Dove admired Walcott’s verse and its scope, but demurred over his politics, his portraits of women, and his egoism (Dove 1987).

Though Walcott seemed an enigma in the world of American poetry in the early eighties, it is likely that this confusion was due in part to his self-presentation in that milieu. Walcott received attention from all parts of the American poetry world even though he did not fit any convenient profile. More recent reviews of Walcott’s work in US publications express this confusion, in which critics are enthusiastic about Walcott’s pronouncements on the nature of art, old age, and love, and hesitant about his political views and insights on West Indian cultural dynamics (Kates 2005). Walcott’s most

dedicated readers are still to be found in divisions of postcolonial studies, and Commonwealth studies before that, here in the US and in the rest of the English-speaking world. Critics of West Indian origin, who have most embraced Walcott, and whose careers have had a symbiotic relationship with his, and have grown with his reputation, have provided various tropes to view the trajectory of Walcott's career and the evolution of his poetic persona. In one, Walcott is described as a prodigal who departed and returned home penitent (McDonald-Smythe 91).

Walcott's biographer, Bruce King, offers several ways of reading the Walcott poet-persona, seeing, perhaps too grandiosely, a number of parallels between Walcott's literary career and epic enterprises. Walcott's life, he writes, "is like that of the epic hero of unusual abilities, of great strength, intelligence and cunning, who falls into temptation, has rages, but is driven by his fate, by a seemingly God-given purpose" (B. King, *Walcott* 4). Other prototypes include "the romantic epic when the low origins of the hero really disguise high connections," (5) and "the bourgeois hero of the eighteenth and nineteenth century novel," a narrative of someone who is "red" or "high brown" who comes from the provinces and discovers his secret history. "It would take a decade to recover, to learn to see that most people have at one time been conquered, sold, or enslaved" (6). Walcott, King claims, recovers from the ravages of his own history by placing them, or displacing them, in a larger historical context.

It has also been argued that Walcott never really left the Caribbean. "It would be misleading," Baugh suggests, "[to say] that Walcott somehow became less Caribbean after he went to live abroad" ("Centering" 156), refuting all claims of Walcott's prodigality and estrangement. Other arguments have focused on Walcott's essential

Caribbean-ness, asserting that Walcott left the Caribbean to bring something back, be it glory or fortune, but in the process spread the worldview of the Caribbean region and its peoples. Basing his work on a number of poems by Walcott, Stewart Brown organizes the poet's work under several modulations of patriotism. Whether he is a simple, earnest patriot, a satirical patriot, or an exiled patriot, according to Brown Walcott demonstrates a deep engagement with and commitment to the Caribbean (Brown "Spoiler" 19 ).

I would like to contribute to the helpful studies discussed above by analyzing the various phases of Walcott's poetic persona, or "the various and incommensurable speaking positions," as Bhabha suggests (234). By presenting the evolution of Walcott's work and poetic persona as he navigates historical circumstances and formal developments, my analysis will provide an outline that draws on all the models discussed in the introduction to this study. Walcott's work offer an interesting reflection of Fanon's first assimilationist stage, complicated as it was by the political situation in the Caribbean and the emergence of the US as its neocolonial metropolis, as opposed to London. Walcott's second stage represented by a return to his roots proves not to have been lethargic at all, but in fact a combat stage, as Walcott faced the rise of Black nationalism in Trinidad and the Caribbean as whole. Here Walcott begins to challenges what Appiah "nationalist legitimization" of the new state and its leadership. In his third stage, Walcott appears to shed what Almond called "postcolonial melancholy", and takes the fight to the metropolis and its institutions. Walcott was an insider/outsider then, what I call a guest-intruder, who agitates against the center, but remains within it. In the final stage of Walcott's career, we see his self-sanctioned reinstatement as a native of the Caribbean, and his celebration of the culture of the Antilles—a choice of terms which suggests that

Walcott, by favoring it to “the West Indies” or “the Caribbean,” is providing a vision of inclusive regionalism based on the islands’ history and cultural, racial, religious , and linguistic heterogeneity.

## A. A FAR CRY FROM EMPIRE: WALCOTT'S MULTIPLE BEGINNINGS

Derek Walcott was born in St. Lucia in 1932, where he published his first book in 1948, financed by his mother. In 1949 he headed to Jamaica, where he enrolled in the University of the West Indies and earned a degree in English. In 1953 Walcott moved to Trinidad and Tobago and lived in Port of Spain, where he published two books and began writing for local journals. Walcott published a selection from his first three books with Jonathan Cape of London in 1964, which led Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux to publish a volume of his selected poems a year later. Both houses have remained his publishers. Though his works were published in the metropolis, at the time Walcott lived in the Caribbean, primarily in Trinidad, with periods of return to his native St. Lucia. In the early 1970s he stopped writing for the *Trinidad and Tobago Guardian*, minimized his connection with The Theatre Workshop, for which he had written wrote most of his plays, and began teaching in the US. My reading of Walcott's work here covers the period when he worked and resided in the Caribbean, before he moved to the US.

### 1. Apprenticeship Among the Ruins

Reading Walcott's early poems, we often find the poet brooding at the site of ruins. The poet's distress at these sites presents an interesting opportunity for us to speculate on a postcolonial poet's anxiety at the beginning of his career. Belated in many ways, often writing in adopted languages, racially disfavored, amidst societal structures still teetering from colonialism, a postcolonial poet is in fact standing amid ruins, far away from the origins of the literature to which he hopes to contribute. Frantz Fanon considers this tension the result of an Oedipal relationship between the colonial subject and the colonial

structure within which he was brought up. The colonial subject is colonialism's offspring, and as he attempts to part from it and join his people, colonialism, like a patronizing parent, restrains him (Fanon, *Wretched* 149). This painful tearing away, adds Fanon, has the potential of causing serious "psycho affective injuries" and producing "individuals without an anchorage, without border, colorless, stateless, rootless, a body of angels" (155).

The postcolonial poet begins writing after attempts at domestication by colonialism have come to an end. He has been trained to perpetuate the system, through education at colonial schools and adoption of the colonizer's language, esthetics and conceptual paradigms. In the waning stages and the aftermath of the colonial experience, the postcolonial poet finds himself facing the ruins of his ancestral civilization, shattered by the colonizer, or of the fragile structures established by the colonizer. Unease is not erased by elation at the colonizers' departure. That departure robs the colonized intellectual of the opportunity to rise within a social structure that he understood. Traces of the melancholia that rattles the postcolonial subject, be he native, Creole, or settler, are to be found in much of postcolonial literature, and represent an important source of tension and exploration.

In the poem "Banyan Tree, Old Year's Night" we find the poet contemplating a village square with a "withered fountain" (Walcott, *Collected Poems* 48). The light bulbs in this modern landscape become relics at an archeological site, each lamp flickering "like echoes where small savages whooped" (48). The poet then begins a reverie, in which he remembers people who used to frequent this square of his native village. They soon appear to him as ghosts who "show the whites / Of vanished eyes" (48). Their

absence “crowds the mind,” and the town is also similarly decrepit, its “foul canal” running toward “rotting edges” that have become “silt clogged” (49). The poet wonders whether he should linger, and realizes that other people passing by are also stamping for home, “fearing those bulbs will hiss out in the dark” (49).

Lingering at ruins recalls a Romantic trope with which Walcott was familiar and which he would have wanted to emulate. In “Ozymandias” Shelley finds irony in nature’s victory over man’s false sense of immortality. “Look upon my works, ye Mighty and despair,” the great figure states, and we feel a sense of dramatic irony at the situation Shelley has created. The ancient king’s words aptly describe nature’s power to turn great human works into “remains, a colossal wreck” and we do indeed “despair” at ever gaining immortality, no matter what mighty works we leave behind. To evoke such “melancholy strains of loss and nostalgia [is]...so utterly essential to the Romantics,” (Drucker 2003) and the poet may indeed have felt a sense of victory upon delivering the desired somber effects. On a political level, Shelley’s “Ozymandias” was written as Britain began to establish itself as the dominant world power, and the poem represents an attempt to belie “the fresh hopes of new youth or the impetus of empire” (Drucker 2003). Yet the poet is unaffected when he leaves the sand do its work. Shelley’s first-person speaker only appears in the beginning of the poem; the poem never becomes about a personal crisis. Rather, the poet, like a detached philosopher or scientist, appears to examine an issue, and once the examination is completed, his presence is no longer required for the poem’s final claim to resound. The sands that “stretch far and away” will never threaten him.



Walcott's contemplation of ruins offers no ironic resignation. For him, observing the ruins of an empire as it falls apart ignites a sense of urgency and real dread as he and his people are left behind. Witnessing ravenous nature triumph over human domestication, Walcott's speaker dreads the extinguishing of the last electric lights, bringing about total darkness and negating all that was achieved by the civilization. The poet fears that remaining in the square might cause "the mind be swept of truths as by a broom" (*Collected Poems* 49).

Other representations of human achievement fair equally badly as the poet's examination of ruins begins to represent his search for spiritual shelter. In the often-cited "Tales of the Islands," the poet-speaker considers reaching out to religion as a source of stability and durable strength. Standing before a stone cathedral, he finds that the church, too, is being reclaimed by nature as it "echoes like a well / Or as a sunken sea-cave, carved, in sand" (*Collected Poems* 22). Ironically, the closest he comes to sensing the power of religion as a source of comfort is in the appearance of Miss Rossignol, a former prostitute, who "had white skin / And underneath it, fine, old-fashioned bones" (23) and whose "flesh knew silk / coursing green estate in gilded coaches." Now he finds her walking about on "stilted legs," wrapped "in a black shawl harnessed by rusty brooches" (23). Having lost her one child, she has become "a tattered saint" (23).

The natural landscape Walcott depicts exerts a great deal of pressure on him to depart. He surveys the seascape in "Prelude" from his "prone island," as he would do often in his first four books. The steamers that coast past the islands "prove / Us lost" (*Collected Poems* 3), confirming his sense of marginality and his distance from what he later calls "the white world of men" (3). The islanders do not exist to themselves, and

only seem to be alive to the tourists viewing them from “behind ardent binoculars” (3). The islanders can only see their existence depicted in tourist books or reflected in “the blue reflection of eyes” (3). The European visitors, though they are people “who have known cities,” are superficial, and it is their superficiality that makes them think “us here happy” (3). These reflections begin to fill the poet-speaker with intimations of exile. In “The Harbour” he assures the poem’s addressee that they should not listen out for “secret faring forth” (*Collected Poems* 7) because journeying is impossible. The fishermen he watches cannot discern “the stillness through which they move” (7) suggesting that movement in or even away from the islands is futile.

The poet realizes that the deteriorating effects the setting has on his mind are not new. The fountain’s “hoarse throat” and “failing arch” have conveyed to him a sense of “growing fear” since childhood, and now fill him with melancholy. We have to turn to another poem to find the source of the young Walcott’s anguish. In “A Far Cry from Africa,” the speaker begins the poem with scenes of violence from the Kenyan war of liberation, where a “white child is hacked in bed” and the native “savages” are “expendable as Jews” (*Collected Poems* 7). The mutual brutality of this violence alienates the poet from belonging to the colonizers and their African adversaries. The speaker considers this battle, in which “the gorilla wrestles with the superman” and “brutish necessity wipes its hands / Upon the napkin of a dirty cause,” and decides that it is “A waste of our compassion” (7). He can neither side with the rebels nor with the colonials to whose culture he feels a deep kinship. What follows are some of Walcott’s most quoted and best remembered lines:

I who am poisoned with the blood of both,  
Where shall I turn, divided to the vein?

I who have cursed  
The drunken officer of British rule, how choose  
Between this Africa and the English tongue I love?  
Betray them both, or give back what they give?  
How can I face such slaughter and be cool?  
How can I turn from Africa and live? (*Collected Poems* 8)

The speaker's racial ambiguity causes him to feel fevered paralysis. Clearly the poet cannot side with Africa and its brutal fighting methods, nor can he support the drunken British officer; if he chose between them, he would lose either the English language he loves or the life that Africa has given him. He is most true to himself in the refusal to be a loyal colonial or an African nationalist, but in that truth he finds himself alone and exiled.

The above is ostensibly the reading most critics have accepted, having understood the poet's description of "divided to the vein" as divided equally. Yet as he sets himself on the line "between this Africa and the English language I love," the poet gives no qualification to Africa, while he declares his love for the English language specifically. Earlier he states that he has cursed English "rule," a word choice that expresses order and civilization as well as tyranny. Regarding Africa, on the other hand, the attribution is clear and unambiguous. The Mau Mau action that provoked this poem was unmitigated "slaughter." In postcolonial circles the poem has been cited as a classic articulation of the state of in-betweenness in which postcolonial writers find themselves trapped (see McWatt; Dathorne). But the liminal state described does not seem to take into account the fact that the poet is caught between something he loves and to which he cannot belong, and something that he detests but cannot abandon. Thus, "A Far Cry from Africa" is almost unabashedly solicitous of an audience sympathetic to an obviously talented, racially mixed poet with intimations of greatness who wants to make it in the world of English poetry. The poem is not about the totality of British rule or the violence

of anti-colonial resistance, it is about how it has impacted the young poet negatively, how his mixed racial inheritance has made him unhappy. He is cursed, unable to find his way. Hybridity is getting in the way of his personal fulfillment.

The poem “Origins” supports this interpretation of Walcott’s view of his double, conflicted inheritance. Positioning himself between the two parts of his racial heritage, the poet writes,

Between the Greek and African Pantheon,  
Lost Animist, I rechristened trees:  
Caduceus of Hermes: the constrictor round the mangrove.  
Darade, their golden, mythological dolphin  
Leapt, flaking light, as once for Arion,  
For the broken archipelago of wave-browed gods  
Now, the sibyl I honour, mother of memory,  
Bears in her black hand a white frangipani, with berries of blood  
She gibbers with the cries  
Of the Guinean odyssey (*Collected Poems* 12)

In this passage, the gods of the Greek pantheon assume a regal or magical bearing: Derade is “golden,” leaping and flaking light. Hermes, though a “constrictor,” is granted ontological autonomy by being specifically named and located. They speak through their actions, and more importantly, through their given names. The African “mother of memory” who the poet honors is nameless, however, and proffers sinister “berries of blood.” The blood is possibly a reference to the violence of the Middle Passage, or her Guinean odyssey. Instead of telling the story of her journey, she merely “gibbers” it. The poet ends the stanza with that image and she is no longer mentioned. Later in the poem, having “washed out with salt the sweet faded, savour of [the] rivers” of Africa, the poet directs his soul to turn from

her long interior rivers, their somnolence, brown studies...  
their old Egyptian sickness...their rage of funeral pyres of  
children’s flesh, their sinuousness that shaped the original sin.” (*Collected Poems*

15)

Not only is Africa a place of disease, somnolence, and cannibalism, but it becomes associated, as was argued by generations of colonizers, with original sin.

None of these negative views of Africa compel the poet to rush into the arms of his white ancestry. Unlike many of his contemporaries who hit the open road to exile, Walcott was not ready to take such a leap. In the last sonnet of the “Tales of the Islands” sequence, we find the poet on an airplane watching the landscape “till the plane / Turned to the final north” and all he “loved folded in cloud” (*Collected Poems* 27). He observes from the sky the limitations of his island home; its road appears to him “as small and casual as twine / Thrown on its mountains” (27). As the plane moves away from all he loved, he observes that fidelity is beginning to strain, and that the distance stretching between him and his home “would” eventually “snap it” (27). This realization brings oblivion—“I thought of nothing,” he says. The only event that would redeem the place would be that the “nothing” on the island, “would not change” (27). Our young poet wants to eat his exilic cake and have it, too. He wants to leave his place of nothing, and wants, as he anticipates a return, this vacuous place to remain the same, thus saving himself from the inevitable pain of displacement upon a return to familiar grounds that no longer belong to him.

Walcott declares his journey, or “progress outward,” visible for all to see. He will make his passage through poetry, “braving new waters in an antique hoax” (*Collected Poems* 7). The poetic enterprise is a journey that sublimates his desire to abscond from his island and board one of the liners headed for colder Atlantic ports. Walcott felt that his greatest gift, his most valued inheritance, was his “sound colonial education,”

(*Collected Poems* 346) and it is upon this cornerstone that he intended to build his search. His challenge was to make use of his knowledge in the local setting. Intent on pursuing his poetic gift and following in the footsteps of his master poets, Walcott developed an approach to imitation that relies on reconciliation with the history of European colonialism.

The aforementioned poem, “Ruins of A Great House,” launches this reconciliation. “Ablaze with rage,” the poet thinks “some slave is rotting in this memorial lake” of the great house (*Collected Poems* 20). But the thought, which he calls “the coal of my compassion,” (20) is rebutted by the insight “that Albion too was once / a colony like ours... / nook-shotten, rook o’erblown, deranged / by foaming channels and the vain expanse” (20). We note that the source of this reconciliation emerges at a moment of linguistic fidelity. The poet’s rage is quieted by his admiration of the expressiveness of the English language. The use of the archaic “o’erblown” and the rich assonance and imagistic precision of “nook-shotten” demonstrate his love of the language. The poet is therefore compelled to forgive, and ends the poem stating “all in compassion ends” though “differently from what the heart arranged” (21). The Great House is forgiven “as if [it were] a manor of thy friends” (21). This line quotes the famous passage of Donne’s that begins “No man is an island,” suggesting that the English poets who gave Walcott the language he loves also dictate the terms upon which he phrases his forgiveness of their empire’s history of injury to his people.

Olaniyan argues that “powerlessness and imperial subordination prod the former colonial world to search for alternatives, either “violent, the total rejection through revolution” or “cunning, or conservative,” by which he means, “open assimilation of

what is considered from the metropolitan center to be most useful” (203). Walcott chooses the latter option because “a return to Africa is impossible, for we cannot return to what we have never been” (Walcott, *Conversations* 36). Furthermore, he combines his refusal to condemn the colonial with active appropriation of colonial culture. “I do not consider the English language to be the language of my masters. I consider language to be my birthright. It is mine to do what other poets before me did, which is to fuse the noble and the common” (*Conversations* 82), Walcott says, reflecting on his apprenticeship years. As a youth he began with a determination to make poetry “legitimately prolonging the mighty lines of Marlowe and Milton”—the lines being both prosodic and genealogical (Brown, “The Apprentice”15). Edward Baugh suggests Walcott went to “school on the masters” (Baugh, “Centering” 157), learning to copy their styles as directly as possible. His apprenticeship takes on a heroic quality, positioning him as the forger of a new tradition, albeit one that places him and his people on the margins of civilized society.

Walcott decided to stay in the Caribbean, having not been granted a scholarship to an English University, and doubtful about his prospects in England. After high school he left his native St. Lucia to earn a degree at the University of the West Indies in Jamaica. He then moved to Port of Spain, the capital of Trinidad and Tobago, feeling that it had the potential to be a Caribbean metropolis. These journeys add up to a partial flight, variations on a landscape, which, as we will see later, he decides is a constellation of ruins. Walcott decides to stay precisely because he viewed these sites of ruins, when seen from within, as his subject matter. Such a stance—and Walcott make no small effort to assert that it is a heroic sacrifice—would distinguish him. The main figures of Caribbean

literature at that time, V. S. Naipaul and Wilson Harris, had settled in England, and the imperial metropolis was filled with many other exilic contenders.

Early in his career Walcott was also intent on a career as dramatist, and he saw no chance for a Caribbean theater company in London. A trip to New York in 1957 convinced him it was impossible to export Caribbean theater; the plays could not be performed without his Caribbean company of actors (J. King 80). Yet, King continues, if “the playwright needed the Caribbean, the poet was continuously contending with that need and with a desire to leave” (J. King 83). In addition to being haunted by the steamers which divided the horizon, Walcott “was consciously trying to make a “‘Waste Land’ of the Caribbean” (Brown, “The Apprentice” 20). Walcott’s early meditations on ruins immerse him in the melancholic mood that prevailed in that era. Faced with the uncertainty surrounding the colonizer’s departure, and the underdeveloped national culture to which he belonged, Walcott did not flee to the metropolis. Seeking to raise workable existential models from the empire’s ashes, he called on two foundational figures and, wearing their personae, he searched his native landscape for a second beginning.

## 2. Journeys Inside the Mask: My Names Are Adam & Crusoe

In *The Castaways* and *The Gulf*, Walcott, having opted not to leave the Caribbean, travels his home turf. He adopts the persona of a castaway, modeled after Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe. Walcott asserts in a lecture given in 1965 that wearing such a mask was a necessity for West Indian poets like him, “the unhappy few” “who have elected to remain behind” in the West Indies (*Twilight* 33). We note Walcott’s ambivalence in his



word choice: he has “elected” to remain in the Caribbean, fully claiming agency, but he is certain the choice will result in unhappiness. How does Walcott turn this ambivalent posture into a positive force in his life and art? Such unhappiness and isolation, he explains, is an occupational hazard since poets by nature are “hermitic” (34). He offers an image of the poet as “a lonely man on a beach who has heaped a pile of dead bush to make a bonfire” (34). For the postcolonial poet, this bonfire, Walcott adds, “may be a metaphor of tradition and the colonial talent” (35). The poet burns his poems, burns all poems he has read in the past, and burns the past itself in order to make new poetry.

Having advanced Crusoe as his model, Walcott begins to articulate his idea of history as amnesia. For West Indian writers, he argues, history must become amnesiac if they wish to pursue a truly new and inventive literature (34). According to Walcott, West Indian writing fixated on history has produced “a literature of recrimination, a literature of revenge written by the descendents of slaves” (37). Driven by cynicism and melancholy, such literature offers no potential for “elation,” or for artistic revelation to transport the mind and imagination to an embrace of the future and the capacity for action (4). Tied to older cultures and a painful history, such writing offers the people of the West Indies no way out of their victimization, and only perpetuates it (12).

To break this cycle, Walcott needed to make a model of a figure forced to stay in the West Indies and make the best out of his exile, a model for which Crusoe was the obvious choice. Walcott acknowledges that the adoption of the Crusoe mask is a complex act of reconciliation, but in the fictional character’s predicament, Walcott finds the formula for the elation he seeks. Where there is nothing, there is everything to be made (Jones 33), he argued, urging his fellow Caribbean writers to follow his lead toward

historical amnesia, and to reach for the agency that exploration presents. Crusoe had nowhere to go, and tried to create a life in the wilderness. Inversely, Crusoe's experience, like that of Ulysses on Calypso's island, is characterized by longing and immobility, combining the desire for flight and the awareness of its impossibility.

If one follows the parable to its end, Crusoe's experiment never reaches its full potential, as we never see the end of his search for self-realization. Indeed, his departure and the rendition of his narrative depend on his rescue from the island. Leaving is only deferred, then, and the "everything" that one has to make is done in compensation, serving only as a temporary replacement for the real thing. To address this crack in his argument, Walcott advocates historical amnesia. His refashioned Crusoe will have to forget where he came from, and only if he does so will he re-discover the new place. Walcott argues that his Crusoe is like the Biblical Adam, who explores new land and has the privilege of giving things their names, and Crusoe can do this only if he has amnesia.

Walcott's poem "The Castaway" is among the first written in the guise of Crusoe. The speaker's "starved eye devours the landscape for the morsel / Of a sail" (*Collected Poems* 57). The speaker attempts to imagine himself sailing by following the "ribbed shadow of a palm" (57), and does not want to disrupt this reverie by walking, lest the image of his footprint confirm that he is still on the island. He contemplates his setting, and his eyes fall only on ruins, a dried leaf, and dog feces that "whiten like coral" under the island sun. The lack of action "breeds frenzy," (57) and the poet, while engaged in these insignificant actions, is visited with a revelation. "Godlike, annihilating godhead, art / And self, I abandon / Dead metaphors..." (58).

The poet seeks renewal, having become Godlike, abandoning art and his very self.

He continues by listing the dead metaphors he wishes to abandon. Though the poem presents a moment of resolve and the emergence of a new speaking position, it ends by surrendering itself to this list of dead metaphors: the brain rotting in the sun hatching “sea-lice, sandfly, and maggot,” (58) which effectively brings them to life. The sea sends him a green wine bottle, parts of a wrecked ship, and sea-wood bleached white “as a man’s hand” (58). These images recall the wreck of Crusoe’s ship, and Walcott’s poet-speaker resolves to abandon them, but by leaving the encounter without resolution, he stands overcome by the dismay that these vital metaphors cause him.

Walcott makes the Adamic enterprise of naming central to his mission under the Crusoe guise and explores it in three short poems. “Coral” provides a description of the grainy marine element, but is immediately compared to the shape of a lover’s “breast in my cupped palm” (*Collected Poems* 73). The description of the coral leads to meditation on the absence of the beloved, in which “Bodies in absence displace their weight / and your smooth body, like none other // Creates an exact absence like this stone” (73). Like Crusoe, even in the act of assuming a landscape and in the presence of things ready to be named Walcott is haunted by absence. “Tarpon” gives a more detailed description of a fish common to the warm waters of the Atlantic basin. When the poet first encounters it, “it is thudding the dead sand...thrashing with brute pain” (*Collected Poems* 61). The poet enters the scene and identifies with, or rather, appropriates, the death throes of the tarpon as “it slowly sought design / it shuddered in immense doubt / the old jaw, gibbering, divulged nothing...” (61). As the speaker’s son watches the fisherman strike the fish’s head, the poet feels no compulsion to shield the child from the violence since it is looking “simply at the one world we shared” (61). The following line, “Dead, examined in

detail,” ambiguously punctuated, seems to describe the world the poet shares with his child as well as the tarpon’s bulk, depicted in the succeeding line. The poet begins to celebrate the fish’s shape and color using the language of riches: the tarpon’s “scales [are] like coins...dense as frost glass etched by a diamond, the “triangular skull” “is ringing with gold.” However, he concludes the poem by seeing “terror and fury” in the fish’s complex shape, and wonders why “imagination sent” him in that direction.

Walcott provides a more elaborate example of his adaptation of the Crusoe mask in “Crusoe’s Island.” The poem begins with the image of sea grapes yielding to decay and becoming “Bronze plates to the metallic heat” (*Collected Poems* 68) in the West Indian sun. The air is hot, as if issued from a kiln, and produces “a child’s vision / Of hell,” becoming “nearer, nearer” (68). The sky domes the island, a temple “of our hedonist philosophy” (68). Meanwhile, the poet continues to “labour” at his art even though “My father, God is dead” (68). The poet, like Crusoe, must call upon self-love to fight being “swallowed by the blue / of heaven overhead / or rougher blue below” (69). He informs the reader, “Some lesion on the brain / From art or alcohol / Flashes this fear by day” (69). Crusoe, the poem continues, suffers from being in “heaven without his kind / Crazy by paradisal calm” (69). He is “craftsman and castaway” (69), who feels deprived for lack of human love; his brain is like a “rotting nut, bowled by the surf” (69). Similarly, the poet feels his “mind / like bread, disintegrates in water” (70). The stress and pressure of life in the West Indies have given him hallucinations. The poet envisions his “son’s head / Swaddled in sheets / Like a lopped nut, lolling in foam” (70), the same image he used to describe Crusoe’s head.

The vision of his son's head swaddled and lopped like a nut launches the poet into a self-pitying soliloquy that echoes the last stanza of Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach." "O love, we die alone" (*Collected Poems* 70), he begins, decrying his intractable solitude. The sound of a bell sends him back to childhood, to the people in his congregation God took away "As he gathered my father" (71). Irresolute, yet proud, "he vows not to go back" (71), as he has lost faith in religion and its vision of the afterlife, as well as in "human will," having realized that "My skill / is not enough" (71). Thus, he has nowhere to go—"Crazed by a racking sun / I stand at my life's noon, / On parched, delirious sand / My shadow lengthens" (71). The poet complains of middle age under the merciless sun, on parched sand that causes only rot. He sees his shadow lengthen, announcing the beginning of his end, having still not done much with his life.

In the last stanza the poet notices a group of girls playing on the beach. They are "Friday's progeny, / The brood of Crusoe's slave" (*Collected Poems* 72). In his essay on Crusoe, Walcott overlooks the fraught relationship between Friday and Crusoe. None of his tacit defense of Crusoe is present in this poem; rather, we find disgust expressed in the animalization of the girls as a brood, and in Friday's description as Crusoe's slave. The girls are enjoying "their air of glory" unaware of the sea that hisses at their feet. When they head to church at dusk, guided by the tolling of a church bell, they become a rainbow of seraphs and angels dressed in pink organdy and crinolines. The poet is touched by their aspect, and by the power of their faith, and he confirms their humanity, and indeed their power to transcend assumed animalism and centuries of slavery. But it is too late for the poet to be part of their world. "Nothing I can learn / From art or loneliness / Can bless them" (72) as the church bell, which transfigures them, could.

At this point Walcott vacillates between two powerful states of mind: engagement with art, and irreparable loneliness. On the surface, the last passage suggests that the poet cannot bless his people as religious ritual and symbols can through his self-examination or with what he gleans from art. This thought may be attributable to any modern artist pursuing redemption through humanism. But these are particular girls, Friday's progeny, and the poet's inability to bless them has to do with the place from which he and they emerge, or with his relation with it. Walcott suggests that art in the West Indies does not have the power to transfigure the region's inhabitants. This realization only fuels his already growing sense of non-belonging as a solitary artist in a place that has no inclination or capacity to celebrate him. Toward the end of his Crusoe phase, Walcott discovers that "the release hoped for" (Jones 40) in renaming the islands was not achieved. Toward the late 1960s we find "poet and castaway are isolated in their self-built Eden" (Jones 41), yearning.

With the rise of Black nationalist sentiment in the West Indies, and as his racial ambivalence and allegiance to Western high culture were becoming suspect, Walcott began to feel he was out of place in Trinidad, and in the West Indies in general. In "Codicil," the poet declares that he once thought "love of country was enough" (*Collected Poems* 97), indicating that it no longer suffices to energize his mission. The reason he gives for this lag in energy is that "even if I chose, there's no room at the trough" (97). Too many people claim love of country; too many "root," and there is no longer room for him. Interestingly, Walcott uses the metaphor of a seafaring vessel for "the country," an ark taking its people to their self-willed destiny. The notion of a ship of state is familiar enough, but the choice of this metaphor hits several registers as it evokes

the Middle Passage, the journey back to Africa, and the ships that for a few decades sent thousands of migrants from the Caribbean to a second exile in England or elsewhere—for the people of the West Indies, the return to Africa would be banishment. Like Fanon, Walcott argued that the people should root themselves in the land they live on, and that what they needed was a sense of home, not continuous displacement, even if it were only metaphorical.

Ultimately, Walcott's Adamic Crusoe-inspired naming project proved problematic in two ways. First, Walcott's mission did not rise from organic cultural needs and necessities. In his later work, Walcott notes that West Indians named the islands' birds and plants, and were developing a regional lexicon based on their interaction with nature and with each other. There was no organic need for a great man, a father figure, to undertake such a heroic effort. Furthermore, as Dove notes, the Adamic mission is itself a Western import that assumes the islands and their people are a *tabula rasa* ready to inscribe (57). It did not help that in Walcott's own attempts at naming, he tended to "resort to Western canon and mythology" (De Mel 35), from which a great many West Indians felt alienated, while he refused to "recognize what African traditions and languages that did survive" (35) since slavery as useful implements of culture. Attempting to transcend dead metaphors and create new ones, Walcott travels his island and finds it a combination of ruins and wilderness: one beyond bringing back to life, the other untamable; his journey is either impossible or endless. As Walcott puts aside the Crusoe mask and tables the Adamic mission, he turns his attention inward, to examination of his own life, and a long pause to take stock is necessary for the self to recover from its roving.

### 3. Sad Boast: The End of the Beginning

In January of 1971, Derek Walcott headed to Jamaica to speak at the Association of Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies Conference. The conference program included panels titled “Literature and the Folk” and “African Literature and the Oral Tradition.” During one panel in which he spoke, V. S. Naipaul met a hostile audience of black militants. Walcott’s friends tipped him off that some participants were intent on giving him an equally hostile reception. Walcott decided to forego allowing his critics such an opportunity and “excused himself at the last minute” (B. King, *Walcott* 263).

The late 1960s saw increasingly radicalized Black nationalist activism in the Caribbean. At the time parts of the Trinidad and Tobago army were sympathetic to the movement. In April of 1970 the government, falling apart from internal jostling, declared a state of emergency because of the racial tensions, establishing curfews and police patrols. At about the same time, a rebellion was taking place within The Theatre Workshop, which Walcott had founded and directed in Port of Spain. A leading member of the Workshop, Slade Hopkinson, who sympathized with the Black nationalists, accused Walcott of financial mismanagement and dictatorial leadership. Other members of the Workshop supported Hopkinson’s charges. Walcott had directed the workshop with a firm hand, rewarding those who adhered to his program, and chastising and bullying those who differed with him (B. King, *Walcott* 256-258). Outraged by charges leveled at him during the meeting, Walcott resigned. King reports that Walcott was at a psychological and political crossroads. While his poetry seemed to linger on ruins, contemplating the doubtful potential of the West Indies, Walcott’s work with the theatre,



as playwright, director, and group manager, engaged him positively with the culture of the West Indies. The mood in the West Indies has changed, however, and Walcott saw no way to go on making a living there.

A few weeks after the volatile Workshop meeting, Walcott headed to New York to oversee a performance of his play “Dream on Monkey Mountain.” In an ironic twist, the play was performed by The Negro Ensemble Company. In the play, after a long struggle with his blackness the main character, Makak, kills his white muse, who had long preoccupied his dreams. Purged of her, he returns home from the mountain, and begins to accept himself for what he is, filled with hope and appreciation for his island and its people. The Negro Ensemble’s interpretation of the play focused on Makak’s murder of his white muse, delineating his symbolic violence as an embrace of violence against whites. The play’s poster was emblazoned with the black fist of the Black Panthers (B. King, *Walcott* 269).

Walcott’s emphasis on doing without history did not resonate with The Negro Ensemble, who saw in the play a call for evening the score with white violence. Walcott was ambivalent about the play’s success; he needed the exposure and the work it brought him, and so was reluctant to tamper with the Ensemble’s interpretation. In a conference at Columbia University a few months later, Walcott read an early version of his essay “The Muse of History,” providing a corrective measure to the way his play was presented. He reiterated his argument that the people of the New World must begin to approach history with amnesia in order to have a new start. The self-investigation that Makak undergoes in *Dream on Monkey Mountain* is necessary for all people of the New World to recognize that their desires for self-fulfillment are diametrically opposed to their wishes to take

revenge upon their historical victimizers. Thus, New World selfhood must be based on the tension between a positive outlook and a need to forget the past, and it is within this tension that New World art is to be produced (Walcott, *Twilight* 18).

Walcott eventually returned to direct the Workshop though the rebellion, and what he felt to be a betrayal had rattled him. Hostility toward his artistic vision and difficulties making a reasonable living in the West Indies stood in stark opposition to the lure of opportunities in the United States. With increased international exposure and its inevitable burden of representation, along with the potential for misinterpretation, Walcott became increasingly aware of the poet persona he was projecting from the world stage. He needed to find a way of speaking, or rather, a persona that would allow him to speak all of his ambivalences. He was proud of his provincialism and attachment to the Caribbean, and hoped to remain relevant in his cultural milieu (Hamner 44). Coming and going to and from the metropolis, he realized he had yet to find a place there. Over the years of visiting the great capitals of the English language, he writes that he “would learn”

that every tribe hoards its culture as fiercely as its prejudices,  
that English literature, even in the theatre, was hallowed ground  
and trespass, that colonial literatures could grow to resemble it  
closely but could never be considered its legitimate heir.... (*Twilight* 28)

Walcott wrote this in 1970, seven years after he had been added to the rosters of Jonathan Cape and Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux. King reports that Walcott had excellent contacts with American poets, and was championed by Robert Lowell, the dean of American poetry in the sixties and seventies, and the first American poet to discover him. Walcott’s contacts in London were less strong, and his lack of enthusiasm for the old capital stood in stark contrast to his by then regular visits to New York. It seems Walcott is targeting

London when he refers to tribal defense of literary traditions and the colonial's inability to make in-roads to them. As far as the mother country was concerned, categories such as colonial and Commonwealth literature were mere "filial and tributary" branches of an unsullied canon.

In the US such concepts did not have as much influence, as the intelligentsia saw racial matters from within the nation's own history of racial oppression and discrimination, and groups such The Negro Ensemble Company also embraced Walcott. These varied contingents only partially understood the complexity of Walcott's ideas and esthetics. What was needed was a body of work that anticipated multiple audiences, and could outline his distinct and layered perspective on both his personal experience and the postcolonial experience at large.

In the early seventies that voice was not ready. Walcott needed to prepare for his departure from the Caribbean before assuming the role of international poet. Walcott's most important work of the early- to mid-seventies is doubtless the book-length poem *Another Life*, a work that arose from the poet's need to take stock of his life's journey and his place within his culture. In *Another Life*, Walcott emphasizes the purity of his literary aims, the hard work and sacrifices made, and the poem allows him to vindicate himself and castigate his adversaries. With this volume Walcott ends his career as a conventional, national artist who attempted to live within the parameters expected of a postcolonial poet, staying home and working toward the ideals and aspirations his society set for its intellectuals, within the limits of its capacities.

Two of Walcott's major critics, Baugh and Hamner, argue that *Another Life* is the poet's masterpiece, at least of the first half of his career. Yet, as much as *Another Life* can

be read as a love song for the Caribbean, it is a chronicle of disappointment. As a work that can be compared to Wordsworth's *Prelude* and Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as A Young Man*, the poem installs Walcott within the Western tradition, an accord of the growth of an artist's imagination and his struggles in a turbulent historical epoch. Yet whereas Wordsworth contentedly finishes off his poem "In beauty exalted, as it is itself / Of substance and of fabric more divine" (482), and Joyce, also a postcolonial, leaps out of his portrait with exhilaration—"Welcome, O life! I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race" (276)—, Walcott's poem ends on a wistful, reminiscent note. He and Gregorias "were the light of the world" (*Collected Poems* 294), and there is no promise that that light will ever gleam again.

Art, as Walcott has argued elsewhere, emerges from a power beyond itself (*Conversations* 23). It was art that gave him a way to see the beauty of the West Indian landscape, the act of mimesis filling him with love for it. Before devoting his life to art, he writes that he and Gregorias were "Victoria's orphans," "orphans of the nineteenth century...[who] lived by another light" (*Collected Poems* 219). In "that other light" he feels he was "a houseboy" in "the house of literature" (219). The world he lived in, established by the colonizers, was inhospitable; only "in the deep country" where the colonial influence was invisible did he find a reflection of himself as a "natural man, / generous rooted" (*Collected Poems* 184). The poet tells us that he "yearned for that other life" (184), when "a clear tongue was spoken" (184) and his ancestry surrounded him. The discovery of art ended this limbo of perpetual non-belonging. The poet "fell in love with art, / and life began" (186). The new life brought with it responsibility fired with

exhilaration. Our poet and his friend Gregorias swore

that we would never leave the island  
until we had put down in paint, in words...  
all its sunken, leaf choked ravines,  
every neglected, self-pitying inlet...(194)

It allowed the poet and his friend to appropriate their place of birth “as conquerors who had discovered home” (195). The claim for art’s intrinsic value and recuperative powers resounds throughout the book, and provides a relevant counter-argument to the inclination within postcolonial cultures to politicize art into a useful tool to use to gain a greater share of power within generally powerless nations. In this regard, *Another Life*’s most significant contribution occurs in Chapter 3, where Walcott provides portraits of local figures, chronologically ordered from A to Z, standing in for Greco-Roman gods and legends. The West Indies, he suggests, have ample stories of people whose experiences show the full range of human potential as well as mythical resonances.

Other than its pursuit of his earlier “Adamic project,” *Another Life*’s major feature is the tension between epic intent and lyric execution. As Paul Breslin argued, the poem “suffers from the thinness of incidence” (Breslin, “History” 197). The sense of disappointment that is the central theme of the latter half of the poem is not highlighted as a major issue in the beginning. For most of the poem, we are exposed to Walcott’s lyricism and verbal virtuosity, but without a focus gathering these elements. We encounter, for example, the following passage:

as the sea’s huge eye stuns you  
with the lumbering, oblique blow  
of it weary, pelagic eyelid  
its jaw ruminates  
on the lighthouse needle signals  
like a stuttering compass  
north north by northwest north

and your hair roars like an oven  
and a cloud passes  
till the landscape settles on  
a horizon humming with balance  
and like a tired sitter  
the world shifts its weight (*Collected Poems* 198)

The phenomena occurring before us, with a great deal of pathetic fallacy employed to render it, seems an important event for the speaker. Had the above passage been a single short poem, we would read it as an intense, concisely described event. Its seismic impact on his inner life would resound because of the brevity and precision of the poem. In *Another Life* there are so many of these intense moments that they make it difficult to respond, obscuring any broader vision of the poet-speaker's life.

King tells us that *Another Life* began to take shape as a prose memoir, and that Walcott worked on it for years with that intention (*Walcott* 302). The lyricism in Walcott's essays gives his prose an exceptional quality. "What the Twilight Says," for example, is a superb essay precisely because of its restraint from breaking into verse. In it Walcott manages to utilize that urge trenchantly to keep the focus on the themes at hand. In *Another Life*, the prose narrative and structural focus created by adherence to a sequential thread lose out to the lyric, so that by the time we reach the narrative of Harry's death, we feel a great burden lifted. There the digressive, lyrical riffing finds its locus, and Harry's death becomes the poem's central event, Walcott's mentor becoming a heroic victim. Walcott does as much as acknowledge that this event gave the poem its purpose. Addressing Harry the speaker says:

Forgive me, if this sketch should ever thrive  
or profit from your gentle, generous spirit.  
When I began this work, you were alive,  
and with one stroke, you have completed it. (*Collected Poems* 282)

Harry's death is important to our analysis in ways that go beyond the poem itself. As mentioned earlier, Walcott had been at a crossroads politically and esthetically. The conflict with the Black nationalists had boiled over into rebellion in his Workshop, and despite his years of committed cultural work he was seen as allied with the powers that had damaged the people and societies of the West Indies. With Harry's death and Gregorias's decline and subsequent suicide attempt, along with his own profound anguish, Walcott had his own wounds to display. Quoting Naipaul in *Another Life*, he states that the West Indies have become a culture "which denied itself heroes" (*Collected Poems* 272). As such, once *Another Life* takes up the story of Harry's death, the poem gains momentum, with Walcott launching into invective against his adversaries for their corruption and close-mindedness. Taking his cue from Dante, he draws a circle of hell in which he encloses

all o' dem big boys, so, dem ministers  
ministers of culture, ministers of development,  
the green blacks, and their old tom,  
and all the syntactical apologists of the Third World  
explaining why their artists die  
by their own hands, magicians of the New Vision.  
Screaming the same shit.  
Those who peel from their own leprous flesh, their names,  
who chafe and nurture the scars of rusted chains,  
like primates favouring scabs, those who charge tickets  
for another ride on the middle passage....(*Collected Poems* 269)

Walcott indicts two of his adversary groups, the Black nationalists and the politicians who want to remain in power no matter which way the ideological winds blow. They are the big boys, the ministers of culture and development. Egging them on and jostling with them for power are the ideologues "who chafe and nurture the scars of rusted chains." Walcott places the blame for his mentor's suicide squarely on the heads of these figures

he disdains. Walcott's curse, which is only fifty-two lines long, is given the designation of a separate chapter in *Another Life*, delineating its significance as one of the poem's main functions.

With this indictment as backbone, *Another Life* ends on a perverse boast, the poet castigating his foes to bolster his nobility and heroism. Walcott is well aware that this kind of boast does not provide sufficient self-justification, or what Bakhtin calls alibi. He argued at length for the purity of his and Gregorias's mission, and about how an unenlightened cultural setting undermined that project. But there, too, he is dwelling on the negative, and the more he praises the purity of his dream, the more it becomes necessary to know what the poet values and what sustains him. Toward the end of the poem, the poet declares, "I have swallowed all my hates" (*Collected Poems* 282), and expresses his gratitude for his family, especially his wife, "in whose side" he returns for solace "when I cannot see light from the deep leaves" (282).

*Another Life's* emphasis on art and the elaborate forms it takes, with displays of the poet's prosodic virtuosity, tonal variety, and rhetorical and lyrical density, enacts a sad and angry boast. Demonstrating commitment to high culture and sounding a refusal of nativism both in content and form, *Another Life* is both an elegy and an acknowledgement of defeat. Walcott ends the poem by asking the islands' forgiveness for "our desertions" (*Collected Poems* 293), though at the time *Another Life* was published his desertion had not taken place. The poem does not mention for what Walcott is deserting the West Indies, nor what speaking position he would assume from then on. He was ready to leave, but he needed the kind of resolve that would transform his angry invective into a broader, less personal, more convincing critique of Caribbean culture and



politics. It was not long before Walcott was to present Shabine, speaker of the poem “The Schooner *Flight*,” to begin the second phase of his career.

## B. REBELLION: MORE NATIVE THAN THOU

Up to this point only two conventional frameworks, comprador bourgeois and black radicalism, had been available to Walcott to frame his cultural production. He milked the former of all it had to offer, distinguishing himself with a lyricism borne of postcolonial melancholy and disillusionment. He refused the latter because it refused him. Where does the poet go when he no longer fits in his society? What becomes of his subject matter? How can he respond to his culture and create a space for himself that will allow him to speak his mind and help direct his culture in a way that would leave room for the likes of him?

Walcott maintains the Caribbean as his primary subject matter even as his departure from the islands is imminent. By the mid-1970s he had drifted from the local limelight, decreasing his output of dramatic productions and journalism. His challenge was to fight with poetry for his piece of home ground and not to drift into exile, however much more lucrative it proved to be. If the argument against him was that he was not Caribbean enough, he was determined, before leaving the islands, to show his detractors that he was fit to express the national experience.

As noted, the political struggles between racial and economic groups had spilled into the cultural arena. In the world of letters the struggle manifested itself in the issue of language, and from there spread to the relationship to the literature of the colonizer. Walcott's poem "The Spoiler's Return" provides an opportunity to examine his contribution to this debate in a complex way that undermines both nativist and neocolonial claims for hegemony. The poem departs from both oral and literary

traditions, but it is indebted to both. A dramatic monologue in the voice of the Mighty Spoiler, a classic calypsonian from the 1950s, who speaks the poem from Hell, it is a calypso composition and a Roman and English Augustan satire. Set up in this manner, we might expect an echo of Walcott's earlier claim that he is "divided to the vein." Instead, we encounter a hybridizer slicing multiple traditions so finely and reassembling them in such close proximity that it is impossible to parse them, even as we can see the poet's effort to weld them together. Walcott uses several modes and registers, exemplifying the diverse linguistic and social structures of the Caribbean region, making it difficult to distinguish the oral from the written, the formal from the colloquial, even the ancient from the contemporary.

Discussions of the use of colloquial speech and code-switching in Caribbean literature have focused mainly on the work of such poets as Louise Bennett and Kamau Braithwaite, whose work incorporates oral elements in obvious ways and whose aims for a national language stand in contrast to Walcott's more formal, canon-based approach. Walcott's work in "Spoiler" encroaches on a nationalistic poetics using the formal techniques and vocal register of one of the region's most recognized native spokesmen.

The shark, racing the shadow the shark  
across clear coral rock, does make them dark—  
that is my premonition of the scene  
of what passing over this Caribbean.  
Is crab climbing crab-back, in a crab quarrel,  
and going round and round in the same barrel,  
is sharks with shirt-jacs, sharks with well-press fins,  
ripping we small-fry off with razor grins;  
nothing aint change but colour and attire,  
so back me up, Old Brigade of Satire,  
back me up, Martial Juvenal, and Pope  
(to hang theirselves I giving plenty rope),  
join Spoiler chorus, sing the song with me,  
Lord Rochester, who praised the humble flea. (*Collected Poems* 433)

The passage goes on to quote Lord Rochester's poem "A Satyr against Reason and Mankind." Crossing illusory linguistic and social fault lines, Walcott's approach encompasses a broad and layered discursive sweep. The passage begins with a packed simile in standard English, full of alliteration, and then breaks into Caribbean vernacular. High language exemplified by "premonition of the scene" gives way to "crab climbing crab-back, in a crab quarrel," a simile fitting the islands' reliance on the sea and the observation of its creatures.

Walcott appears to have exposed all his sleights of hand here, but in fact he leaves much that requires double reading. As we hear the poet speaking in calypso, we also hear the calypsonian trying to speak in the poet's mode. Walcott adopts the local style of speech and shows his mastery of it, demonstrating that the reverse is also possible—that one of the ambitions of local speech could be to adopt his literary manner. Indeed, Spoiler can quote Lord Rochester in passing and have his poem enfold the white master's work, utilizing it for his own purposes, a move reminiscent of Tagore's approach to Kalidasa's *Meghaduta*. A second look at the poem shows that Walcott actually fused lines from Rochester's poem with lines from the song "Bedbug" by the Mighty Spoiler, the persona upon whom the poem's speaker is based.

The Spoiler's mask is flexible enough to seem independent of the face beneath it, and Walcott is keen at times to remove the mask between lines to reveal a persona closely related to his own. One of the poem's most quotable couplets refers to a V. S. Nightfall, a play on Naipaul's pessimism and denigration of the Caribbean. Spoiler finds some truth in the novelist's claims: "I see these islands and I feel to bawl, / 'area of darkness' with V. S. Nightfall" (433). The humorous reference to Naipaul and one of his most negative

books, about his ancestral India, is not in the provenance of the calypsonian, but it is not beyond such a persona to make it—a calypsonian’s rhetoric relies on folk references as well as high-art allusions, depending on the point made. “Area of darkness” refers to Naipaul’s repeated declamation that the blacks of the Caribbean will amount to nothing. That someone as pessimistic as Naipaul would cry out “area of darkness,” when he himself is nightfall is laughable, and scores a folksy point for Walcott. Still, the Spoiler feels “to bawl” with Nightfall, but does not join him. Walcott’s Spoiler proceeds in calypsonian fashion with a great many inside jokes familiar only to natives of the region, and some only to Trinidadians. Such specificity locates Walcott in the midst of the cultural and political moment in language, form, and content.

Walcott’s most important poem of the mid-1970s, “The Schooner *Flight*,” is a more somber and ambitious project than “The Spoiler’s Return,” but it also relies on Walcott’s adoption of a local persona who speaks in a mixture of linguistic registers. Here Walcott carves out a place for himself outside of convention, the margin providing ample space for his self-justification to expand as far as his capacity to make metaphor of it. “The Schooner *Flight*” is a long dramatic monologue in the voice of Shabine, “a red nigger who love the sea” (Walcott, *Collected Poems* 345). Shabine’s leave-taking of Trinidad begins with the invocation “out of corruption my soul takes wing” (345). His enemies are varied and united against him:

They had started to poison my soul  
with their big house, big car, big-time bohbohl,  
coolie, nigger, Syrian, and French Creole,  
so I leave it for them and their carnival—  
I taking a sea-bath, I gone down the road (346)

Shabine's mixed racial background allows Walcott to infuse the persona with his autobiographical experiences, creating a fictionalized self who comes from the bottom rungs of society, who has a wife, mistress, and children, and particular dreams and desires. As Baugh suggests, Walcott is a poet who is compelled to put his life into his poems (Baugh, "Fiction" 311-312). Shabine, we learn, is also a Methodist, the same faith Walcott was raised in, and the church described in the poem brings to mind Walcott's childhood experience (Baugh, "Fiction" 313). Such autobiographical intervention is typical of Walcott. In the book-length poem *Omeros*, long after we have begun to anticipate a third-person narrative Walcott, or a speaker very much like him, enters the poem and becomes a major protagonist.

Walcott's persona in "The Schooner *Flight*" rings with populist overtones. Shabine's name is patois for "red nigger," making him an everyman rather than an individual. To further complicate things, Walcott writes that Shabine is an alias; it is a name based on racial categories, given him by the taxi driver who delivers him to his final departure. The different uses of the alias generate a multiplicity of selves, or masks. There is Shabine the realized person, doubling for Walcott, Shabine, the pseudonym of someone who keeps his real name hidden, and Shabine the everyman. These layered selves are central to the poem, and as the dramatic events of the poem unfold, Shabine is engaged in reflection and deflection, creating a kaleidoscopic effect. Upon leaving the island he states: "and I look in the rearview and see a man / exactly like me, and the man was weeping / for the houses, the streets, that whole fucking island" (*Collected Poems* 345). As a rhetorical gesture, Shabine's reflection allows the poet to weep, thus both engaging in and undercutting the melodrama and sentimentality of the moment. For

Shabine, too, these moments of high emotion bring about a departure from his rough-textured self, for while they confirm such emotions, they also deflect from them with a suggestion of denial. The multiple selves in the poem allow Walcott to speak as the eloquent poet that he is, as an amateur laboring poet-sailor, and as the Caribbean everyman, each fictional self voicing a different register of thought, feeling, and experience.

Launching a new phase of Walcott's career, the Shabine stage begins where Walcott stood at the end of *Another Life*. Displaced and outraged by the racial politics of his region, he cannot find a niche among the entrenched racial divides. Pulling the rug out from under those who critique him for being affiliated with the literature of the colonizers, Walcott's Shabine speaks in authentic West Indian speech. He is not an esthete milling about ruins and pacing shores wistfully thinking about empire, but an impoverished, angry, working-class man, suggesting that Walcott, can, and indeed does, speak for the people and express their anguish. Like Walcott when we last saw him, Shabine is concerned about his poetry, and indeed, takes to the sea in order to write poetry. At the end of the poem, afloat on his exile, Shabine states, "I work, then I read" (*Collected Poems* 358). His work is writing poems. Indeed, having left the scene of strife, he adds that he has "no weapon but poetry" (358).

Featuring an important inversion of the conventional exilic lyric, "The Schooner *Flight*" offers the scene of departure as a moment of severance, full of rage rather than the melancholy that would indicate longing and affiliation. Shabine picked fights with his kin and apparently lost, having failed to gain status or recognition in his social setting. One of the first issues that Shabine raises with his native enemies is their wealth. Whether

“coolie, nigger, Syrian, [or] French Creole,” they are all well endowed with “their big house, big car, big-time bohbohl” (*Collected Poems* 346). Shabine’s main occupation is sailing, which is peripatetic at best, and his income is insufficient to guarantee him lawful and sustaining employment. He has had to survive by engaging in criminal activity, smuggling “Scotch for O’Hara,” a “big government man.” Eventually “that whole racket crash,” and a Commission of Inquiry was established by the government headed by O’Hara “himself as chairman investigating himself” (347).

Shabine’s purported departure is political: Port of Spain is corrupt; its leaders are using their racial affiliations to benefit themselves. He believes his people misguided and misinformed and quickly gives up his belief in revolution. He recalls a scene of revolt that ended as quickly as it began with “every one / with his own nimbus,” “their noise ceased as foam sinks into sand” (*Collected Poems* 351), when the sounds of riot police scared everyone away. Sardonicly, he imagines the only chance for a popular riot taking place in a movie house. There “in the 12:30 moves the projectors best / not break down, or you go see revolution,” the populace rising in rage if its pleasure in a spaghetti western is disrupted.

Shabine is a solitary, isolated rebel; the “corruption” he sees in his society and its people convinces him that reform and rehabilitation are impossible. Shabine’s displacement within his own culture, we learn, is fed by the racism practiced by all the well-defined racial groups (coolie, nigger, Syrian, and French Creole). Shabine, however, does not declare “racism” or even “prejudice” as his main accusation, nor does he claim to speak for other hybrids (or red niggers); he only asserts his own right to fair treatment, even if only within the code of honor of the thieves who employ him. While he is certain



that he is being mistreated because of his racial ambiguity, he prefers to accuse his enemies of the moral and financial corruption that enables them to abuse people like himself and defraud their own racial groups. Racism is not the genus of their corruption, but one of many tools used to maintain their powerful positions.

This is a new and important development in Walcott's work, since what distinguished his poetry before Shabine was his posing the racial question only as a source of personal anguish, and not in broader social terms. In "A Far Cry from Africa," as noted, the precocious poet decries his "being poisoned by the blood of both" Africa and England. King reports that at some point in the 1960s Walcott attempted to connect with his white ancestral relatives in England, but was rebuffed (B. King, *Walcott* 8). On several occasions Walcott "would ask himself whether he had Jewish blood...in the hope that he was less black" (B. King, *Walcott* 17). In a wistful note in *Another Life*, Walcott writes of his childhood self, "What else was he but a divided child" (*Collected Poems* 183). The sadness in such recognition suggests that his crisis over racial division still troubles him, and that though much had been built, in terms of personal achievement, the racial question remained a vibrant fault-line threatening to undermine the poet's sense of identity.

In "The Schooner *Flight*" Shabine confronts this anxiety directly:  
I met History once, but he ain't recognize me,  
a parchment Creole, with warts...  
I confront him and shout, "Sir, is Shabine!  
They say I'se your grandson. You remember grandma,  
your black cook, at all?" That bitch hawk and spat.  
A spit like that worth any number of words.  
But that's all them bastards have left us: words.

I no longer believed in revolution.  
I was losing faith in the love of my woman. (*Collected Poems* 350-351)

This passage contains many associative leaps that help us better understand Shabine and the sequence of events that lead to his rebellion. Shabine seeks his paternal ancestor(s), and is summarily rebuffed, his request not even dignified with words, but responded to with a contemptuous spit. This contemptuous, but still ambiguous, spit stands to Shabine as an inheritance of words he must decipher, and he in turn flexes his linguistic muscles to define his adversary. Barred access to patriarchal power, Shabine immediately calls his ancestor a “bitch,” enacting a similar emasculation. Likewise, because his grandfather leaves him genealogically ambiguous, Shabine summarily calls him “bastard.”

Words are important to Shabine; they are the tools he uses to disarm his adversaries, as above, and though they too are a questionable inheritance, it is through them that he must define himself. Before Shabine accepts words as his only inheritance, he considers other options, for it seems that the indignity flung at him would be seen as insult to the collective and would ignite group action. However, nothing of the kind takes place, and it is at this moment of personal humiliation that Shabine disavows his disbelief in revolution; the denial of ancestry and loss of hope in collective solidarity are also linked in the last two lines of the passage to the emergence of Shabine’s hostility toward his partner and toward women in general.

The crisis sparks a psychological tension keenly observed by Frantz Fanon in *Black Skins, White Masks*. “I will say that the black man is not a man” (8), Fanon writes, adding that “the colonial experience annihilates the colonial’s sense of self, seals him into a crushing objecthood, which is why he is not a man” (109). We can take Fanon’s definition of “man” to mean both “human being” and “male Homo sapiens.” The

postcolonial setting continues the framework of colonial racism, and the oedipal associations with skin color established in that system also continue. Fanon speaks of the black “man,” not black “men” as a whole, when addressing the link between colonial oppression and the emasculation of the colonized. This use of the singular rather than plural pronoun suggests that racism’s oedipal associations never quite rise to prominence as a public issue, though they are acutely felt on an individual basis. Shabine reacts accordingly and decides to make a solitary response.

Denouncing domesticity and the feminine as a response to the rejection of his ancestors, Shabine begins “losing faith in the love of my woman.” His departure takes place as his relations with the feminine reach a point of revulsion. We learned early on of his devotion to his wife and children, but we also learn that he left them for Maria Concepcion, a Dominican beauty. He attempts to leave her by, ironically, beginning to frequent brothel prostitutes. “I tried other women,” Shabine tells us, “but, once they stripped naked, their spiky cunts / bristled like sea-eggs and I couldn’t dive” (*Collected Poems* 350). He returns to Maria Concepcion, but he stops speaking of her beauty. When he leaves the island, he does not let her know of his departure.

The feminine also haunts Shabine’s dreams:

A next night I dreamed of three old women  
featureless as silkworms, stitching my fate,  
and I scream at them to come out of my house,  
and I try beating them away with a broom,  
but as they go out, so they crawl back again (*Collected Poems* 357)

The dream has Shakespearean and Classical echoes, with its three old witches pronouncing prophecies. Shabine’s three old women, faceless as worms, stitch his fate and try to claim their space within his life. Superficially, the dream would suggest that

within a domestic setting, Shabine himself would be domesticated, feminized through the performance of household chores such as sweeping. The broom also functions as phallus, an insufficient implement for warding off, or satisfying, the three featureless women who stand for his wife, Maria Concepcion and the prostitutes he frequented at one point. Shabine cannot bear this vision of impotence before insatiable female desire. Female sexuality, in his psyche, stands as “part of the natural forces which could be hostile to the poet” (Savory 250). Furthermore, the feminine cannot transcend its sexuality. Maria Concepcion looks in her Book of Dreams to find an interpretation of Shabine’s nightmare, but she is incapable of helping him. Soon afterward, his nerves “melt like a jellyfish—that was when [he] broke,” and he decides to ship out from the island.

While emblems of the feminine remain in Shabine’s life after his departure, these elements are under his control once he is at sea and in the company of men. As Shabine attempts to reconstruct his solitary life, we encounter natural images rendered in feminine imagery. In the foam caused by the schooner’s slicing through the water, he sees “the widening lace of her bridal train / with white gulls her bridesmaids” (*Collected Poems* 360). Images of ironing and stitching begin to articulate his vision of the relations between natural elements. These feminine aspects, Savory argues, are allowed into his personal elements “only as an extension of his imagination, with females as servants of his will and quiescent figures in his world” (Savory 251).

The repression of the feminine takes on a violent quality as Shabine establishes himself in the world of men. In fact, denigration of the feminine, reflecting male prejudices about women, begins to play an essential role in “establishing the close and important understanding relationship among men” (Savory 249). When Shabine is

assaulted by one of the big man's thugs, he ridicules his nemesis for being "a bitch that [was] so grand, / couldn't get off his high chair and kick me himself" (*Collected Poems* 348). Onboard ship Shabine's manhood is tested again when the ship's cook, "one bitch on board—like he had me mark" (354) starts ridiculing his poetry. He has snatched Shabine's book and is tossing it around in a game of catch with other crewmen. The cook is first called a bitch, but once we get close to the violent action, he becomes "this man" who "start mincing me like I was some *hen* / because of the poems" (355). Shabine's poems are full of his longing for his family, revealing his vulnerability, a side of himself that he fears will render him a "hen" in the eyes of other men. Shabine "beg[s]" the cook to return his book, but the cook "kept reading, 'O my children, my wife,' and playing he crying, to make the crew laugh" (355). Without further ado, Shabine's knife, "move like a flying fish...that catch him right in the plump of his calf" (355).

The phallic knife penetrating the plump of a calf sexualizes the violence between men. Manhood, as defined by Shabine in this case, makes such violence necessary: "I suppose among men / you need that sort of thing. It aint right / but that's how it is" (*Collected Poems* 355). The cook faints from the stab, which, along with being a cook, associates him with the feminine. Shabine takes it all in stride, saying, "There wasn't much pain, just plenty of blood" (355), as if the encounter was a kind of menstrual pain. The outcome reinforces Shabine's supremacy in the ship's sexual hierarchy: "Vince [the cook] and me [become] best friend," and more importantly, the other crewmen are forewarned and so "none of them go fuck with my poetry again" (355).

On the boat Shabine creates a new political order in which he is at the top. He had hoped that imagination and the power to make art would become his mission.

...Well, when I write  
this poem, each phrase go be soaked in salt;  
I go draw and knot every line as tight  
as ropes in this rigging.... (*Collected Poems* 347)

The metaphors used for Shabine's poetry suggest that his poetry will somehow perpetuate his residence on the schooner *Flight* and his liminal existence on the surface of the water, never touching land on the islands among which he shuttles. The new order he has created, though on one hand affirming his independence, also deprives him of any symbolic social or political exchange. From this, one could speculate that Shabine views his new status as the triumph of bitter but passive reticence over more aggressive anger. This immersion in the moment and in personal experience, Walcott goes on to suggest, would not suffice. So far in the poem history appears only in relation to ancestry, its shallowest manifestation. Shabine's healing requires a deeper engagement with history, whether he wishes or not.

Shabine's most significant experiences on the journey are his visions of the region's history. The first vision occurs at sea and puts him in awe of history. Two fleets of ghost ships sail past the *Flight* in morning fog. The first, a fleet of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century warships, sails from east to west, commandeered by "great admirals." "It was horrors," Shabine tells us, "but it was beautiful" (*Collected Poems* 352). He quickly identifies his position in this representation of history. "High on their decks I saw great admirals / Rodney, Nelson, De Grasse I heard the hoarse orders / they gave those Shabines..." (352), who, like him, are beneath the admirals, subservient and following orders. Next a fleet of slave ships comes along, and here too Shabine finds his historical connection: "our fathers below deck too deep, I suppose, / to hear our shouting..." (353). Holding on only to his generic name of Shabine, he wonders "Who

knows / who his grandfather is, much less his name?" (353). In both versions of history, Shabine envisions his past as one of servitude and enslavement, making his momentary elevation in status on the ship seem petty and vindictive.

Shabine's next vision occurs as he discusses with a crewmate, his new friend the cook, the tragedy of progress. Their conversation focuses on the enslavement and genocide of the native Caribs, and prompts Shabine to dream of himself sharing the experience of the natives. Running through the forest, he finds himself pursued by soldiers, his head filled with the "screams of my burning children" (*Collected Poems* 356). He collapses at last and when he comes to, "there was nothing but Progress" (356). Having reached the nexus of this so-called progress that mows over whole peoples and cultures, Shabine reacts powerfully to his emasculation and lack of agency. He becomes mired in delusions of grandeur:

all you ain't know my strength hear?...  
All you fate in my hand,  
ministers, businessmen...  
I shall scatter your lives like a handful of sand. (357-358)

Though it seems that Shabine has lost all perspective, his defiant screams are an act of exorcism. In seeing the horrible end of the Caribs with whom he identifies, Shabine releases the last of his rage and hatred.

Blending realistic description with magical realism, Walcott transforms Shabine's rage into a physical storm. On deck, fighting for survival alongside his mates in a storm that can be read as his own anger, Shabine at last acknowledges his own culpability in his misfortune. He states simply: "I have not loved those that I loved enough." In the storm he finds redemption from all the resources available to him and takes strength from the thought of his family as he imagines himself drowning in the terrible history he has

confronted. He rediscovers his faith: “‘I from backward people who still fear God.’ / Let Him, in His might, heave Leviathan upward...” (*Collected Poems* 359), and remembering his faith, he rediscovers a source of strength and dignity:

... and that was the faith  
that had fade from a child in the Methodist chapel...  
(where) in hard pews ribbed like the whale,  
proud with despair, we sang how our race,  
survive the sea’s maw, our history, our peril,  
and now I was ready for whatever death will. (359)

Having focused only on his weaknesses up to this point, and having exploited others’ weaknesses as well, Shabine is now able to find the frame, the anchor and harbor for which he had prayed earlier. He begins to see his history as one of endurance, of triumph over adversity, and himself as a perpetual rover. He is satisfied by the work he has done.

Though my *Flight* never pass the incoming tide  
of this inland sea beyond the loud reefs  
of the final Bahamas, I am satisfied  
if my hand gave voice to one people’s grief. (360)

Satisfied now with his identity, he similarly makes peace with the islands and the whole world (“this earth is one / island in an archipelago of stars”) (361). In this conclusion he is able to ameliorate his bitterness by placing it in a larger context, allowing it to be absorbed by a vast, cosmic perspective. But Shabine’s journey will go on until he begins to sing us from “the depths of the sea.” Shabine represents a moment of anger that reaches dramatic levels and explodes in self-realization. Shabine represents a kind of sacrifice in the battle for the dignity of the islands’ people, a generation that manages to reach equanimity after being beaten down for so long by anger and racism. His voice “gave voice one people’s grief,” but struggle is to go on elsewhere.



Though Shabine's heroic stance exudes the exhilaration of a new beginning, it is not free of angst. Shabine announces his departure in the section of the poem ironically titled "Shabine Leaves the Republic," a republic with "spray-plane Air Force," for which he has little respect. He does, however, politicize his action, and having done so, his choices are either to be "a nobody" or "a nation." But these choices are too stark, and offer Shabine no possibility of belonging. He wonders out loud:

Where is my rest place, Jesus? Where is my harbour?  
Where is the pillow I will not have to pay for  
and the window I can look from that frames my life? (*Collected Poems* 350)

His "harbour," "pillow," and "window" imply a need for social and political acceptance, a place to call home where minimal provisions are provided, and most importantly, there is a fixed point from which to view the world. Shabine declares that these aspects, concrete as they are, must from now on be provided by the imagination. "I had no nation now but the imagination," (350) he declares, his discovery of a solution for his displacement. In seeking his kin or searching for another nation, Shabine struggles with societal values as he affirms them. He disdains the republic, but claims his need for a "harbour;" he detests being a "nobody" and continues to seek a "nation."

That we find room for ambivalence in Shabine's attitude toward his anti-social status suggests that he is capable of making himself culpable. In the opening departure scene the taxi driver taking Shabine to the harbor tells him, "Look like this time Shabine, you really gone," hinting that Shabine has been contemplating flight for some time, and that his discomfort was an open secret. Shabine's purported reason for departure was that he was fed up with the corruption that surrounded him, but we learn that he also contributed a great deal to his troubles. He left his wife and his children for a mistress for

whose wellbeing he had to expend a great deal of psychic and financial resources. To rid himself of his mistress, as God once instructed him in a vision, he shacks up in a brothel. His employment leads from one shady line of work to another. Walcott offers us a speaker who seeks our sympathy, but who does not quite earn it, his feelings of guilt and self-righteousness wrapped tightly together.

### C. GUEST INTRUDER: POET OF THE THIRD WORLD

Exploring exilic agency in his essay, “Reflections on Exile,” the late Edward Said outlines several responses to exile in the Western metropolis. Given the success of many exiles, Said wonders why exile “has been transformed so easily into a potent, even enriching, motif of modern culture” (173). The answer is partly because “Modern Western culture is in large part the work of exiles, émigrés, refugees” (173). Said stresses that most people who experience exile do so in ignominy and extreme poverty in refugee camps or liminal territories across the globe. They are the victims of an age of modern warfare, imperialism, and totalitarianism. Nonetheless, many exiled poets and intellectuals have come to “lend dignity to a condition legislated to deny dignity” (175). All migrants experience exile, Said insists in another essay, and they always feel their difference, but some are “marvels of adjustment” (*Reader* 372) who wholeheartedly adopt the ideology of their host country. Citing as examples US National Security Advisors Henry Kissinger and Zbigniew Brzezinski, immigrants from Germany and Poland respectively, Said notes how they have “contributed their talents entirely to their adopted country” (372).

The success of the exile in his country of relocation, particularly in the US, has led to the emergence of “a fetish of exile” (Said, *Reader* 183). Poets such as Bei Dao, Joseph Brodsky, and Czeslaw Milosz were known as much for being exiled poets as for their poetry. Their exile gives their poetry an aura of vision and authenticity, a pathos that poets who wrote from home seemed to lack. Brodsky’s exile was part exile, part rehabilitation. He viewed his relocation to the West as a kind of return home to the liberal

Western democracy to which he felt that he all along belonged (see Bethea). He began to write in English, in a traditionalist mode, after a few years in the US. Though often struck with nostalgia, he was nonetheless a central figure in US poetry and served as US Poet Laureate in 1991, five years before his death in 1996.

Brodsky's departure from the Soviet Union to the West was brought about by his reputation as a literary dissident and with the adoption of his case by Western poets who lobbied for his cause, W. H. Auden most prominent among them. Brodsky became so immersed in life as a poet in the US that he never quite took up his role as a dissident. However, those exiles who would fall in Appiah's second stage of the evolution of the postcolonial poet, characterized by confrontation with their own nations or national governments, continue the fight throughout their exile. Said cites James Joyce and V. S. Naipaul as perhaps the most antagonistic of exiles toward their native lands. James Joyce, writes Said, "picked a quarrel with Ireland and kept it alive so as to sustain the strictest opposition to what was familiar" (*Reflections* 182). Whenever his connection to Ireland seemed to take on a positive aspect, Joyce found "a new incident to solidify his intransigence and to reaffirm the rightness of his voluntary absence" (182). Similarly, Naipaul "remorselessly judged the illusions of cruelties of independent states" (Said, *Reader* 374). Neither quite reconciles with his nation of origin, and both remain outsiders in their places of relocation.

Said offers a third possibility for the exile, one that comes closest to the portrait of Walcott after he relocates to the United States.

For the intellectual an exilic displacement means being liberated from the usual career, in which 'doing well' and following in time-honored footsteps are the main milestones. Exile means that you are always going to be marginal, and that what you do as an intellectual has to be made up because you cannot follow a

prescribed path. (*Reader* 379-380)

Said's description is useful, as it positions the exile outside conventional means of agency, an approach within neocolonial politics that makes engagement ethically desirable and practically attainable.

Said explains that an exiled intellectual now has more options, a claim with which Walcott concurs (*Conversations* 81). An exile need not contribute to the Metropolis and its hegemonic endeavors without question. Nor must he keep up an ongoing antagonism, or wallow in nostalgic longing. Contemporary exiles realize "that their home is not in fact so far away, and that the normal traffic of everyday contemporary life keeps you in constant but tantalizing and unfulfilled touch with the old place" (Said, *Reader* 381). Walcott was very well aware of the trajectory of Naipaul's career, and resisted the options and approach that Naipaul chose, despite the many convergences between their positions and views of their native region. Walcott was also very close to Brodsky, but never adopted his friend's enthusiasm for the US. For those who choose exile, such as Walcott, there is room for fulfillment, and the tantalization of meaningful contacts with home can represent real opportunities for poetic creation even from within the metropolis.

Working within a notion of exile similar to that outlined by Said, Walcott reconfigures his poetic persona and begins to assert himself as a contrarian working from the metropolis. Perhaps one of the best expressions of this testy insider's stance is the model provided by South African poet Breyten Breytenbach. Breytenbach sees the function of the postcolonial poet in the metropolis as being a contentious provider of awareness ("Exile" 180). The exile, or "intruder," Breytenbach explains, is at the mercy

of the “the guest” (“Letter” 15), but must also assume a challenging pose. As the postcolonial learns “the chameleon art of adaptation”, he must “never again entirely relax the belly muscles” (“Exile” 180). The exile must carry an aura of invincibility and even superiority. “You demand to be treated respectfully, your edges become sharper and your paranoia more acute...You are invited to New York for a conference? Insist upon being put up in the best hotel?” (180). For the postcolonial in the metropolis to be an effective advocate, he “must husband [his] weaknesses” (180). “You make sure that you are tougher than ‘they’ are, or you damn well learn how to pretend to be” (180). Breytenbach advances this masculine exilic approach as the best way to serve the masses of Africa and the downtrodden elsewhere. If the postcolonial intruder “starts wanting to be treated on an equal footing,” his hosts will “tear him to pieces” (Breytenbach, “Letter” 15). Not allowed equality in the metropolis, as he pleads his noble causes the postcolonial intellectual claims superiority, threatening his hosts with a world that can “vomit at unexpected moments” (“Exile” 180). In Breytenbach’s description the postcolonial poet engages in Fanonian combat and dialogue at the same time. Examining the poet’s assumption of an established cosmopolitan role, as well as his role as a rebel insider whose poetry serves to justify rebellion against tribal hegemony, will help provide a model for the poetic persona Derek Walcott assumes in the third phase of his career.

Describing his friend Joseph Brodsky, Walcott outlines his role within the metropolis. He sees in Brodsky the ideal model of an exile who is “an irascible guest” (*Twilight* 142). Walcott tells us that Brodsky “does not flatter the torturer or the system...nor has he rushed into the lowered arms of the Statue of Liberty, afraid of being burnt by her torch” (142). Noting that Brodsky is a Soviet exile in the US, Walcott adds

that the Russian poet “has written under two self-idealizing democracies, America and the Soviet Russia” (142), and swiftly equates the two superpowers, a gesture of his own irascibility. Brodsky is an exile who refuses to help “ensure the perpetuity of the republic. He does not glorify his hosts...He seems to be inhabiting his own country, muttering a complicated monologue which does not simplify its references, and whose spirit not to lament but to cherish disinheritance” (142). And again as if speaking of an ideal he would like to adopt, Walcott tells us “Brodsky resists the elegiac seductions of ruins. Instead, he coarsens their atmosphere with the belligerence of a barbarian from the steppes” (142). Given Brodsky’s engagement in the American literary establishment, his support of the Vietnam war, and his easy employment of the pronoun “we” when speaking of the US (see Polukhina), Walcott could as easily be offering advice to his fellow poets. The criteria Walcott applies to Brodsky reflect his own poetic persona, emerging in the late 1970s as he took up Robert Lowell’s seat at Boston University and began to spend most of his time in the US.

Speaking (most likely) of himself in the late 1970s as he takes up residence in the US, Walcott writes, “I accept my function / as a colonial upstart” (*Collected Poems* 405). This well-chosen phrase suggests that Walcott recognizes himself as someone from humble origins who has risen to a position of consequence. “Upstart” also implies an individual who is presumptuous and objectionable. Characterizing himself as such, Walcott acknowledges the tenuousness of his agency in the metropolis. His status is both earned and questionable, causing him to see himself as both more and less than his peers. In the same poem, Walcott gloats that he is there to witness, or even preside over, the decline of an empire. This may be merely “a childish revenge,” since everything

pertaining to the empire “is gone, except their language, / which is everything” (403). And since no peace can yet be reached with the forces of hegemony, one behaves as a perpetually entitled, cantankerous upstart or is burned by Lady Liberty’s torch. In a parting shot, Walcott equates the Raj and the Reich, their withdrawing roar sounding the same “guttural death rattle” (405). Marking his entrance into the US, a few blocks from the world’s largest financial district, he calls the snow-covered streets of New York a “heart of darkness” (404), turning Conrad’s description of Africa and the colonized world on its head.

Part of Walcott’s “objectionable” persona arises from homesickness and the disorientation of exile, as well as a growing sense of obligation to the Caribbean. Shabine may have walked away from Trinidad saddened, but he was resigned to his demise. In Walcott’s later poems regret and responsibility begin to be featured more prominently along with a need to realign his poetic mission. In *Summertime*, the volume that succeeds *Star Apple Kingdom*, in which “*Flight*” appeared, Walcott writes, “Every word I have written took the wrong approach. / I cannot connect these lines with the lines in my face” (*Collected Poems* 471). This divide between the poet and his earlier work comes while he is a wanderer whose “fate” dictates “that the more [he] wander[s], the more the world grows wide” (474), and his travels bring discomfiting discoveries. Alluding to London’s riots in the early eighties, he takes note of others displaced in metropolitan settings by institutional and popular racism.

...the riot police and the skinhead exchanged quips  
you could trace to the Sonnets....  
Praise had bled my lines white of any more anger,  
and now had inducted me into white fellowship,  
while Calibans howled down the barred streets of an empire. (483)



The poet's privileged position in the metropolis has neutered his anger. The use of blood imagery echoes "A Far Cry from Africa," in which the poet wrote that he was "poisoned by the blood of both" Africa and England. The term "fellowship" also rings with nuance as Walcott had indeed received several "fellowships," and his circle of friends in the US was almost exclusively "white" poets and writers (B. King, *Walcott* 190). In the meantime, when police and skinheads use the language for which he declared his love in "A Far Cry", Shakespeare's sonnets reverberate. The world has indeed grown large for the poet. The poems in *Summertime* range in location from Chicago to Wales to Rome, yet for his fellow colonials the empire's streets are still barred.

When the poet-speaker in "The Light of the World" encounters the beauty of the people of his island St. Lucia his desire turns into self-revelation. Upon boarding a 16-seater transport to Gros-Islet, the speaker takes the front seat, isolating himself from the other passengers, and notices a beautiful black woman. She looks at him, and to his heartbreak, looks away "politely because any staring at strangers is impolite" (*Arkansas* 48). The poet reads much into his self-designation as "stranger," and entertains a fantasy of adorning the black woman with earrings made of "good gold," for she wears no jewelry. He fancies her as Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People*, and inverting the blackness of her skin in the dark concave of the transport he praises her, "O Beauty, you are the light of the world" (48). The poet, who had deemed the snow-covered streets of New York in daylight a heart of darkness, sees a black woman inside a darkened vehicle as the light of the world. Even the rum shops that cater to weary drunken women have "bright doors." He recalls "wandering glass lanterns / hung on poles at street corners," (48) and even the bright eyes of the children "white as their nighties" (49). He recollects

his mother's "white hair tinted by the dying dusk" (49). He recognizes that he mostly "remembers the shadows," (49) but now he begins to fantasize about the beautiful black woman, about inviting her to his house, and having her dressed "into a smooth white nightie that would pour like water / over the black rocks of her breasts" (50).

His compatriots, however, and his feeling for them would not allow him to "lust in peace" (51). An old woman hobbles toward the transport and says to the driver "Pas quittez moi a terre" (51) in her patois, which means "Don't leave me stranded." Her words begin to work on the speaker's sense of guilt, and through translation and word association he reaches a revelation:

... "Don't leave me stranded,"  
which is, in her history and that of her people:  
"Don't leave me on earth," or, by a shift of stress:  
"Don't leave me the earth";  
"Pas quittez moi a terre, Heavenly transport,  
Don't leave me on earth, I've had enough of it"  
The bus filled in the dark with heavy shadows  
that would not be left on earth; no, that would be left  
on the earth, and would have to make out.  
Abandonment was something they had grown used to.

And I had abandoned them, I knew that there  
sitting in the transport.... (51)

Soon the speaker "was afraid [he] might suddenly start sobbing" (51). He longed to be part of the other passengers' "neighborliness, their consideration, and the polite partings" (51). But it was not to be, for he "has abandoned them" (51); he has left them to earth.

A sense of duty to take account of the dynamics of injustice along with an insistence that the poor and the powerless gain a foothold in their home countries begins to fill the poet. Having long been an observer caught in pity's grip, the poet, encouraged by admiration and love for his people, begins to direct his focus toward a more

responsive stance. Divided in sections titled “North” and “South” and “Here” and “Elsewhere,” *The Fortunate Traveller* and *The Arkansas Testament*, published in 1979 and 1986, respectively, highlight his sense of the economic, racial, and historical divides that he witnesses and experiences. As he settles in the US, Walcott, who had begun “falling in love with America,” begins to temper his love for it with recognition of the continent’s violent history, represented by the “broken promises / that helped make the Republic what it is” (*Collected Poems* 399-400). In “Old New England” the poet notes that the land is marked by the absence of its native people. Signs of modern civilization begin to evoke the violence that was done them. The poet hears the sound of a rocket whistling past and the landscape appears wounded by “the spire / of the white meetinghouse, [as] the Indian trail / trickles down it like the brown blood of the whale” (399). New England becomes a sanitized site of human and animal slaughter. The black clippers on the shore are still in service, bringing “farm boys back from ‘Nam” (399).

Walcott’s critique of the US and its history runs contrary to his call for fellow Caribbeans to take an amnesiac view of history. In the US, the poet cannot escape history as the landscape itself bears witness to the hypocritical cohesion that allows the nation to view itself and its God as both meek and vindictive. The poet keeps his eye on the present; the absence of the native peoples is stitched tightly together with news of the war in Vietnam and of the near-extinction of the whales. In this case history points to a pattern of action that seems to prophesy a similarly dark future. “Old New England,” the title of the poem in which these lines are found, encapsulates the potential for continuity, the “old” and the “new” indicating the generative and enduring forces of an ideology in which conquest is couched in benevolence, as a form of godliness.

Walcott brings this critique of the hypocrisy of global economics into focus in the title poem of *The Fortunate Traveller*. The poem is a dramatic monologue spoken by a shady, unnamed World Bank financier worthy of Graham Greene's *The Third Man*, who offers to help a developing country with a deal to import tractors. The poem ends with the protagonist's business partners at his heels, having tracked him down at his island refuge. A rather complicated arrangement of narrative, polemic and digression, the poem is a meditation on global economics and postcolonial intellectual's role in it. US poet-critic Calvin Bedient has argued that the poem was "marvelous except that it is a waste on its corrupt speaker" (44). This criticism misses the poem's point about the degree to which such a system fosters corruption. As we see in "The Light of the World," where Walcott implicates himself in the act of abandoning his people, Walcott is keen on not making a "career of conscience" (*Arkansas* 67). A critique of how wealth corrupted one society's values and social fabric, "The Fortunate Traveller" renders the impossibility of "conscience" in the relation between rich and poor in the global economic system.

A bureaucrat armed with the triple-spaced, Xeroxed documents of the World Bank, the starving and his awareness of their plight damn the speaker. Though he is considered a fortunate traveler, flying first class, he denigrates his privilege because of his guilt. In a gesture of self-loathing, he calls himself and the people of his profession "roaches" who

infect with optimism and when  
cabinets crack, we are the first  
to scuttle, radiating separately  
back to Geneva, Bonn, Washington, London (*Collected Poems* 458)

With roaches in charge of the world, Walcott suggests that the same ideologies that led to colonialism and the Holocaust persists in the postcolonial world, with its racism and rules

of exclusion. The former colonized regions are not just simple webs of corruption, but constitute a world of hunger and stifled ambition in an unchallenged state of dependence to the old colonial powers:

Like lice, like lice, the hungry of this earth  
swarm to the tree of life...  
But fires  
drench them like vermin, quotas  
prevent them... (462)

Prevented from getting a larger share of the world's wealth, wealth they helped create, the hungry have no recourse but to claw for a place among the powerful. The contemporary Western traveler witnesses this as he goes "everywhere the earth shows its rib cage / and the moon goggles with the eyes of children" (462). But he easily turns away from the scene. This is the first world citizen's prerogative. Travel in the "developing world" for the first world traveler requires a booster shot of denial; the more the West addresses global poverty, the more it seems to perpetuate it.

On the other hand, seeing the world's poverty engenders confusion in the poet-speaker, which in turn makes him a target for delusions and a candidate for betrayal. The speaker is first moved by pity, having spent time "rehearsing the ecstasies of starvation" (458). He begins to seek "in all races a common ingenuity" (458), and he is filled with idealistic exhilaration. Having agreed to offer "mercy" to an African nation on the tractor deal, he imagines sowing "the Sahara with rippling cereals / my charity fertilized these aridities" (459). His African contacts wonder why he is assisting them. They ask, "May my country ask you why you are doing this, sir?" (457). While he does not answer them, he tells the reader that he had a vision of "children pounc[ing] on green meat with a rat's ferocity" (459). Distrustful of his offer, the African government officials bribe him with

“Iscariot’s salary” (459) and warn him “if you betray us, you cannot hide” (456). The realpolitik of economic development grind in their usual manner, where money and force speak louder than charity. The poet-speaker soon wonders, “who cares how many million starve?” (459). “No one” is the answer he expects and summarily receives. Continuing this dialogue between different sides of himself, and referring to himself in the third person, the speaker concludes the scene with an appropriately obscure image: “grey mist enfolding the conspirator / like a sealed envelope next to its heart” (459).

The use of first- and third-person voices in this poem demonstrates the speaker’s clarity of understanding about the drama in which he finds himself involved, and that he knows its scope is larger than his agency can manage. He nonetheless claims his speaking position, and attempts to delineate his personal dilemma as well as the potential dangers that await all of us. As in “The Light of the World,” the poet-speaker is guilty, and seeks redemption through acknowledgement of his guilt. Fueled by defeated idealism and his own corruption, the speaker can only rage in apocalyptic visions. At the end of the poem, at precisely the moment when the pursuers threatening to kill the narrator find him, the poem takes a prophetic turn.

In loaves of cloud, *and have not charity*  
the weevil will make a sahara of Kansas,  
the ant shall eat Russia.  
Their soft teeth shall make, *and have not charity*  
the harvest’s desolation,  
and the brown globe crack like a begging bowl,  
and though you fire oceans of surplus grain  
*and have not charity*

still, through thin stalks,  
the smoking stubble, stalks  
grasshopper, third horseman,  
the leather helmet locust (*Collected Poems* 463)

Alluding to the Book of Revelation, the speaker sees the rich world's surplus as a catalyst for the apocalypse. Walcott provides a sense of our time by making this contemporary equivalent to John of Patmos a conflicted, but nonetheless corrupt, finance official. He finds potential for heroism in the character, suggesting that while careers "of conscience" are objectionable, conscience will find a way to inhabit even the most corrupt souls. The poem is an "impassioned and important poem of our time" (Burnett 177), because it manages to expose the breadth of poverty's corruptive power on individuals and social institutions.

In residency at the University of Arkansas, I was asked by one of my hosts if I had read Walcott's poem "The Arkansas Testament." I replied that I had, and the host retorted, "I don't know what that was all about." Having read the poem more thoroughly since then, I can understand my host's confusion and disappointment that Walcott chose Fayetteville as the setting for his encounter with Southern history and the specter of racism that still haunts the region. Compared to other places in the South also mentioned in the poem, such as Montgomery, Alabama, Fayetteville has had a much more tolerant history. But to assume that Walcott would be grateful, or that he would in any way try to placate the South or America with regard to its racist history would be folly. In fact, in his choice of Fayetteville, or of Boston for that matter, places in America that pride themselves in their tolerance, Walcott's critique of US racism strikes a more painful blow. He is not only critical of racism, but of any attempt of the White establishment to exculpate itself.

My host may also have been puzzled because nothing terrible happened to Walcott on his visit to Arkansas. Baugh notes that

the poem is a narrative in which nothing much happens by way of external event. The poet checks into a motel in Fayetteville, Arkansas on a midwinter evening. He awakens before dawn. At first light he walks to a nearby café to get a cup of coffee. The sun is already up and the city beginning to go about its business when he returns to his motel room. He switches on the TV set to the news on the Today show...He suffers no racial insult or discrimination during the twelve hours or so that the narrative covers. (*Walcott* 182)

But much happens to the speaker in those short hours of contemplation. Walcott had not previously written anything as explicit about US racism; and in this case the poem appropriates aspects of the Black Nationalist discourse he opposed in the late sixties. Furthermore, the subtext of the narrative is that Walcott during the writing of the poem was considering taking up American citizenship (Baugh, *Walcott* 183). The hills of placid Fayetteville bring to mind Robert E. Lee. A giant neon cross outside a church reminds him of the burning cross of the KKK and lynchings in the South. Having critiqued his fellow Caribbean intellectuals for making careers out of opening scabs, the poet wonders if he can help “heal the stripes and the scars” (*Arkansas Testament* 117) of the America that has become his home.

Walcott demonstrates the parameters of the discussion of race in the US and what he is expected to contribute to it. He asks in the poem,

Can I swear to uphold my art  
that I share with them too, or worse,  
pretend it is all past and curse  
from the picket lines of verse  
the concept of Apartheid (*Arkansas Testament* 115)

His American readers and critics would like him to critique Apartheid; it is a safe, distant target. Fighting Apartheid demonstrated White commitment to end racism, and directed attention away from racism in Europe and the US. For Walcott to join the chorus would mean that all is forgiven. For the poet, such a choice would have amounted to abusing his



art, and would therefore be morally wrong.

In “The Arkansas Testament,” the insistent return of history as a means of indictment and the turbulent ambivalence that the poet experiences regarding becoming a citizen of the US arise from the poet’s physical experience of being a Black man in the South. The poet feels effaced. Upon arrival, he has to wait “until my name re-entered me” (*Arkansas Testament* 105). Later, filling a form at the hotel register, he hesitates over the title “Mr.,” unsure that it fits him. “I had felt like changing my name,” the poet writes, still wondering whether “pretending whoever I was / or am, or will be, are the same” (105-106). In the morning, he contemplates shaving, and thinking of a disposable shaver, he thinks of his “own disposable people” (107). Once outside he wants to melt in the “Confederate grey” (108) of the dawn light. His gait changes as he begins “Hugging walls in [his] tippler’s hop—the jive of shuffling bums, a beat that comes from the chain” of slavery (109). He hides beside a “ruinous wall” to avoid “the revolving red eye on top / of a cruising police car” (109). Passing an auto garage, he envisions a toothless sibyl who tells him “STAY BLACK AND INVISIBLE / TO THE SIREN OF ARKANSAS” (109). He heeds her call when he reaches the café and avoids setting next to anyone to find his “own area” (110).

There the poem opens up into a wider discussion of race. The poet has made his way among the honorable, who sit at mahogany tables, where he too has a place card. This passage of the poem shows fully the nuances and effects of the poet’s self-interrogation:

The self-contempt that it takes  
to find my place card among any  
of the faces reflected in lakes  
of lacquered mahogany

comes easily to me now. I had laughed  
loudest until silence kills  
the shop talk...  
Every candle-struck face stares into  
the ethnic abyss. In the oval  
of a silver spoon, the window  
bent in a wineglass, the offal  
of flattery fed to my craft,  
I watch the bright clatter resume (111)

The poet now knows his place, and that knowledge feeds his self-contempt. The atmosphere is edgy at these gatherings, and the poet is driven to laugh the loudest, a vain attempt at bridging “the ethnic abyss.” The praise he receives for his poetry is mere “offal” or carrion at a scene of slaughter. And “the excessively polite remark,” he discovers, is no different from “the passbook” of Apartheid, the muttered asides, the involuntary gestures and signs that become “acid in the gut” as US racism is experienced and deeply understood by the speaker in Arkansas. He “felt its / poison infecting the hill pines / all the way to the top” (116), the pines’ pyramidal shape standing as a diagram for social strata, a system in which our poet is often invited to join those at the top, where he and his hosts are in uncomfortable company.

#### D. THE EPICAL TURN: SPEAKING MYTH TO HISTORY

If Walcott seems an unpleasant guest to his Southern northern hosts, his ingratitude underscores the futility of placating a few individuals from the postcolonial world by reserving token seats at the table. Our poet declares that the poem “The Arkansas Testament,” which appeared in one of the major literary journals of the English language, to be his “two cupfuls of Cowardice” (*Arkansas Testament* 116). Though he is in the inner circle, the postcolonial agent persists in his ambivalence, his in-betweenness, celebrated by both his hosts and by other outsiders like him as a potential site for creative hybridity, though fraught with agitation and unpredictability. Capable of holding his own in the metropolis and aware of how his denied knowledge can slip easily into silent corners within the dominant discourse, the postcolonial artist also becomes aware that his presence is the enactment of an ironic compromise. His true presence can only pronounce itself through subversion, an approach that releases him from “undecidability” toward “the grounds of intervention” (Bhabha 112).

The postcolonial’s perpetual “enervation,” to use Walcott’s term, arises from the tension between the poet’s sense of powerlessness and the empowerment of the act of writing, which radiates from him to others. Recalling his deep desire as a youth for the transformation of his region, Walcott writes that he could not take up the cause of revolution: “She [revolution] would not understand / that [he] wanted no other power but peace / that [he] wanted a revolution without bloodshed” (*Collected Poems* 388). “I am powerless except for love” (389), he cries, and revolution, after having “stroked his hair / until it turned white” becomes “a bat that hung day and night / in the back of his brain”

(389). The bat in the back of the poet's brain is not merely an old romance with revolution, but one episode in the postcolonial poet's search for agency, an inevitable outcome of the combination of his calling and historical circumstances. Decades later, now well positioned in the metropolis, the poet has to again address his place in the world, and his apologetic tone is palpable: "There are things that my craft cannot wield, and one is power" (*Arkansas Testament* 116). Unable to organize the starving, those condemned to "hug the walls of the North" (108) who populate the poems in *The Arkansas Testament*, the poet, cursed and blessed by his gift, undertakes a mission to provide a rewritten Western history that would exonerate his people.

Walcott's best-known work in this regard is the book-length poem *Omeros*, after the publication of which Walcott received the Nobel Prize, and which was almost immediately declared his masterpiece. Walcott's appropriation of Classical Western mythology in *Omeros* sheds a different light on the poet's region, ordinary Caribbeans assuming a heroic status and redefining heroism with their common humanity. While Walcott's use of Homer in *Omeros* shows him alluding to Western history's better bookend, he also refers to one of the modern West's bloodiest chapters in his allusions to the Holocaust, and in other poems that underscore the dignity and suffering of his people. In doing so, he demonstrates his mastery of the Western tradition and unequivocally makes the Caribbean experience essential to this tradition. Though Walcott's work deceptively flatters Western traditionalists by adopting Homer and appropriating the whole of Western history, he uses those traditions to haunt his readers and admirers with the historical wounds of his people.

Before taking on the Homeric tradition in *Omeros*, Walcott had applied other

versions of Western texts and traditions to Caribbean history. "The Sea Is History" can be read as a dry run for his appropriation of Homer's epics. In the poem, the Afro-Caribbean experience of slavery and exploitation corresponds to various books of the Old Testament: The Middle Passage is seen as the region's Exodus; slavery is "Babylonian bondage." The tidal wave that engulfed Port Royal, the most important city in colonial Jamaica in 1692, stands in for Jonah's captivity inside the whale. The Caribbean's Renaissance can be found in the "colonnades of coral / / past the gothic windows of sea-fans / to where the crusty grouper, onyx eyed / blink, weighted by its jewels, like a bald queen" (*Collected Poems* 365). On the sea floor where marine culture mixes with the bones of the victims of the Middle Passage can be found cathedrals, windmills, villages, churches, spires, even Christ himself and his New Testament. Institutions and actions of the modern state such as voting, a legislative body (a synod), ambassadors, judges, and even khaki-clad police can all be found in the carnage.

On the surface Walcott's reading appears to affirm Depish Chakrabarty's claim that postcolonial historiography suffers from a lack of independent models and that it is deeply dependent on Western history. For Chakrabarty the use of Western epochal frameworks such as the Renaissance and the persistence of comparisons to Western chronology in the reading of non-European history establish these models as the only available paradigms for examining societal and historical evolution. This process deprives postcolonial historians of opportunities to develop their own theoretical frameworks, and skews their interpretations of historical findings. Such epochal paradigms have also crept into postcolonial literary history. For a few decades a vision persisted in Indian literary history in which "Kalidasa was India's Shakespeare, Tagore

was our Shelley, Bankim Chand our Scott and R.K. Narayan our Jane Austen” (Narasimhaiah 21). Of course, it is easy to see the bathos in such a comparison and the potential irony it offers. In Walcott’s poem, the epochs of Western history and religious chronology lay in a heap under the ocean; such a presentation becomes an indictment of that very history. The issue is not that of equivalency, but causality, whereby the Exodus amounts to the transport of millions of slaves, killing them along the way, and other important epochs and achievements also end up as sites of massacre and annihilation. The epochs of Caribbean history are adulterated versions of the colonizers’ Western history. Like mad women in the attic of European history, these violent chapters offer a sinister portrait of the masters’ civilization.

Recent historical epochs also figure into Walcott’s subversive rewriting of history. The Holocaust and other modern European atrocities began appearing in Walcott’s work as early as “A Far Cry from Africa,” and have continued to surface with regularity since the late 1970s, or his relocation to the US. In “A Far Cry,” the young Walcott describes the people of Africa as “expendable as Jews” (*Collected Poems* 17), an allusion to the Holocaust, which had concluded less than a decade before the poem’s writing. “Forests of Europe,” dedicated to Joseph Brodsky, appropriates the imagery of Soviet state repression. “The tourist archipelagos of my South / are prisons too” (*Collected Poems* 377), Walcott writes, describing how metropolitan capitalism has rendered his Caribbean islands labor camps. “North and South” finds the poet in Virginia, where he delivers this powerful comparison:

Under the blue sky of winter in Virginia  
the brick chimneys flute white smoke through skeletal lindens...  
there is no memorial here for their Treblinka  
as a van delivers from the ovens loaves

as warm as flesh, its brakes jaggedly screech  
like the square wheel of a swastika. The mania  
of history veils even the clearest air,  
the sickly sweet taste of ash, of something burning (*Collected Poems* 408)

Virginia, manic about representing its colonial history, provides no record of the genocide of the native Americans or of the African slaves brought to its shores. Though (or because) there is no record of these American holocausts, the poet is haunted by them, his senses assaulted by the buried history. Conflating bakery ovens with crematoria, the poet reacts as if he is witnessing ongoing cannibalism.

Alluding to the Holocaust again in “The Fortunate Traveller,” Walcott issues this corrective retort to those who describe Africa as the heart of darkness:

The heart of darkness is not Africa.  
The heart of darkness is the core of fire  
in the white center of the holocaust.  
The heart of darkness is the rubber claw  
selecting a scalpel in antiseptic light,  
the hills of children’s shoes outside the chimneys,  
the tinkling nickel instruments on the white altar (*Collected Poems* 461)

The inversion of white/light and dark is central to this passage. The light of Western civilization, as opposed to the darkness of Africa, becomes the fire that consumed millions in the Holocaust. Other crimes of the Nazi era are mentioned, such as the scientific experiments conducted on Jews, Gypsies, and homosexuals in the concentration camps. The image of children’s shoes becomes horrifying when we realize that the genocide, as Walcott renders it, was in part religious and in part scientific. The white altar of the operating room where scientific research is conducted turns the religious icon into a symbol of racist ideology, and brings both science and religion into question.

Walcott’s re-writing of history to indict the metropolis and its current hegemony runs parallel to his search for a hopeful future for the Caribbean islands. Like Joyce’s

Stephen Daedalus, Walcott often feels that “History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake” (*Ulysses* 34), yet history as sleep offers the necessary conditions for an awakening. Comparing himself to Janus for his January birth, Walcott writes “my sign was Janus / I saw with twin heads” (*Collected Poems* 281), looking backward at the empire and forward to political independence. The rejection of history is a rejection of its violent legacy, while the process of seeking answers through it and the willingness to embrace phases of it continues despite that legacy. In his disagreements with Black nationalists Walcott believed that retelling the suffering and denigration of the people of the Caribbean consecrated that history and promoted paralysis. Such a reactive response, based on denial, only reinforces metropolitan discursive hegemony. Even a return to one’s African roots, where imperialist hands wrote a great deal of the history, will keep one locked in that framework.

What Walcott sought was a response that could destabilize that history, and this inevitably meant a turn toward the epic and the intense identification of reader with text in which the capacity to suspend disbelief is an end in itself. Without the religious requirements that demand the repression of inconsistencies in the Biblical narrative, the reader is guided only by the dynamics of artifice and his imagination’s ability to create impossible events and landscapes, enhancing the process of identification with the protagonists. The epic format empowers the reader, whether he is highly conscious of his relation to the text or eschews meta-literary speculation. The Homeric and Greek allusions Walcott pumps into *Omeros* and other historical poems both emphasize the artifice of his project and underscore the mutual understanding that he and his Caribbean reader need to suspend their disbelief and inscribe their culture on the tabula rasa they



find when they search for their “history.” Framing contemporary Caribbean life as epic therefore has “the epic purpose of securing self-respect to the Caribbean people of the future, both in their own eyes and in the eyes of the world” (67 Burnett).

Though he is known as its primary proponent, Walcott did not invent the idea of a Greek Caribbean. It was advanced as a vision of a united West Indian federation beginning with the positing of the region as an American Aegean in the 1940s, a notion Walcott embraced early on and continued to even after the idea lost ground and practically fell apart. Walcott’s juxtaposition of the West Indian experience with the Homeric world appears in poems as early as “Epitaph fro the Young” (1949) and in the play *Ione* (1957). Traces of Classical Greece and its master works continued to appear in Walcott’s work until the publication of *Omeros*, which made full use of the Greek classics to convey the Caribbean experience.

*Omeros* braids three main narrative threads. The first is the story of the Homerically named fishermen Achille and Hector and their love for Helen, a hotel waitress and domestic worker. The cast also includes Philoctete, an injured fisherman, based the Sophocles’ character of the same name. When Hector dies and Helen seems reconciled to living with Achille again, the poem’s focus turns to Philoctete’s injury, which he suspects hearkens back to the chained ankles of his ancestors on the Middle Passage. Ma Kilman, the local obeah woman and owner of the No Pain tavern heals Philoctete by applying a local plant that had come from Africa and invoking African gods. The second plotline is the story of Sergeant Major Plunkett and his Irish wife Maud, who live on the island and must reconcile themselves to the violent history of British colonization on St. Lucia. Plunkett is a veteran who fought with Montgomery in

North Africa during World War II and received an injury to his head. He and Maud are childless, an insinuation that Plunkett is impotent. Unable and unwilling to return home to Britain, Plunkett attempts to root himself in the island by writing its history. Plunkett adopts the persona of a young officer he finds in his history books; the earlier Plunkett died fighting for British rule on the island. The third narrative thread in *Omeros* involves the exiled poet-narrator, who comments on the action of the poem and the poem's characters as he partakes in many transatlantic journeys and wanderings. His main interaction, however, is with is with Seven Seas, the blind poet, who leads the poet, like Virgil leading Dante, up the mountain of speculation at the end of *Omeros*. The poet-narrator, haunted by the despair of lost love, travels the world and is eventually led to renewed faith by his blind guide.

Shifting between the Caribbean and Africa, and between our contemporary era and the 18<sup>th</sup> century as conflicts ensue among British, Dutch, and French naval forces over colonial spoils and the slave trade in the Caribbean, *Omeros* weaves together the lives of the protagonists, myth and history, nature and the human-made world. The poem's meter is a loose hexameter, approximating Homer's, though it contracts occasionally to five and even four-beat lines, as if also to acknowledge Milton's blank verse, the accentual tetrameter of *Beowulf* or *Piers Plowman*, and the folk music of Europe and the Caribbean. For the most part the *Omeros* stanza is the terza rima tercet of Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

Walcott had previously called the English language his birthright (*Conversations* 82), and his loose but undeniable adherence to classical forms and allusions accentuates his ease with and sense of ownership of the Western tradition. This emphasis is liable to

engender discomfort in a reader familiar with the classics. Homer and Dante are easily brought together, as well as echoes of Milton and Shakespeare, with Joyce hovering in the margins. Ramazani has called Walcott's appropriation "not merely subversive or exotic, but emphatically defamiliarizing" (Ramazani 55), with its inversions of black and white and classical and contemporary. Terada notes that Walcott "pastoralizes" Homer, giving us heroes who are "not explorers, conquerors, or imperialists, but St. Lucian fishermen, waitresses, transport drivers, and the like. Walcott distinguishes [his] Achille from [Homer's] Achilles by his gentleness and modesty" (Terada 185). It should be noted that the Greek names of Walcott's characters are also not his own invention. Slaveholders are known to have borrowed names for their slaves from mythical and Biblical sources, perpetuating the names of mythical figures in contemporary West Indian society (Hamner 40). The ironic juxtaposition of superhero and slave had long been a part of Caribbean life, as if to emphasize the limitations imposed on the carriers of these names. In that regard, this cruel, ongoing colonial joke offers an irresistible challenge to the artist and the characters he invents to undo it.

One character exhibiting the defamiliarizing pastoralization is that of Helen, who as *Omeros* begins, stands for her Homeric namesake, and serves as the cause of tension between Hector and Achille. "The duel of these fishermen / was over a shadow and its name was Helen" (*Omeros* 17), Walcott writes, though no war ensues. Physically desirable, she becomes the inspiration of two intellectual pursuits: the poet's attempt to write (and belong in) the present of his birthplace, and Plunkett's effort to write a history of the island so that he can root himself beside "the harbor [that] closed his wound" (61). The Helen of the West Indies, Walcott's Helen, is a part-time maid and hotel waitress and

stands for the island of St. Lucia, impoverished and mercurial. During a 1990s interview, Walcott explains that he had in mind a woman to represent St. Lucia as the Helen of the West Indies because of the island's history of being fought over by European empires (White 19). The iconic figure of Helen arose from an earlier poem, "The Light of the World," discussed in the previous chapter. The woman the poet encounters in that poem is "nothing but heraldic," iconic like "a black Delacroix's / Liberty Leading the People" (*Arkansas Testament* 48). "Light of the World" expresses the poet's sense of exile and his guilt at having left his native island and its people. Touched "by their neighborliness, their consideration, and the[ir] polite partings" he is also haunted by his veritable non-existence to them. "There was nothing they wanted, nothing I could give them," he says (49). The woman who would serve as the model for the Helen of *Omeros* steps out of the transport, a precursor to Hector's, without a glance back at the poem. In *Omeros* she appears pregnant, unsure of the identity of the father, and expecting no aid from him. As Terada suggests, Helen is a stand-in for the Biblical Mary, but a defamiliarizing one nonetheless. She frustrates the poem's powers of omniscience as neither the poet nor the other characters seem able to penetrate her inner life, and refuses to fit neatly into the persona of either her namesake or the Biblical character she most resembles. None of the characters can simply dismiss her, nor can the poem, for like the island, she is what the characters have in common. She is the Plunkett's maid, whom they reluctantly fired, accusing her thefts; she is Achille's and Hector's lover, who will commit to neither; and she is the poet's muse, who refuses to acknowledge him, let alone engage him in any symbolic exchange. All of the other characters in the poem are wounded figures who want to make peace with Helen.

Speaking in the first person and positioning himself both as “author” of the other characters and as protagonist among them, the poet exercises his omniscience by recreating a great deal of the island’s background, with a particular focus on the English naval wars that took the island from the French. Plunkett emerges as the poet’s competitor in his attempt to write a history of the island. Plunkett is an exile who is trying vigorously to root himself in the Edenic landscape of St. Lucia, while the poet is an exile on a return visit home, uncertain of his place in the world. Both of them have to negotiate the Homeric resemblances that, due to their colonial education, they cannot help noticing. And like Plunkett, who finds a young officer with the same last name and adopts him as a son, Walcott, identifying himself as the narrator of the poem, receives a vision of his father, when he realizes that he is now twice the age of his father when he died. That’s where the similarities end, however. The narrator of *Omeros* finds his father’s early poems are the root of his calling. “I appeared to have made your life’s choice, / and the calling that you practice both reverses // and honours mine from the moment it blent with yours” (212), the father addresses his son, with the respect due his age. Plunkett’s imaginary adopted son leaves no such legacy. Plunkett’s desire to belong forces him to stay put and focus on archival findings in the island’s museums, while the poet’s search for the island’s history takes him to contemporary Portugal, England, Ireland, and the Mediterranean. Plunkett inevitably quits his venture, having stopped well short of his aim, and turns his attention to nurturing the landscape around him. The poet’s version of history triumphs, but he is pensive and sad, filled with “so much left unspoken” “which will remain unknown / and unread” (321) by his characters.

The effect of this historical research on the local characters is negligible, and they

seem figuratively to live above their history. Casting his characters as heroes, Walcott seems to recommend that we redefine their heroism by acknowledging their common humanity. Though they bear the names of heroic figures, Walcott's characters hold on to their ordinariness and continuously frustrate any attempt at comparison to their Greek namesakes. Walcott's eschewal of heroism also appears in several comic inversions. Hector's chariot becomes a transport van adorned with flames, and a trip to cut down some cedars becomes a battle scene for Philoctete. "I fire one more white rum. Then we advance" (2), he says as if leading an army against a battalion of tree. These details are akin to the kind of meta-theatrical moments that happen when the camera cuts to Hamlet or Lear smoking a cigarette backstage or using a cell phone halfway through the play. The loose guises Walcott places on his characters, as well as the reality they experience, invites viewing as heroic Greek figures.

As the narrative of the poem proceeds and we see Caribbean landscapes transformed into Greek ones, we are in constant negotiation with the classical texts, alternatively seeking their aid and setting them aside. In overdoing what Chakrabarty saw as reliance on a master narrative, Walcott, perhaps unwittingly, makes his reader conscious of this reliance. The Classical overload makes the reader conscious of the baggage he brings to *Omeros*, and he is forced to put aside what he so often imposes on other texts. As the classical text proves a nuisance that must be shed, we are forced to ask ourselves to what extent such texts exert themselves without our knowledge on all the foreign voices, lives, and ideas we encounter. With this approach Walcott undermines cultural narcissism by making the reader conscious of the fact that any serious reading of his work would be akin to looking below the surface of the water, until we can see what

lies deep beneath the pervasive image of our own reflection.

And what we find below the surface is the ongoing impact of long repressed history. The use of the Homeric tradition in *Omeros* finds its focal point in Philoctete's wound. From a cut by a rusty anchor, a symbol of an exhausted naval power and empire in decline, the wound refuses to heal, and Philoctete suspects that the wound is the same as the ones that his ancestors incurred on their ankles during the Middle Passage. With the various layers of Western literary tradition that infuse the poem, Walcott strongly implies that it would take all of that tradition's acknowledgement to bring healing to the region. Furthermore, by choosing Philoctete, or Philoctetes, whose healing was necessary to bring the Trojan war to an end, Walcott also suggests that no peace can be brought to the world's empires unless they heal the victims they abandoned on the peripheries of their empires. Finally, by acknowledging that even the soldiers of empire get wounded, suggested by Plunkett's wound to the head (a cerebral wound, as Ramazani interprets it), Walcott affirms the humanity of both sides of the historical trauma.

Utilized as a way to imagine a possible reconciliation between colonizer and colonized, Philoctete's wound is also a reconciliation of another kind for Walcott. Having deemed much of Afro-Caribbean literature that dwells on the wound of slavery acts of "masochistic recollection," in *Omeros* Walcott embraces the wound motif in this, the most celebrated of his works. Ramazani suggests that Walcott's emphatic use of Africa as a source of healing for Philoctete is an homage to Negritude, an esthetic Walcott had soundly dismissed in the 1960s (Walcott, "Negritude"). Ma Kilman, an obeah woman who invokes African gods on her patient's behalf, heals Philoctete's wound. The gods lead her to a wild plant, the seed of which had come from Africa. Ramazani asserts that

this imaginary return to Africa as a necessity for Afro-Caribbeans would not have been possible without Negritude (59). The obeah woman, the African plant she uses, and the authority granted by local knowledge of the people of the Caribbean allow Walcott to position the region as a potential healing space for both Western and African maladies.

The two characters in *Omeros* who suffer most, Plunkett's wife Maude and Hector, are the ones who attempted to drive a wedge between their presents and their pasts. Maud becomes ill as she grows restless for a return to the Ireland of her childhood; Hector's demise comes shortly after he renounces the sea. The poet-narrator and Plunkett occupy opposite ambivalences about rootedness, the former forced to accept his tenuous belonging, the latter to accept his ongoing restlessness. Achilles and Helen reunite again with the memory of Hector (the child to be born is his) between them, a wedge that they have to turn into bond. The healing of Philoctete also offers Walcott an opportunity to highlight the virtues of Afro-Caribbean inbetweenness as opposed to cultural purity. The old fisherman's healer, Ma Kilman is no African nativist or strict evangelical; she conducts her healing invoking African gods after having gone to church, still dressed in her Sunday best. Ma Kilman's improvised faith is remarkably authentic, drawing deeply on its inheritances and equally committed to its present circumstances. Weighted with history and cognizant of the difficulties faced by the descendants of slavery and colonialism, with *Omeros* Walcott sounds a sober celebration not only of his region, but of human intrepidity, goodwill and survival.



## E. EPILOGUE

Walcott's early poems resonate with an awareness of decay and a sense of belatedness, but turn their back on time. His frequent presence among ruins in those early poems results in the depiction of various states of inertia he attempts to control with heightened lyricism, a sign of his possession of birthright even as the colonizers are on their way out. We hear the grief that propelled him into poetry in "A Far Cry from Africa" and other early poems. Caught between a "fury that shakes like wet leaves in the wind" and "bitter devotion to home," he felt cut off "from heaven's hearing" (*Collected Poems* 29), his cry never beyond "the reef-shore foam" (29). This is not to say that he was not published in London and the US where heaven is not so hard of hearing. Rather, the poetry itself did not move beyond decrying the scrim-edged foam, dirtied by human greed and selfishness. In other words, the work was the outcome of melancholy, which is by nature uneventful, the resultant art intricate but weighed by "oblivion of action" (29).

Walcott's second major move in that phase was to adopt the Crusoe mask and take up an Adamic naming mission. Walcott insisted that where there was nothing, everything was to be made, and the adoption of Adam/Crusoe was meant to initiate a new creative and historical epoch. Admirable for its attempt to claim geographical space, the project entailed historical amnesia that proved ultimately untenable for the poet who called for it. The need seemed so urgent that the poet may have ignored the fact that myths of origin are collective fictions that accrue slowly in the collective imagination like coral, and cannot be cut from whole cloth by a single Adam. He would later recognize that there was never "nothing" in the Caribbean. Dealing with his countrymen in the

present, in his autobiographical *Another Life*, Walcott sets the narrative as a familiar battle between idealized youth and corrupt, opportunistic older leaders. The poem lacks historical markers and contexts, rendering its narrative of betrayal and disappointment in broad, universal terms. Walcott called for the dismissal of African nationalist aspirations through the adoption of historical amnesia, and later accused the nationalists of reactionary vengeance.

Both attempts suffered for their failure to negotiate a vision of the interaction between individual artist and the collective to which he belongs. The artist's assumption of the role of sole mythmaker, in the guise of a persona largely associated with the colonizer, confuses what an individual artist can do and what communities create collectively. His effort may also be the result of what Trinh T. Minh-ha called a "planned authenticity," which configures an ideal born of another's narcissism and attempts to impose it (98-99). *Another Life* becomes an indictment of a collectivity that is based on the experience of a single individual whose life, by all accounts, is not characterized by discernable or inordinate suffering. Both manic efforts reveal to us the psychological level of narcissism that Fanon attributed to the bourgeois in postcolonial societies. (*Wretched* 151) This is the narcissism of adopted children constantly reminded of their non-belonging, who are also constantly on the verge of melancholy. In this context the perpetual search for deficiencies in one's surroundings serves as a form of self-preservation in a changing world where one is already adrift (Cudjoe 194).

These claims raise several problems. First of all, the social and political atmosphere in the Caribbean, especially in Trinidad, where Walcott worked, experienced serious tensions, and the atmosphere was marked by corruption and racist sentiments. If

every postcolonial intellectual artist believed he was merely protecting his bourgeois status when he takes on his culture's or nation's deficiencies, then we would have no hope for consultative or open politics in these societies. Furthermore, many aspects of Black nationalist discourse themselves fall into what Minh-ha called "planned authenticity," perhaps more so than Walcott's Adamic vision. Such developments need both response and silence, seen by Minh-ha as "a response in its own right," which would not have sufficed. Clearly, the poet was doing exactly what was expected of him in making the interventions that he did at the time.

Readers may find it troubling that I consider Walcott to be most effective in his later works, those that the poet wrote in exile. Am I suggesting that exile and work in the metropolis are the only options available to the postcolonial writer for a measure of agency and effectiveness? Sadly, I would not rule out that notion completely. In Walcott's own words, many a postcolonial author has found being "colonial upstart[s] at the end of an empire, / a single, circling homeless satellite" (*Collected Poems* 405), more inspiring and conducive to their writing than being at home. Their associations with and accreditation by the metropolises of imperial powers have granted them great influence and access to power within their own nations.

The issue for me is not what is written per se, the mode of the writing or the place that it appears. Around the time he wrote *Another Life* Walcott began to write from a context of personal and cultural contingency. I do not demean his earlier sadness or the displacement that he experienced, but the nationalist fervor and speculation about his loyalty to the region shook him out of his passivity, a mode that dominated his poetry but is much less evident in his dramatic works. The adoption of the Shabine aura initiated a

new phase in Walcott's development as a postcolonial subject, a mode of action that combines Fanon's third stage of direct agitation against the colonizer and Appiah's second, in which the agitation is also directed at the poet's own society. Perhaps it is not surprising that Walcott's important poems of the period cease to be short lyrics, for neither the intimacy of the lyric nor the descriptive impulse in the pastoral mode can hold the history and context that had saturated every aspect of Caribbean life. *Shabine* marks a major new tone in the poet's voice, expanding his poetry to address a broad spectrum of issues. In it, Walcott finds a form to express his raging anger at a wide variety of culprits, to expose an edgy, insecure masculinity, and to render a passionate incapacity to receive or demonstrate affection. In the poems that follow we encounter greater courage and boldness in Walcott's work, both in content and craft. His impeccable lyrical skills begin to render a variety of voices and experiences, and a host of characters who embolden the poet toward a poetry rooted in history and inclusive in its redemptive force.

**CHAPTER 3:**  
**MAHMOUD DARWISH**  
**AND THE E(S)TH(ET)ICS OF POETIC AGENCY**

A. INTRODUCTION: PERENNIAL TENSIONS

As noted in the two previous chapters Rabindranath Tagore started his career in poetry hardly conscious of the effects of colonialism on his nation, and died as India approached independence, an effort to which he made valuable contributions. Derek Walcott wrote his first poems moved partly by feeling abandoned by the British empire on its way out of the Caribbean, but went on to help shape the unique identity of the Antilles as a diverse, multinational, hybrid culture. Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish had no such historical fortune to accompany his similarly prodigious literary output and reputation. Darwish's career began and ended under Israeli occupation, the newly established Israeli army razing his home village in the Galilee in 1948, and Israeli settlements encircling his burial site in Ramallah sixty years later.

One of Darwish's last books was titled *Halat Hissar (State of Siege)*, written in 2002. The poet composed this poetic sequence in 2002 during a series of lengthy sieges of Ramallah, effectively the capital of Palestine. In *Hissar* Darwish re-visits his earlier poetry and at times imagines interrogation by the people he attempted to portray in his earlier works. The siege of 2002 evokes the soldiers who kept him under house arrest in

the 1960s, and the 1982 Israeli siege of Beirut, where he lived under threat of death or capture by the Israelis. Darwish in 2002 notes with sober irony how he and his people, more than ever, must “nurture hope” (*Al-’amāl al-Jadīdah*, 117) as they continue to exist “within time’s shot range,”<sup>1</sup> (177) facing a new generation of soldiers, the descendants of the ones who imprisoned him decades before in Haifa.

Darwish acknowledges that confrontation with the occupier who has threatened the lives of all Palestinians has been a constant presence in his life, a source of poetic energy as well as an impediment to poetic creation. “My early interest in poetry developed with my realization that I am a victim of some form of military and political aggression” (Darwish, *Shai` ‘an al-Waṭan* 244). Many critics acknowledge that Darwish’s achievement can be said to have been, in Jon Bailey’s words, his creation of a poetry that is “wholly contingent and yet makes of that very circumstance its own power” (373). Yet writing poetry without any references to the Palestinian issue, poetry “that focuses and fascinates the reader’s mind” (337) without the pressures of the Palestinian contingency has been one of Darwish’s life-long aims. The tension between being a spokesman for his people and a private lyrical poet began to preoccupy Darwish very early in his career. He considered himself “made up of two contradictory personalities” (250). “How can I combine my love for a girl and my association with the public cause?”

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<sup>1</sup> All translations of Darwish’s work and of all the Arabic references cited in this essay are mine. The system employed for the transliteration of Arabic terms in the Darwish chapter is DIN 31635, which is a DIN standard for the transliteration of the Arabic alphabet adopted in 1982. The Harakat, fatha, kasra and ḍamma are transliterated as a, i, u. A šadda results in a geminate (consonant written twice), except in the case of the article, which is written with “sun letters” assimilated (aš-šams). An alif marking [a:] is transliterated as ā. tā’ marbūṭa (ة) as word-final -h or -t. ‘alif maqṣūra (ﺀ) appears as ā, rendering it indistinguishable from alif. Long vowels [i:] and [u:] are transliterated as ī and ū. The Nisba suffix appears as -īy-, the nunation is ignored in transliteration. A hyphen - is used to separate morphological elements, notably the article and prepositions. I have used this system throughout the dissertation except in the cases of individual persons who choose to transliterate their in ways that deviate for this system.

(250) he wondered as a young poet. Perhaps part of the irony of *Hissar* is that the poet yet again felt compelled to write about a confrontation with Israeli soldiers. *Hissar* was published after *Sareer al-Ghariba* (*The Stranger's Bed*, 1996) and *Jidariya* (*Mural*, 2000), two successive volumes that include no direct mention of or even subtle allusions to Palestine, during a period in which the poet seemed to at last have found his universal subject matter and poetic voice, having succeeded in making “a passage from the relative to the absolute” (Darwish, *boundary* 2 81).

The tensions between a poetry of external or political contingency and the dream of “universal” non-contingent poetry can be detected very early in Darwish’s career. Addressing these concerns, Darwish in his very early poem “To the Reader” feels compelled to apologize for writing about the difficult conditions in which he lives, conditions that have driven him to anger. The assumption is that anger does not belong in poetry, or that political anger—and politics in general—would not have been part of his poetry, had he a choice in the matter.

“To the Reader”

Black irises in my heart  
and on my lips... flame.  
From what forest did you come to me  
O crosses of anger?

I have allied myself to sorrows,  
I have shaken hands with banishment and hunger  
My hands are anger,  
my mouths is anger  
the blood of my arteries a juice of anger.  
*O my reader*  
*do not ask me to whisper,*  
*do not expect musical delight.*

This is my suffering..  
a wild shot in the sand

and another to the clouds.  
My fate is my anger  
and all fire starts out in anger. (*Al- 'amāl al-`Ūlā* 15)

Where did this anger come from, the poet asks, and why was he burdened with it? These questions suggest that the poet was once in a state that precluded anger, that anger is not of his ordinary nature. We as readers, however, wonder as to when that peaceful state could have existed for Darwish and his countrymen between 1948 and the time of the poem's writing? Perhaps we are doing the poem injustice by assuming a close proximity between Darwish and the speaker of this poem. Yet, the poet had already announced himself by titling his very first volume *'A'asafir bila Ajniha (Birds Without Wings*, 1961) a metaphor for the cooped-up Palestinians living in the state of Israel. In a later volume he would declare himself "A Lover from Palestine." Aware that the poet is Palestinian who has begun to write after decades of angry Palestinian poetry preoccupied with the travails of the homeland under British colonial rule and Zionist neocolonialism, why would we not expect the poet to be angry?

It seems clear the young Darwish is up to something different with this apology to the reader, for up to then no such precaution was heard or deemed necessary in twentieth-century Palestinian poetry. We are left to wonder what place the poet wishes to carve out for himself by bemoaning his unwanted anger. He declares that he would rather offer the reader some whispers, as expected of an amorous young poet, and some musical delight, suggesting that he wishes to write different sorts of poems. Providing this apology, the poet acknowledges the reader's desire for placid poetry, that such a desire is proper and that perhaps love poetry, full of positive emotions, serene meditations and lyricism, is



what poetry ought to be. Darwish, therefore, apologizes for having to write poetry that does not fulfill his reader's legitimate expectations.

Let's now turn our attention to the reader that the young Darwish anticipates, and why he feels he has to justify, not only his anger, but the timbre and content of his future poetry. Would Darwish's fellow Palestinians object to his anger? Would his fellow Arab readers not understand his anger? No. By the time Darwish was writing, literature of commitment, *Adab al-Iltizam* (which I will discuss in more detail) had become firmly established in Arab letters outside of Palestine/Israel. And within Palestinian literature, Darwish was part of the third generation of twentieth-century Palestinian poets whose careers were sparked in response to the experience of occupation. So why then is our poet concerned about his anger? The issue is of course larger than one poet's sensibilities, and is about justifying the consequences of the trauma experienced by the Palestinians. Here Darwish is speaking as a single self, but as with much of his work, that self-voicing is embraced and claimed by other Palestinians. Darwish seems to argue that anger has no place in poetry, that poetry should offer the intimacy of whispers, in equal parts consolation and the consoling pleasure of music. Darwish knows this and announces his sadness that he cannot offer either. But again, if Palestinians and other Arab readers do not expect this kind of poetry from Darwish, or will not willingly grant his anger license to sound itself, to whom is Darwish speaking? Clearly, Darwish intended for his voice to carry beyond his fellow Palestinians and Arabs.

Couched in apology and sincerity, the poem is not without a degree of slyness. The poet apologizes for his anger even as he forcefully expresses it. The poem is short enough that it can stand being whispered, and at the same time it loudly states the poet's

intention/dilemma. Also, the poet is clearly being coy when he tells us not to expect musical delight; the poem is precisely measured and exquisitely rhymed. The point to which we ought to pay attention—and it is one that Darwish would bring up again and again—is the poet’s desire for a poetry that does not arise from a fateful anger, or later, exile, siege, or betrayal. Darwish repeatedly longs to write poetry that goes beyond ontological state, or the perpetual “madness of being Palestinian” (Darwish, “Madness” 38).

During the 1990s several literary critics in the Arab world celebrated Darwish’s ability to extricate himself from the Palestinian subject matter in its detail (see *Zeitunat al-Manfa*, 1997 and *Al-Muhtalif al-Haqiqi*, 1999). Critic Subhi Hadidi delights in the fact that “Darwish has been able to draw lyric condensation that addresses the universal existential tensions of our postmodern times from the specifics of his experiences” (49). In *Sareer al-Ghariba* and *Jidaraya*, Darwish states that he had seen such a development in his work as successful, and for reasons close to the ones Hadidi outlines. Salma Khadra Jayyusi, the leading canon-maker of Palestinian literature, judges Darwish’s success mainly on his ability to transcend the political expediency of his earlier work and by his submersion into esthetic experiments as he remained dedicated to the Palestinian cause (61-65). By the time he published *Sareer* (1996) and *Jidariya* (2000), Darwish had been firmly established as the national poet of Palestine for three decades. The Palestinian political situation during the brief Oslo agreement years allowed for experimentation, and he, as a poet tied to the mission of national spokespersonship, felt he had a longer leash allowing him to explore more freely. Several critics noted then that Darwish had earned this phase of personal expression having given his Palestinian, and

indeed all Arab, audiences so much over the decades (see Beydoun, Al-'Ustā, and Abdul-Mutalib).

One of the gifts Darwish offered his Arab and Palestinian audience is the poem “Identity Card,” which was written in 1964 and closes the volume in which the poem “To the Reader” appeared. “Identity Card” has been a fan favorite throughout the Arab world, one that Darwish was frequently asked to read before thousands of listeners at his recitations. The poem was made into a popular song and has been an unofficial Arab nationalist anthem for decades. Yet it is one that Darwish has never read in public once he left Israel/Palestine in 1971.

Record!  
I am an Arab  
and my identity card is number fifty thousand.  
I have eight children  
and the ninth is due after summer.  
Does this anger you?

Record!  
I am an Arab  
employed with fellow workers at a quarry.  
I have eight children.  
I earn their bread,  
clothes and books  
out of these rocks.  
I do not beg for charity at your doors.  
Nor do I kneel  
    on your marble floor.  
    So does this anger you?

Record!  
I am an Arab.  
I am a name without a title,  
patient in a country  
where people live on furor or rage.  
    My roots  
    were entrenched before the birth of time  
    and before the opening of the eras,  
    before the pines and the olive trees

and before the grasses grew.  
My father comes from the family of the plow  
not from a privileged clan.  
And my grandfather, a farmer,  
not well-bred or well-born,  
taught me to be proud  
before he taught me how to read.  
And my house is like a watchman's hut  
made of branches and cane.  
Are you satisfied with my status?  
I am without a title, just a name!

Record!  
I am an Arab,  
hair color, black as coal,  
eyes brown.  
Features:  
an iqal on my head tied around a kaffiyah,  
a hand solid as a stone  
that scratches whoever touches it.  
And my address:  
a weaponless village, forgotten,  
its streets too without names,  
all its men are in the quarry or the fields.  
Does this anger you?

Record!  
I am an Arab.  
You have stolen my ancestors' orchards,  
the land I farmed  
with my children.  
You left us nothing  
except for these rocks.  
Will your State take them too  
as it's been said?!So Now!  
Record at the top of the first page:  
I do not hate people  
nor do I steal.  
But if I become hungry  
I will eat my robber's flesh.  
Beware then, beware of my hunger  
and my anger! (*Al-'amāl al-'Ulā* 80-84)

There is nothing in the poem that diverges from Darwish's consistent message as a poet and spokesman for the Palestinian people. The speaker of the poem, who bears a remarkable resemblance to Darwish's own father, was expelled from his village, lost his farm, ended up working in a quarry, and fathered eight children. The angry speaker tells his story under occupation, how he has suffered patiently and remained proud despite the cruel hand that the occupation has brought upon him. But now he draws a red line: he will not beg from the one who stole his land and he will fight his usurper to fend off hunger, indeed he will turn into a cannibal if need be. The speaker's last words are "Beware of my hunger and my anger," the two intertwined irrevocably. This poem provides a rational basis for the speaker's rage that resonates effectively with the references to anger that open the volume in "To the Reader".

Why then has Darwish refused to recite the poem in public since he left Palestine/Israel, when it still encompasses his political stance and despite the pleas for it coming from audiences around the Arab world? During one packed recitation in Beirut a member of the audience kept saying "Record, I am an Arab," asking that Darwish read the poem. Fed up with the repeated request, Darwish shot back at the listener, "Record, yourself!" and went on to read a different poem (Al-Sayyid 7). Darwish said that the circumstances that sparked the poem occurred when he was placed under partial house arrest in Haifa in the mid-1960s. He had been tried in court for a poem he published in 1965 (Snir 161). The judge placed him under probation with the stipulation that he never leave his residence after sunset, and that he sign in at the police station every day (Al-Naqqash 102).

“‘Write it down: I am Arab!’ I said that to a government official. I said it in Hebrew to provoke him, but when I said it in Arabic (in the poem) the Arab audience in Nazareth was electrified” (*Dhikara* 180). The poem, a dramatic monologue addressed to Darwish’s detainers, continues as a translation of what Darwish would have said to the Israeli policemen in Hebrew. The reason the audience was electrified may have had a lot to do with putting in Arabic a private conversation that each humiliated Palestinian had had while facing Israeli officials and soldiers, making private anguish into a public testament that evoked a collective feeling that broke down barriers between I and We, and between the poet and his audience.

The poem was written within the first four decades of the existence of the state of Israel, a time in which the Jewish state did not recognize the Palestinians as a nationality and the words Palestine and Palestinian were never mentioned. Palestinians who lived within the border of the state of Israel were merely Arabs. The translation and placement of expressions uttered in Hebrew into a poem in Arabic made the moment public, and turned humiliation on its head. Palestinians living in Israel, beginning with the audience in Nazareth who asked to hear the poem repeated six times, identified with this reversal as a way to turn the word “Arab” from a derogatory term into a declaration of dignified humanity before the Israelis who confiscated their lands and officially designated them third-class citizens. The refrain of the poem “Record / I am an Arab” took on a different resonance outside of Palestine/Israel, devoid of the specific context in which Darwish wrote the poem. It became a battle cry and the poem an anthem expressing Arab national pride and even chauvinism, as opposed to the defiance of subjugation and racism that the poet had meant it to be. Darwish explains, “the Jews call the Palestinian an Arab, and so I

shouted in my torturer's face 'Record I am an Arab!' Does it make sense then for me to stand before a hundred million Arabs saying 'I am an Arab.' I'll not read the poem." (Al-Qaissī 13)

I bring up the history of Darwish's relation to "Identity Card" and his Arab audiences' claim upon it to point to his awareness of the contingent circumstances that surround his poems. As opposed to his desire for "universal" non-contingent poems, here we see him insist that poems do target different audiences and serve as specific rhetorical gestures or even as political messages that should not be taken out of their historical context. In other words, poems do not necessarily have "universal" messages just because they emerge during different contingencies with different interlocutors.

To understand Darwish's career as a major search for poetic agency, this study will outline the evolution of Darwish's poetry, keeping in mind these two contending forces, or rather these two definitions of the role of poetry as a means toward agency, while operating within it. And though it is difficult to accept the polarities Darwish sets between engagement and private contemplation, love and political struggle, the expedient and the enduring, the relative and the absolute, what is remarkable is the degree to which Darwish managed to remain present as a discourse-maker in the Palestinian context, building bridges between these polarities for maximal agency. This discourse-making manifested in essays, interviews, and primarily through poetry.

The evolution of Darwish's poetry constitutes a struggle to preserve the poet's presence within political deliberations, and to maintain and develop the esthetic pursuit that grants the poet the degree of independence upon which his relevance as a discourse-maker depends. Darwish's poetry kept up with his various personal displacements and

political affiliations. He redefined his role as a poet through his compositional practice, and his attempts to bridge the tension “between ethics and esthetics” (Darwish, La `Aḥad Yaşıl 19) have helped to shape the Palestinian national discourse and define the parameters and priorities of Palestinian identity formation.



## B. THE POET AND THE NATIONAL LITERATURE

### 1. Biography:

Darwish was born on March 13, 1942, in the village of Birwe in Palestine while it was still under British mandate. When he was six years old, the Israeli army occupied and then destroyed Birwe and over 400 other Palestinian villages. Darwish's family fled to Lebanon, then returned a year later, "illegally" relocating in the nearby village of Dayr-al-Asad and then in al-Jadeeda, where they still reside. Darwish and his family became internal refugees living under Israeli military rule, legally classified as "present-absentee aliens." Darwish recalls how his teachers in the Arab school he attended had to hide him from the Israeli education officers who insisted that only Arab Israeli citizens attended such a school. Darwish was never allowed to become an Israeli citizen; nonetheless, he was very active along with other Palestinians in the Israeli communist circles, first with Maki (the Communist Party of Israel) and later with Rakah (the Israeli Communist Party, which was the only Israeli party that accepted Palestinian/Israeli Arab members). After completing high school—he could not afford and would not have been allowed to enroll in Israeli university—Darwish began to write for Arabic-language communist newspapers and became a renowned figure for his articles and his poetry, often recited to packed houses. Before leaving Israeli in 1970, Darwish was imprisoned several times for reciting his poetry and traveling inside Israel without a permit. He was jailed five times and was subjected to long spells of house arrest during which he was required to register daily at a police station in Haifa.

In 1970 Darwish was allowed to leave Israel while on an Israeli communist party delegation to attend a conference in Moscow, where he accepted a scholarship. In 1971 he surprised his Palestinian colleagues at Rakah by arriving in Cairo, where he accepted an invitation to work as a journalist in Egypt's leading newspaper *Al-Ahram*; there he shared an office with then future Nobel laureate Naguib Mahfouz. Two years later Darwish moved to Beirut to work at the PLO's Center of Palestine Studies, became fully involved in the PLO, and became part of the resistance to Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories.

He remained in Beirut through the 1982 Israeli occupation of the city, fleeing first to Tunis to continue working as part of the PLO's cultural apparatus, and then to Paris where he edited *Al-Karmal*, the leading Palestinian cultural and literary review. In 1987 PLO chairman Yasser Arafat recruited Darwish to write the Palestinian Declaration of Independence, with Edward Said editing and supervising the English translation. Released at a momentous meeting of the Palestinian National Assembly, convened in Algiers in November of that year, the declaration laid the ground for a future Palestinian state that would exist in peace with the Jewish state, based in territories occupied by Israel in 1967.

In 1993, Darwish resigned from all official affiliations with the PLO and the Palestinian authority headed by Arafat in protest of the signing of the Oslo Accords. He returned to Palestine in 1995 and devoted himself to his writing, and to editing the *Al-Karmal*. Darwish lived between Ramallah and Amman, Jordan until his death in August of 2008. He published 25 books of poems (one was published posthumously in 2009), five books of experimental writing, and several collections of journalism. His work has

been translated into more than two dozen languages. Darwish won a number of international awards, including the Lenin Peace Prize in 1983 (USSR), The Knight of the Order of Arts and Letters in 1993 (France), the Lannan Foundation Prize for Cultural Freedom in 2001 (USA), the Prince Claus award (the Netherlands), the Oweiss Prize in 2005 (United Arab Emirates), and the Arab Poetry Prize in 2006 (Egypt). Darwish's experiences as a Palestinian whose "array of displacements" (Nassar and Rahman 1) ran the gamut of Palestinian suffering made him a symbol of the Palestinian cause and experience.

## 2. The Poet and Palestinian Literature: a Context

Historians of Palestinian literature agree that Palestinian literature was a minor literature within the larger body of Arab literature (see Al-Naqqash 1972, Kanafani 1966, al-Khateeb 1968, Suleiman 1984, and Jayyusi 1977, 1992). Palestine's best known poets in the first half of the Twentieth century, such as Ibrahim Tuqan (1905-41), Abu Salma (originally Abd al-Karim al-Karmi, 1906-1980), and Abdulrahim Mahmoud (1913-1948) never rose to become major poets in the Arab world, but received some recognition after the Nakba. Though it houses the Haram al-Sharif, the third holiest site of Islam, Palestine itself "has never been the home of any central political authority and had not princes or patrons of art to help and encourage poets and writers" (Jayyusi 35). Palestinian youth seeking education traveled to Beirut and Cairo as well as other Arab and world capitals before and after the creation of Israel, and "many of the Palestinian talents that flourished before 1948 had lived and usually studied outside Palestine" (Jayyusi 6). Jayyusi explains that

although Palestinians were highly appreciative of culture and had quickly developed a modern educational system in the [second half] of the twentieth century, Palestine had, prior to the 1948 disaster, remained less affected by the literary currents blowing across the Arab world and had never been a center for the more innovative trends that other Arab countries in the vicinity of Palestine. (6)

Modern prose fiction fared rather badly in Palestine before 1948 and continued to struggle for a place in the literary culture partly due to the entrenched position poetry held as the main literary genre of the region, and the nation's political crisis fostered an atmosphere averse to experimentation. This is not say that the country lacked literary output. In fact, Palestinian poets were highly engaged with political and social development in their country, especially after the Balfour declaration of 1917, the British mandate, and through the time from the 1936 revolt until the 1948 war.

Critics Al-Naqqash, Mustafa, and Abu Shawer argue that the years following the 1948 Nakba (catastrophe), which brought on the establishment of the state of Israel and the expulsion hundreds of thousands of Palestinians from their ancestral villages, shocked Palestinian writers into "stunned bewilderment" (Jayyusi 18), driving many to silence for a few years. Palestinian literature began to re-emerge after the shock turned to anger at the agonies of Israeli political oppression, legal discrimination, and land confiscation. Palestinians inside Israel, like Darwish, were also buoyed by real transformations in the Arab world such as the 1952 Egyptian revolution led by Gamal Abdul Nasser and the Suez war of 1956, the beginning of the Algerian revolution that same year, the unification of Egypt and Syria in 1958 and the nationalist revolution in Iraq that toppled a pro-Western monarchy, also in 1958. Mustafa notes that early on Palestinian poets inside Israel resisted poetic innovations that had been taken up in the major Arab capitals, such as the modern *tafiila* poetry. They stuck to the classical prosodic practice that mandated

the use of a constant metrical pattern and a single rhyme scheme. Feeling “isolated, desiring to escape their reality, and seeking solace in poetry they were familiar with” (Mustafa, 215) poets of the generation that preceded Darwish’s employed diction that drew largely from the established classical and neoclassical repertoire.

Hardly any Palestinian prose fiction was written inside Israel in the first decade after the Nakba. Palestinian writers in the diaspora, however, had a better chance to follow up with developments emerging in other Arab regions. It was they who produced the first modern Palestinian short stories and novels, as represented in the work of Ghassan Kanafani, Samira Azzam, and Jabra Jabra. The diaspora poets such as Salma Khadra Jayyussi and Tawfiq Sayyigh contributed to the revolutionary modernization of Arabic poetry in the 1950s.

The disjuncture in Palestinian literature between the inside (of Israel) and outside of it (mainly Lebanon and Syria) occurred due to the blockade that the state of Israel enforced on its Palestinian Arab citizens. Qahwajī reports that there was not a single public library in all the Arab cities or villages (281). Furthermore, a ban on Arab-owned presses and independent Arab publications went on for decades, thus assuring that Palestinians inside the state of Israel, like Darwish, were cut off from their Arab neighbors and from other Palestinians living there (287-290). A trade embargo between Israel and the Arab countries also denied Palestinians access to publications from the Arab world. Furthermore, the state was engaged in a Hebrewfication of the Arab population by imposing education in Hebrew and allowing only a limited curriculum of Arabic literature and religious studies in state schools. Al-Naqqash notes that from 1948

to 1968 only 64 books in Israel were printed in Arabic, some of which were written by Arabic-speaking Jewish Zionists (32).

At the time Darwish started writing, and to a large extent until today, Palestinian literature written in Israel has been what Deleuze and Guattari called “a minor literature.” Deleuze and Guattari locate a minor literature in the repressed and censored dimensions of a culture. According to them, a minor literature evolves and is characterized by deterritorialization, political engagement, and collective articulation. In their discussion of Kafka, they drew the concept of a deterritorialized language as a vehicle for self-expression from the Jews in pre-World War I Prague who formed a German-speaking minority “cut off from masses” (16) of Czech speakers around them. The Palestinians were similarly cut off from the rest of the Arabic-speaking world, and their writings in Arabic were also cut off from the Jews of Israel, who were not interested in the least. Furthermore, the Hebrew language had made very few inroads to the Arab community before the establishment of Israel, and Arabs who did write in Hebrew were practitioners of an even more minor literature.

The second feature of a minor literature according to Deleuze and Guattari appears as a strong political orientation. “Everything in them is political” (Deleuze and Guattari 17), and they insist that individual and psychological concerns of a minor literature articulate themselves in terms of “a political program” (17). “The cramped spaces of minor literature magnify each individual intrigue and connect it to politics” (Deleuze and Guattari 17), and the danger of a disappearing national and collective consciousness outside the nation urges the writer to forge alliances, to participate in different configurations of identity.

A strong political orientation can be readily discerned in the Darwish poems presented in my Introduction. He was part of a generation of poets whose main subject matter was the political dilemma in which they found their people embroiled. Several intellectuals and artists prior to Darwish's generation had in fact forged alliances with Israeli political activists. Foremost among them is the novelist Emile Habibi, who joined the Israeli communist party MAKI (later renamed Rakah) in the late 1940s, bringing with him several other writers as well. MAKI, Rakah and other communist groups were primarily Jewish institutions, and thus allowed to print materials in Arabic. Through these communist newspapers, Habibi and later Darwish, as well as other Arab authors, began to publish their work. Some Palestinian writers, such as Ziyad Tawfiq, saw the Palestinian crisis from a global perspective and refused to devote their attention to fighting only Israeli injustice toward Palestinians, instead urging Palestinian authors to engage in a global anti-capitalist anti-imperialist class struggle.

Closely linked to the political disposition of minor literature lies a third feature, that of collective articulation. Deleuze and Guattari explain that the political element in minor literature assumes a kind of collective will operating within it, or the attempt to fashion such a will. "What each other says individually already constitutes a common action" (Deleuze and Guattari 17). Since the writing of minor literature originates in communities marked by a loss or erasure of national or collective identity, memories and other fragments of historical and cultural repositories need to be brought together. Here "literature finds itself positively charged with the role and function of collective, and even revolutionary, enunciation" (Deleuze and Guattari, 17). Darwish's poem "Identity Card," cited above, is a supreme example of a collective articulation. I have already noted

that the poem is a kind of dramatic monologue that joins the biography of the poet's father with the poet's own anger to fashion a statement with which many Palestinians and Arabs elsewhere identified.

Deleuze and Guattari's outline of the basic elements of a minor literature sounds a great deal like the stipulations for the production of a literature of commitment, what came to be called *adab al-iltizam* in Arabic. Influenced by social realism (and to some extent by Sartre's writings on engagement), the *iltizam* critics working in the 1950s, led by Salama Moussa (1887-1958) in Egypt and Raif al-Khourri and Marun Abboud in Lebanon, emphasized mass communication as an essential property of committed literature, as well as the necessity of writing in the language of the people. Men and women of letters were called upon to engage with the masses and to share in the sufferings and joys of the common people. Writers were also called upon to portray real life, the struggle between the classes, and to advocate heroism among the oppressed. Optimism and faith in the strength and determination of the masses should permeate literature; general and class understanding, rather than an individual point of view, should guide the literary work.

Darwish, in keeping with the poets of his generation, operated in an atmosphere where poetry, recited and printed, had been established as a means of political action. Palestinian poets before Darwish were fully engaged in political agitation against the British not just through their poetry but also political organization and education. Among Palestine's early heroes was the poet Abdulrahim Mahmoud, who was involved in militant activity against the British in the 1936 Palestinian revolt and was forced to flee the country. In 1948 he returned to fight the Israeli army and died in battle. The shaping



of Darwish's poet-persona. as such had a pre-existing model of the poet as political agent. Ancient classical Arabic poetry has a tradition of poet-warriors such as Imru-al-Qais, Antra ibn Shaddad, Abi Firas al-Hamadani and al-Mutannabi, who were either rulers or sought to become political leaders in their tribes or principedoms. Neoclassical poetry of the modern era also offered several examples of poets whose works reflected and influenced public opinion. The romantic mode that emerged in the Arab world in the twentieth century as represented by the Lebanese poet Al-Akhtal al-Sagheer (originally Bishara al-Khouri, 1885-1986) and Abulqassem al-Shabbi of Tunisia (1909-1934), among others, bore the strongest expression of Arab national longing for national independence and freedom. Through these models of Arabic poetry written before 1948, Darwish was made conscious of poetry's history as a guiding discourse and tool for political change. Beginning with his first attempts at poetry, Darwish saw that both Palestinians and the Israeli authorities understood the power of poetry. Darwish first publicly appeared as a poet in grade school, where he recited a poem addressed to a Jewish youngster like himself who had the school supplies and educational possibilities he did not. News of the poem reached an Israeli military officer, and the young Darwish was accosted (Darwish, *Shai`an al-Waṭan* 219-220). Darwish's five imprisonments were sentences for poetic activity, such as traveling to recite his poems without being granted permission, or for a poem that was published in a newspaper. His poetry put him in direct confrontation with the Israeli authorities (Al-Naqqash 110-113).

The Palestinians in Israel in the first decade after 1948 understood, and fostered, the power of poetry to galvanize their community. Denied permission to organize to fight for their rights as citizens and residents of the state of Israel, and refusing to submit to

government censorship for publication, Palestinian communities in the 1950s began to organize poetry festivals which usually ended up culminating as political rallies and during which the poets and political organizers involved were harassed or arrested. Qahwajī and Mustafa report that thousands attended these festivals where the poets persistently focused on themes of the land and village life, elucidating the concerns of Palestinian agricultural workers and farmers who had been deprived of their land, their social support networks, and their right to work independently and to be taxed fairly. The fusion of poetry to political expression created in the minds of the Palestinians an association between poetry and great moments in the emergence of political will power.

According to Qahwajī, poetry

encouraged the youth and those susceptible to being brought under the fold of Israeli hegemony, most likely in a subservient fashion, to seek a political and emotional discourse that uplifted them instead and herein lay the role of poetry in helping them counteract the Israeli government's effort to erase their Arab heritage through negligence. (Qahwajī 284)

Darwish and other Palestinian poets began to appear on the scene during these festivities in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Interestingly, their adoption of some of the more recent developments in Arabic poetry as they understood them (shorter lines, opposition to classical diction, and the use of everyday images and common objects as symbols), along with the influence of international revolutionary literature's emphasis on collective representation of the experiences of ordinary, working people, served the young poets in a politically expedient manner. These modern approaches brought the poets closer to the masses where such innovations would otherwise alienate them. The largely semi-literate Palestinian population respected classical Arabic poetry, "but their poetry, the one in which they saw themselves most closely represented, was the

vernacular form” (Kanafani 109). The modern poetic line as presented by Darwish’s generation was shorter, lighter in diction, and played off a variety of metrical registers and rhyme schemes. It exhibited a proximity to the vernacular poetry, and evoked a sense of exuberance and youthfulness rather than the somber authoritativeness of classical Arabic poetry. In essence “the poets of the resistance” writing inside Israel, as Darwish, Sameeh al-Qassem, Tawfiq Ziyad and Sallim Gibran came to be known, kept up with the latest poetic developments in the other Arab capitals and in doing so managed to connect strongly with their fellow citizens. Instead of alienating a large chunk of their populace as other modernist poets such as Said A’aql, Adonis (Ali Ahmad Said), and even some more committed poets such as Salah Abdul-Sabur and Khalil Hawi did, the young Palestinian poets in Israel succeeded in getting the populace to embrace the new poetry.

Another factor that should be noted is the extent to which Palestinian literature inside Israel, beginning with Darwish’s generation, was to some degree a hybrid literature. A minor literature, as Deleuze and Guattari note, emerges partly out of isolation, and takes on its particular inflections due to that isolation. The emergence of a new, rejuvenated Palestinian poetry inside the state of Israel, poetry that had parted ways with earlier Palestinian poetry, formally and tonally, can be said to have begun in the early 1960s with the emergence of the first generation of bilingual Palestinians writers who spoke (and read) both Arabic and Hebrew. Historical developments in the region and the emergence of a new generation of writers bent on playing an active role in their community’s political future clearly contributed to the birth of this new literature. The acquisition of Hebrew by Darwish and the poets of his generation also played a part. Hebrew, as Darwish acknowledges, was very helpful in breaking their isolation from the

rest of the literary world (Wazen 106). One of the first poets that influenced Darwish was none other than Hayyim Bialik (1873-1934), the national poet of Israel. He was introduced to Bialik by a Jewish high school teacher he adored, who taught him “to read the Torah as a literary text, and to study Bialik regardless of his political enthusiasms, paying attention only to this poetic energy” (Darwish, *Shai`an al-Waṭan* 222).

Darwish would go on to acknowledge an appreciation for the Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai (1924-2000) and other Israeli poets he read while still in Israel (Suleiman 198; Shalat 153). With modern Arab literature and Arabic translations of world literature unavailable, Hebrew became the second reading language of Darwish’s generation and for almost three decades their sole access to world literature, modern and ancient. Darwish was influenced by Nazim Hikmet and Vladimir Mayakovsky through Hebrew translation (Yaḥyā 182). He continued to read Lorca, his life-long influence, in Hebrew for the rest of his life. Another undeniable influence on Darwish was the Hebrew Bible, which he drew on from early in his career and with which he engaged in serious debates over his lifetime (see Neuwirth, Shalat, and Ibrahim 2005). The Bible and the Israeli poets provided Darwish with interlocutors with whom he competed poetically and politically. Darwish utilized Biblical figures to voice the Palestinian cause, and as to the modern Israeli poets, he stated that he competed with them so that he could demonstrate his greater attachment and love for the land, and he continued to compete with them (Wazen 123-124).

The influence of Hebrew on Darwish and his fellow Palestinian poets who came of age inside Israel receives little mention in criticism of his work, despite his repeated references to reading in that language. I believe that his familiarity with Hebrew and his

desire to draw from and to speak outside the fold of Arabic has enriched his poetic project from the beginning, and can be traced throughout his work. We will engage this issue in a deeper manner when we turn to Darwish's post-Beirut period, especially the long poems in *Ara ma Urid (I See What I Wish to See)*, published in 1990. In the meantime, let us turn to analysis of Darwish's poems, published during his first phase in Israel, to understand how he approached his role as a poet and as a cultural and political agent.

### C. POET UNDER OCCUPATION, 1964-1971

The underlying facts of Darwish's life as a young man, such as the marginalized and oppressed status of his community, the state of linguistic and cultural siege under which they lived, the intertwining of poetry and politics, and his familiarity with the literature of the colonizer, shaped him. Emerging in the early 1960s and starting from a lyrical standpoint where a single voice expresses personal suffering, he set about to speak for his community as well as to reach out to his community's adversaries. I noted earlier how keen Darwish was to make a connection with his readers. The assumption of the burden of anger arising from a collective wound helps establish the poet as a spokesperson for his people. Darwish's voice was emboldened by his adherence to the basic contours and duties of *adab al-iltizam*, or committed literature, whereby the larger cause of the community supercedes the individual's suffering. His poems in this framework, as Darwish himself acknowledges, would be

... colorless  
tasteless...voiceless  
unless they carry a lamp from house to house  
unless the simple folks understood their meaning (*Al-'amāl al-'Ūlā* 63)

Poetry must move within the community like a light clarifying a political vision and provide intellectual enlightenment. Ambitious as it may be, poetry has to be written in ways that simple folks can still understand. This combination of instruction, seriousness, and simplicity constitute an esthetic value within the *iltizam* framework that Darwish adopted. In Darwish's case this general approach contained four aims that he went about fulfilling in his first decade of writing in Palestine. The first was to speak and foster a collective consciousness among the Palestinians in Israel and elsewhere; second, to help

shape an empowered Palestinian subjectivity; third, to foster exuberance and enthusiasm as opposed to melancholy and subsequently, subservience; fourth, to demythologize the occupier and to communicate with him.

### 1. Speaking in WE

Kanafani and Al-Naqqash report on the dearth of Palestinian, Arabic-language work published in Israel in the 1950s and '60s. Al-Naqqash informs us that a total of 64 books were published in Arabic in Israel during the period from 1948-1967. Some of these books were published by Arabic-speaking Jews and expressed pro-Zionist attitudes and experiences. Among literary works, most were romance narratives or *zajal* (amorous) poetry, deemed safe and apolitical by Israeli censors. The main venues for political/poetic expression were the aforementioned poetry festivals, which included poetic recitations but produced no publications. Kanafani adds that in Israel many Palestinian funerals, not just the ones where the dead were victims of Israeli violence, became politicized. The funeral criers, reports Kanafani, wove resistance politics into their dirges (15-18). Subsequently, poets began to recite poetry at funerals that went beyond the elegiac occasion, poetry that expressed resistance to Israeli policies regarding the Palestinians inside the country. As such, written poetry was brought to a state of orality and the poet had to become as much a performer as a writer. Darwish and his generation of poets came to a scene where the privacy of poetic composition was quickly brought to the fore of public performance. He and the poets of his generation had no stage fright as they brought the audience with them to the page as they wrote their poems.

Let's turn to a poem from that period, "And He Returned... In a Coffin," to see

Darwish in action:

They say in our country  
they say with sadness  
about my friend who passed  
and returned in a coffin

His name...  
Don't mention his name!  
Let's keep it in our hearts.  
Let's not let the word  
get lost in the air like ash.  
Let him be a sensitive wound... no dressing  
has found a way to it.  
I fear, my loved ones, I fear O orphans,  
I fear that we will forget him in the throng of names.  
I fear he will melt in winter storms!  
I fear that our wounds will fall asleep  
inside our hearts.  
I fear our wounds will sleep. (*Al-'amāl al-'Ūlā* 25-26)

The poem is an elegy for an innocent young man who left his home and returned in a coffin. In the second and third section that follow the passage above Darwish proves the young man's innocence through his lack of experience in love and his lack of travel. In the fourth section the poet turns to the young man's mother, addressing her as "Mother," and advises her not to pull her "tears by the root." He adds that she should leave in her "well of tears, two tears / for tomorrow his father may die... or his brother / or I, his friend" (30). It is only in the fifth and final section that we learn the details of the young man's death:

They speak a great deal in our country  
about my friend  
the fires of lead on his cheeks  
his chest...his face.  
Don't explain things?  
I saw his wound,  
I stared deep into his horizons...



My heart goes out to our children  
and each mother that embraces a deathbed  
Friends of the faraway traveler  
don't ask, "When will he return?"  
Don't ask too much,  
but ask: when  
will the men wake up! (*Al-'amāl al-'Ūlā* 31)

As to be expected of an elegy with shades of melodrama, the poem is full of tears. The victim's innocence is emphasized to evoke sympathy, and his weeping mother is brought before us to console. Yet despite this uninhibited sense of grief, and indeed the desire to evoke a sense of grief in the reader, the poet withholds some information. We learn, and only at the very end of the poem, that the victim died violently, his corpse bearing "fires of lead on his cheeks / and his chest...and face" (30).

Keeping the victim's identity unknown will assure his immortality, contends the poet. Darwish, except in a few elegies of his own friends, never mentions the names of "victims" especially in this early period when the emphasis is on raising collective consciousness. The presence of the victim's name will make him "disappear in a forest of names," (26) but his essence can be preserved in a poem. The issue is not the victim's death, but the fear that the people's "wounds will die inside them" (27). The poet emphatically commands his listeners not to mention the victim's name, but to leave the victim nameless inside their hearts so that their wounds remain alive. No one therefore should have a private grief that ends with the gradual un-remembering of a person. Rather, the Palestinians as a collective should maintain an abstract and unified image of their victim as a symbol of their suffering and inspiration to bring it to an end. The poet is the first to admit to this; he is speaking about his friend to all of his people, sharing his

grief and by sharing it, trying to conjure a form of empowerment out of it. Indeed, even the deceased's mother is asked not to expend her sorrow.

The poet's job in this poem is to choreograph grief. The setting of the poem is theatrical; the poet is addressing a crowd. As he is about to mention the victim's name, and as he feels the crowd about to utter it, he boldly commands them not to do so. He establishes himself firmly as the primary mourner. The poet-speaker informs us that the victim is his friend before we learn that the boy's mother is somewhere in the crowd. After he describes the victim's life, he turns to her and tells her before the listener/spectators how to manage her grief. As to the public's grief, the poet tells them how to act and gives his reasons. At the end of the poem, the poet commands the people again as to how they should address this tragedy. Do not ask about what will happen to the victim who lies still with his grieving mother beside him, rather ask yourselves when will the men among you wake up, he commands. That the poet turns the moment of his private grief into a call for collective action is to be expected in resistance literature. But I am still struck by the confidence of the poet's voice. He is confident of his knowledge about the victim; in fact he knows things no one else can know: "I saw his wound / I stared deep into his horizons" (27). No one else has had this vision and it is this ability to see into other's horizons that emboldens the poet. He takes command of a public situation—indeed he turns the private into the public—and the people are brought together in his grief, the experience enlightening them about their own situation and how they can gear up to change it.

Confident as the poet-speaker seems in this poem, he somehow never uses the first-person plural pronoun. Instead of starting off with "In our country we say," he

somewhat abstracts the “we” into a “they,” perhaps feeling the weight of spokespersonship. Of course, as argued above, the poet-speaker projects no such shyness in the content of the poem, and we may understand his boldness in directing the traffic of emotion as a way to earn the use of the “we” and to speak for the community. In the early poem “Hope,” we see Darwish still resistant to speaking in We, only addressing his community as “You.” In fact, in his first seven books, Darwish has only poems that use the first-person plural: “Ughniya,” “A’an al-Sumud,” and “Nasheed.” As Darwish evolves as a poet, his poems often use a thicket of pronouns, with multiple Is speaking to different yous as well as different sets of wes speaking to plural yous. In this early stage, however, he achieves a sense of the collective mainly through the variety of voices he speaks and the diversity of situations he engages. As in “He Returned in A Coffin,” we encounter a single voice that forcefully presents his predicament outwardly. The theatrical element and the presence of a responsive audience afford the speaker the chance to impact a large group of his aggrieved community, and to ignite a simultaneous catharsis among them.

In utilizing his experience as a public poet performing his poetry, Darwish restages such encounters and mimetically recreates a moment of collective engagement and the solidarity brought about by a simultaneous expression of grief. The poem and the dramatic situation structured within it enact and testify to “the confirmation of the solidity of a single community embracing characters, author and readers, moving onward through calendarical time” (Anderson 27). In this poem and elsewhere at this early stage in his career, Darwish writes to and of his community “as though their relationship with each other are not in the smallest degree problematic” (28). As we saw in the poem, the poet presumes a collective consensus even as he works to create it. As such, the poet,

speaking for and to his community through diverse speech acts and layered dramatic enactments, begins to play an important role in giving shape to individual sentiments and streaming them toward a collective consciousness and action.

## 2. Out of Victims and Martyrs: Shaping the Palestinian Subject

The poems discussed so far demonstrate Darwish's efforts to perhaps build what Benedict Anderson called an imagined community. Part of this process for Darwish involved shaping an imagined subjectivity as well. He calls upon the Palestinian community, "both as individuals and as collective," albeit in a masculine tone, through the image of men awakening, "to invent itself" (Hussayn 130). Language and eloquence "together with the awakening of consciousness...become tools with which to shape a civilization and the individual" (130). Darwish's affirmative approach to literature falls into what advocates of *iltizam* literature have considered a necessity, mainly instilling heroism among the common people and inspiring optimism and faith in the oppressed people's just causes. To instigate social and political change *iltizam* literature was meant to stress the importance of portraying the suffering of oppressed people while inciting optimism among them.

The difference, however, between the hope raised by revolutionary precepts and rhetoric and the reality of the situation at hand naturally points to the gap that literature has to bridge. We as readers often detect this gap within a text when the speaker in a poem begins with images of hardship and injustice and then moves toward a scene of hope and triumph for the underprivileged. Though placed mostly in reality, much of *iltizam* literature suffers from the frequency of what Aristotle called "improbable

possibilities” in his *Poetics* (57). Stories fail to convince us, Aristotle argues, because the outcomes they propose, while they lie within the realm of the physically possible, are improbable, given not only the world of the narrative itself, but also the reality of the ‘real’ world which the text is purportedly depicting.

One way to address this split between the need to depict a harsh reality and the equally important need to create literature that would help people imagine a way out of that reality is to write two sorts of texts, whether they be poems or stories, to serve these two different functions. The other possibility is to divide these functions according to genre. The latter seems to have been the bargain struck by Palestinian literature until well into the 1970s.

The two distinct voices of that era were Ghassan Kanafani (1936-1972) and Mahmoud Darwish. In Kanafani’s hands the novel and the short story focused on the harsh realities of Palestinian life. Kanafani’s two novellas, *Rijal fil Shams* (*Men in the Sun*, 1963) and *A’aid ila Haifa* (*Returning to Haifa*, 1970), are masterpieces in realism. The first centers on a group of Palestinian refugees on the Iraqi border who are trying to enter Kuwait illegally, and perish inside the tank of a water-truck. The characters in this novel begin as victims of a war they did not provoke, occupation, displacement, and finally legal and political infringement against their pursuit of a decent livelihood. *Returning to Haifa* recounts the experience of a slightly different kind of victimization, this time of a Palestinian couple who were forced out of Haifa in 1948 and who had accidentally left their infant at their soon-to-be-confiscated home. Returning to their native city of Haifa in 1967, after Israel occupied the West Bank where they had settled

in 1948, the couple visits their old apartment. There they find that their son has been adopted by a Jewish family and grown to become a proud Israeli soldier.

Despite the fact that *Returning to Haifa* ends with a glimmer of hope, both novels are realistic tragedies. They help deepen the reader's understanding of the Palestinians' anguish and trauma. And for the Palestinians themselves, or anyone highly identified with them, the novels are a great source of catharsis, encapsulating in their characters much of the Palestinians' painful history of weakness, betrayal, and injustice, coupled with unmitigated misfortune.

In his poetry and in interviews at this stage of his career, Darwish attests to Kanafani's definition of a social and political orientation to literature, which the latter practiced and theorized. Wielding poetry as a mass communication tool for political advocacy, Darwish attempts to address the travails of the individual Palestinian and offers appropriate metaphors and personae to serve as symbolic representations of transformation and empowerment.

And herein, I believe, lies the role that poetry, as opposed to realist fiction, played as a political, cultural discourse for the Palestinians living in Israel and outside of it: poetry attempted to create an image of the Palestinian as larger than life, a noble figure who suffers unbearable misfortunes but who holds to life-affirming ideals. Poetry's function was not less than "the restoration of individual subjectivity" (Abu Shawer 176). Focusing on providing the appropriate symbols and metaphors, Darwish's poetry and that of his peers was bent on "exploring the capacity for metamorphosis" (177). Life-affirming metaphors have "a capacity to endlessly recycle their meaning and produce unpredictable proliferations" (177) in the concrete lives of individuals.

Capturing this sense of lop-sided fate that Palestinians faced, Darwish offers the hard facts of Palestinian existence and attempts to burst them:

They placed chains on his mouth  
tied his hands to the stones of the dead  
and said, you are a murderer

They took his food, drink, his field  
and threw him in the prison cell of the dead  
and said you are a thief  
They expelled him from all harbors  
took his young beloved  
and said, you are a refugee  
You, whose eyes and hands are bloodied,  
night will dissolve  
the detention cell will not live forever  
nor the of chains

Nero died, but Rome did not die—  
she fights with her eyes—  
and grains in a wheat plant die  
only to fill the valley with new shoots (*Al-'amāl al-'Ūlā* 21)

Darwish here begins by abstracting the Palestinian subject, writing about a nameless victim, providing a real situation that is on the cusp of becoming myth. Such distance between the Palestinian reader and this portrait of him only deepens the sense of tragedy as this representation offers many of the basic facts of Palestinian experience whereby the victim becomes the offender, the dispossessed becomes a thief, and one rooted to the place becomes a refugee. Setting this drama in motion, Darwish then turns the poem around and addresses the reader who has become identified with the victim. The poet-speaker assures him, basing his argument on history and the laws of nature, that his tragedy will end because it is an abomination to human history and nature. Human history does not allow for such injustice to continue in perpetuity, and nature has the

mechanisms to eventually undo it. The reversal of the human and the natural world will be restored.

In his predicament, the Palestinian does not lie still, but rather strongly expresses his defiance and indeed his indestructibility. Darwish provides several representations of the former, foremost among them the image of the Palestinian, or the Palestinian poet-speaker, as someone being crucified. Images of crucifixion permeate Darwish's poetry at this time, the cross a site of defiance.

They raised a cross against the wall.  
The whip lash on my skin was a fan.  
And the stomping of their feet  
was a song saluting me: O master. (111)

We note here too Darwish's strategy of direct reversal. The whip's lash becomes soothing like a fan. The beatings the speaker receives from the soldiers become an acknowledgement of his superiority. In another poem the poet tells his listener, "We will make of our gallows and crosses, ladders to the promised day [of deliverance]" (158). The image of the cross becomes a force for growth and resurrection in a more elaborate fashion in the passage that follows.

The singer on the cross,  
his wound glowing like a star  
expressed everything to the people  
around him, everything except regret:  
"This way I have died as I stand  
and standing I die like a tree.  
This way my cross becomes  
a platform or a maestro's baton.  
This way the nails of this cross  
become musical chords.  
This is how rain falls,  
this is how trees grow. (96-97)



Multiple reversals are offered here opening up to a cosmic, utopian vision. Personal pain in the singer's wound becomes a star, a light that illuminates others. The cross turned into a tree standing tall becomes a symbol of glory and durability rather than death and punishment. The crucified singer sees in the parts of the cross, its wood and nails, a whole orchestra on stage—thus a multiplication of him and an expansion of his single voice into a larger musical performance. Then the music itself becomes a catalyst for life as it returns to and entices the forces of nature toward nurturing and growth. Once the music begins to play we discover that in the singer's crucifixion lies the secret of life's rejuvenation.

The symbol of the cross takes on a slightly more convoluted manifestation as the speaker addresses his beloved in this passage from "To A Lost One."

If it fell into my eyes,  
that cloud of tears  
that circled your black eyes,  
I will then bear all the earth's sadness  
as a cross  
on which martyrs grow  
as the earth grows small  
and as your tear drops water  
the sands in children's poems. (239)

Darwish again is creating a mystical relationship between human effort and the natural elements. As in the relationship between music and vegetative growth in the previous passage, here the poet establishes a similar relationship between the cosmic and the human. The poet's sadness becomes a cross on which human martyrs grow as the earth becomes smaller. The beloved's tears penetrate the world of the real and enter the world of imagination to irrigate the arid sands in children's poems, fostering growth in their imaginations, the nature inside. Death begets life, the human penetrates the material, and

the tangible penetrates the spiritual. In offering this imaginative expansion of the Palestinian psyche, Darwish repeatedly stresses the generative and transformative potential of the Palestinians' struggle for justice.

### 3. Lover of the Feminized Nation

In his effort to foster solidarity among the Palestinian collective and to redeem Palestinian suffering, Darwish's work in his first four volumes largely focuses on public concerns that all citizens share. The impact of colonial oppression covers all spheres, and the struggle over land, racial equality, national self-determination, and social injustice penetrates all aspects of life to the point that "it is difficult to separate between what is public and associated with the national and what is private and associated with the individual in his daily life" (Abu Bakr 69). Obstacles on mobility, economic repression, and the threat of detention begin to impact the shape and nature of intimate relations. Romantic relationships also become one of the fronts on which the poet fights for his and his people's freedom.

Darwish's early poems begin to utilize love as a motif to assert the Palestinians' common humanity and evolve to portray the various manifestations of Palestinian suffering.

What would provoke people if we walked in the light of day  
and I carried your handbag for you, and your umbrella  
and took your lips by a corner wall  
and snatched a kiss? (*Al-'amāl al-'Ūlā* 78-79)

Politics hardly appears in this poem. The amorous young poet wonders what harm would his expression of affection cause, and wonders why people would be upset by it. The sentiments expressed here are perhaps more daring than those expressed in earlier

Arabic romantic poems, which would have fogged up even this tame love. Darwish's beloved is real, not imagined; she carries a handbag and an umbrella. Still, the poem, like its romantic predecessors, is simply seeking personal freedom and the right to feel and express affection, with little or no political references. Later in the poem we encounter the lines, "From the well of my tragedy, I call out to your eyes / to carry the liquor of light to my veins" (79). We can perhaps insert the Palestinian predicament as his tragedy, but nothing in the poem itself suggests that. The poet-speaker here is simply lamenting his inability to express his love.

The poet's political activism, his engagement and struggle, become more apparent here as the cause of his separation from his beloved.

I have distributed my flowers  
among the dispossessed, my flowers,  
and wrestled with the wolves.  
Then I returned to my place  
where the ring of her laughter does not greet me  
the caress of her kiss  
the flutter of her whisper...  
Friends, take the lamp, the poems, the solitude  
take these cigarettes, these newspapers  
blackened like night  
for I have returned to my place  
and I feel destitute in my home  
and I've lost all my flowers  
and the secret of the source,  
that one light  
in the depth of my tragedy. (*Al-'amāl al-'Ūlā* 38-39)

The symbols of flowers and wolves stand for the poet's political struggle among his beleaguered fellow Palestinians under occupation. His work forces him to live away from his beloved and he is ready to give it all up, offering his poems and his writings to his friends. The beloved is the source of his inspiration, "the secret of the source," and her

presence in his life has kept him at his work of expounding hope and wrestling with the occupiers, but now he is distraught.

Darwish further develops the subject of love as an arena of struggle for the shaping of Palestinian subjectivity in the midst of oppression by adopting the role of *Ashiq min Falastin* (Lover from Palestine) as his most consistent persona in his first decade of writing. He offers a portrait of the Palestinian, dedicated to his homeland, society, noble human values, and his beloved, as a human ideal, not simply a person with a just cause. Darwish's major transformation of the traditional love motif is the conflation of the beloved with the nation. He is the denied lover in the passage below:

Your lips are honey, and your hand  
a cup of wine  
for others...

and the silk of your breast, your basil, your dew  
are a comfortable bed  
for others

and I am the sleepless one lying by your black walls;  
I am the sand's thirst, the shiver of nerves in firesides.  
Who can shut the door before me?  
What tyrant, what fiend?  
I will love your nectar  
even though it is poured in the cups of others. (*Al-'amāl al-'Ulā* 19)

Precise tactile imagery complicates matters for the Israeli censor. The poem is sensual and evocative, capturing the poet-speaker's loyalty to his beloved and his outrage at his circumstances. Unpacking the symbols of the poem readily renders a political reading. The lover's loyalty persists despite the beloved's preoccupation; we do not see her willingly offer her lips or her body as a cup or bed for others, but she nonetheless belongs to the others. The poet adds that the beloved is forced into this situation by a tyrant or a fiend. The lover cannot reach his beloved's nectar, but he shall not be moved. Insisting

instead to remain by her walls, blackened perhaps by war or by forced entry, he lies waiting. He cannot be barred from her since he is the elements themselves, the sand's thirst and the sparks in the household fire.

The eroticization of the homeland becomes more explicit in later poems in this period. "Reading My Beloved's Face" begins with a supposed "real" or human beloved in whose eyes the poet begins to see manifestations of what could be the Palestinian trauma and the potential for continued existence and renewal.

When I gaze at you  
I see lost cities  
and a crimson time.  
I see the reason for death and pride.  
I see a new language yet to be unrecorded  
and gods passing on foot  
before an astounding surprise.

...and you spread before me  
lines of creatures that cannot be named.  
My country is nothing but these eyes  
that turn the land into a body. (*Al-'amāl al-'Ulā* 310)

Looking into his beloved's eyes, the poet sees his nation's history of lost cities and decades of bloodshed. He also sees the reasons to fight for the nation and the awe it will project, forcing gods to walk barefoot before her, astounded by her beauty. The end of the passage further complicates the conflation between the beloved and the nation, making it impossible to discern where the beloved's body begins and the land ends. The poet by now cannot see his country in any other way. The country is shaped by his (or the beloved's) eyes, which refuse but to give the land a desired human shape.

The eroticization, or more precisely, the feminization of the land opens up new horizons for speaking of the nation. It is a clear departure from more traditional approaches to the call for struggle in Palestinian poetry written before Darwish. His voice

is personal, and allows for a specific persona to emerge whose presence is marked by new imagery. A crimson time, gods passing on foot, basil, dew in the sand's thirst, and the shiver of nerves in firesides: these phrases were new to Arabic poetry and are generally secular, bearing no Islamic or traditional Arab echoes. The establishment of this specific relationship between Palestinians and Palestine bears the seeds of a rejuvenated Palestinian nationalism that arises from new, native symbols as opposed to the symbols of Palestine within the broader Pan-Arab nationalism, which were largely reliant on religious associations. In poems written after 1967, Darwish begins to speak explicitly about breaking away from Arab *wissaya* or tutelage. In this tactile imagery of Palestine and in his erotic rendition of the country, Darwish in effect undertakes this effort long before he voices his objection to Pan-Arab guardianship. Writing from within Palestine, his poem does not express "a feeling of longing for something absent, but a feeling of brute dispossession" (Suleiman 198). The land is akin to the beloved, visible and inaccessible.

And though he worked within the Israeli Communist Party, Darwish refused to address the Palestinian problem as only one among the just causes of the oppressed. Here he addresses his fellow Palestinian communists:

Do not tell me  
I wish I were a bread baker in Algeria  
to sing with a revolutionary...  
Do not tell me  
I wish I were a waiter in café in Havana  
to sing of the victories of the downtrodden...  
My friend,  
The Nile will never pour into the Volga  
or the Congo, or the Jordan, into the Euphrates.  
Each river has a source, a stream, a life.  
My friend, our land is not barren.  
Each land will have its birth.

Each dawn will have a rendezvous with a rebel. (*Al-'amāl al-'Ulā* 53)

Darwish's poetry begins to facilitate Palestinian ownership of their cause by establishing a relationship with the land that arises from their experiences on it. The land is female; it is fertile and will give birth to its dawn from and with its local elements. The eroticization of the land provides a metaphor for belonging that approximates the intimacy, passion, and emotional turmoil of romantic relationships. Erotic love as a metaphor for attachment to the homeland helps the individual and the collective weather the various difficulties they are bound to encounter in a long, everlasting attachment.

Finally, Darwish's employment of the love motif as a way of speaking and belonging to the land provides a response to Israeli writing. Darwish openly declared that he is in competition with the Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai to prove that he loves the land more. Darwish understood that he who can "describe the land better can thus lay a stronger claim to it" (Suleiman 199). Poetry becomes an act of naming, and the eroticizing of the land fits Darwish's understanding of the Palestinians' relationship with it. Comparing his and other Palestinians' relationship to the land, Darwish states:

We excavated this land neither in mythical dreams nor in the illustrated pages of an old book, nor did we create it in the way companies and institutions are established. It is our father and mother. We did not, either, buy it through an agency or a shop, and no one had to convince us to love it. We identify ourselves as its pulse and marrow of its bone. It is therefore ours, and we belong to it. (Darwish, *Shai`an al-Waṭan* 8-9)

Darwish here offers a kind of checklist, and all the elements he cancels out lead him toward an understanding of the land as a living being. The Palestinians did not discover Palestine through myth or academic or literary pursuits; their attachment to the land is not religious or ideological. Their relationship does not proceed through commerce or

politics. The land is like a body; it has a pulse, marrow, and bone; the land is the Palestinians' procreative lineage ("our father and mother") and their future.

#### 4. Demythologizing (and Humanizing) the Adversary

Darwish's utilization of the erotic motif to describe his attachment to the land is doubtless part of the struggle to affirm the legitimacy of his belonging to it. His erotic nationalism offers a secular and humanistic form of belonging to counter the religious and racially exclusive form of belonging that Zionism offers. Whether inside or outside of Israel, Palestinians on the left like Darwish felt compelled to demonstrate their faith in an inclusive society and to provide a vision of it for their adversaries the Israelis, as an alternative to a perpetual state of conflict. On the Palestinian side distrust of the Israelis contended with despair in their ability to ever achieve a fair political solution to their suffering, especially after the 1967 war in which their neighboring Arab armies suffered humiliating defeats, and after which more Palestinian territory fell to Israeli occupation. Darwish felt the need to explore the life experiences of his adversaries for their sake and for his people's sake, to find the humanity of the other and by doing so bolster his own subjectivity.

This effort did not begin with poetry. In numerous essays and articles published in the Arabic publications of the Israeli Communist Party (Rakah), Darwish expended serious effort to engage Israeli intellectuals and the Israeli public at large in dialogue regarding the oppressive conditions that the Palestinians in Israel faced. He attempted to expose Israeli writers to Palestinians "who believe in the possibility of the two peoples living together in peace and in cooperation" on the same land, "provided that both



populations are granted the same, and equal, rights” (Darwish, *Shai`an al-Waṭan* 58). Darwish helped arrange meetings of Palestinian (Arabic) and Israeli (Hebrew) writers, and documented the areas of agreement and the obstacles that Israeli writers faced in supporting Palestinian writers, who are also Israeli citizens, persecuted by the Israeli government. Darwish’s calls and reports on these dialogues encompass the various Israeli points of view and provide rebuttals to some. Darwish responded positively to such interactions and saw in them “important turning points in changing the Israelis’ attitude toward dialogue with Arabs” (Darwish, *Shai`an al-Waṭan* 72).

At one point Darwish distributed a survey among Israeli writers asking them the following questions: If you were an Arab (Palestinian) writer, if you were in my place, if your people faced the same issue, what would you do. Would you behave like I do?” (Darwish, *Shai`an al-Waṭan* 88). Darwish collected some of these answers and published them in the newspaper *Al-Ittihad*. Darwish’s editorials in the same newspaper also provided concise and interesting responses to Israeli attitudes toward the Palestinians. In these articles Darwish quotes from Israeli government officials at length as well as from official documents. Darwish also provides summaries and analyses of Israeli literary and cultural studies. Collected in his *Shai`an al-Waṭan* (Something About the Homeland), these articles are adept at reconstructing a dialogue that had not quite taken shape.

Darwish’s poetry discussed thus far provides ample depictions of the Palestinians’ suffering, their dedication to the land, and their aspirations toward self-determination. Dedicated to instill a spirit of resistance, pride and self-reliance among the Palestinians, Darwish nonetheless consistently calls for peaceful coexistence between Palestinians and

Israelis. As a member of Rakah, he faithfully toed the party line, promoting peaceful coexistence between Israelis and Palestinians within the borders of Israel. Darwish did, however, verbally support the armed resistance to Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza (Darwish, *Shai`an al-Waṭan*, 76). Within Israel's 1948 borders, he called for political action and worked to penetrate Israeli intellectual circles. Darwish was aware that "the Zionist system feared more than anything else to be impressed, or to intermingle, with the culture of the Arabs in the same area" (Shalat, 145). He gave numerous interviews with Israeli newspapers and magazines, regularly wrote editorials in the form of open letters to Israeli officials, and was keen on being translated into Hebrew (148). Most interesting in this context are the poems Darwish wrote in Israel before 1970, in which he actively attempts to understand Israelis. These poems provide compelling portraits of Israeli characters and demonstrate exceptional empathy on his part. Giving the majority of their lines to the Israeli speakers, these poems engage Israeli characters in intimate dialogue, teasing out their vulnerabilities, aspirations and contradictions. By displaying his capacity for empathy, Darwish "was trying to find ways of igniting similar empathy among the Israelis" (Beydoun 250).

One of Darwish's best-known poems of that period was devoted to Rita, a young Israeli woman. Rita emerged as a character in Darwish's early volumes of poetry and continued to appear in his work. Darwish begins the interaction with Rita as a story of prohibited love, made impossible by Israel's militancy. "Between Rita and my eyes, a rifle," (*Al-'amāl al-`Ulā*, vol. 1, 200) writes Darwish of his beloved, who is a conscript in the Israeli army. Darwish's poet-speaker is devoted to Rita, whom he had known since they were young. "I remember how she clung to me, / how on my arm a sweet braid fell"

(200). They were lovers for two years “before this rifle came along” (201). The poem depicts the possibility for instinctive, affectionate human connection—the poet-speaker found Rita beautiful and she found him kind and trusted him. Dedicated to their love for each other, they “made vows on the sweetest of drinks,” and thus bonded, they were “reborn”. Then suddenly “the city / swept away all its serenaders / and swept my Rita too” (202). The speaker is aware that he may have been deceiving himself in thinking that the world, represented by the city, would let him continue this relationship with Rita. He had been dreaming, perhaps, when reality interrupted their affair. “Deep into morning / fell my moon” (202), he says, suggesting that the light he offered could not withstand the harsh reality represented by morning light. Rita simply leaves him, is swept away with the force of society’s intervention. What separates them is the rifle given to Rita that forces her to turn her “honey-colored eyes” away from him.

The poem “A Soldier Dreams of White Lilies” offers an example of friendship between an Israeli soldier and a Palestinian named Mahmoud, a stand-in for the poet. Mahmoud narrates the poem, and begins with this description of the Israeli soldier:

He dreams of white lilies,  
an olive branch  
and of her breast in evening bloom.  
He dreams, he told me, of a bird,  
a lemon blossom,  
and he did not philosophize his dream.  
He did not understand things  
except in the way he felt them, smelled them.  
He understood, he told me, that “the country  
is to drink my mother’s coffee  
to return home safely in the afternoon. (203)

The symbol of an olive branch expressing the Israeli soldier’s desire for peace will not escape our attention being introduced so early in the poem. The white lilies are a new

symbol in Darwish's poems at this point, perhaps emphasizing the soldier's attraction to non-native flowers. But the lemon blossom is native and is one of Darwish's repeated images, as well as the birds' singing. Darwish makes the soldier resemble himself even further by describing his longing for his mother's coffee. This image comes right out of one of Darwish's best known poems, "To My Mother," which had become an informal Palestinian anthem after its publication in *Ashiq min Falasteen* (Lover from Palestine, 1966). In that poem Darwish writes, "I long for my mother's bread / and my mother's coffee / and my mother's touch..." (106). The Israeli soldier expresses the same longings as the poet himself. Providing further positive images of the soldier, the poet-speaker informs us that the soldier's mother, like the grieving mothers who fill Darwish's poems of this period, also "wept silently when they took [the soldier] / to a position on the front" (205).

Darwish's stand-in in this poem attempts to project objectivity by repeating the phrase "he told me." The use of this journalistic trope distances the two characters and lessens the identification between them. It's as if Darwish is telling his Palestinian, Arab, and Israeli audiences that he, the poet, did not make up this portrait, that he is merely reporting what the soldier told him. The soldier speaks half the lines in the poem (59 out of 118). The poet-speaker of this poem poses only a few questions and they take up about a tenth of the poem itself. When the poet speaks about the soldier, he mostly describes his physical actions: "He adjusted his posture, toyed with the folded newspaper," "He told me about his first love" and so on.

He told me about his departure  
how his mother  
wept silently when they took him  
to a position on the front.

And his mother's burning voice  
turned a new wish under his skin:  
If only doves would grow in the ministry of defense,  
if only doves would grow...

He smoked, and told me  
as if fleeing a blood swamp:  
I dreamt of white lilies,  
an olive branch  
a bird embracing the morning  
on a lemon bough.  
—"What did you see?"  
—"I saw what a red boxthorn can do.  
I planted it in the sand, in chests, in bellies."  
—"And how many did you kill?"  
—"It's hard to count them...  
but I won a medal."

I asked him, hurting myself as I did.  
—"Describe one victim to me, if you can."  
He adjusted his posture,  
toyed with the folded newspaper  
and said to me as if singing a song:  
—"Like a tent, he fell on the gravel  
and embraced the shattered planets.  
There was a crown of blood on his wide brow,  
his chest without medals,  
because he was not good at killing,  
maybe a farmer, a laborer, or a traveling salesman.  
Like a tent he fell on the gravel, and died.  
His arms  
stretched like two dry streams  
and when I searched his pockets  
for his name, I found two pictures,  
one of his wife  
one for his little girl..."  
—"Were you sad," I asked.  
He answered, interrupting me,  
—"Mahmoud, my friend,  
sadness is a white bird  
that never comes near battlefields,  
and soldiers commit a grave sin  
when they fall sad. I was a machine there,  
blowing rose-colored fire  
that turned space into a black bird."

He told me about his first love,  
and later  
about distant cities  
and the reaction to the war. (204-205)

Darwish's strategy of delivering information is quite deliberate here. The soldier's positive aspects depicted in the departure scene as his mother wept, the soldier's affection for his beloved, "the new wish under his skin" for doves "to grow in the ministry of defense" (204) are all stated by the poet-speaker in the third-person voice. It is the soldier himself, speaking in the first-person, who reveals himself to us as a killing machine, a fire-blowing monster.

The renowned Palestinian critic Yusef al-Khateeb objected to Darwish's sympathetic portrait of the Israeli soldier, stating that he refuses "to go along with Darwish's experiment" (90). Al-Khateeb, who was responding to Al-Naqqash's admiration of Darwish's work here, adds that the Israeli soldier is no different from any of Hitler's officers "who fulfill his military obligations in battle, then returns to drink and weep while gazing at a photo of his wife and infant child" (91). Al-Naqqash, responding to al-Khateeb, states that Darwish's portrait of the soldier "reveals, alongside the humane aspect in this Jewish soldier, the degree to which this simple human being had been mangled and turned into a mass murderer" (Al-Naqqash 223). Darwish's use of inserted monologue in this poem further suggests that the soldier is fully aware of his crimes and that he is trapped in this vicious role, unable or perhaps unwilling to be anything else.

This suggests to me that the poem succeeds in both demonstrating the Israeli soldier's ordinary humanity, his familial bonds, his desire for peace and love, and his overall simplicity. But something at the political level—the heroism of the radio and newspaper, the fiery speech and lecture—have made his "way of love" a rifle. Darwish's

Israeli soldier is both a pitiable figure and a sociopath. Presenting him to his Palestinian readers, Darwish demythologizes the Israeli soldier by painting him as a victim of ideology who prefers his simple desires. For Israeli readers, Darwish demonstrates through this dramatization that he has no issues with his soldier's Jewishness or national background, only his present politics and ideology.

Darwish, however, does interrogate his soldier about issues of legitimacy and belonging to the land even as he expresses sympathy. As mentioned earlier, the soldier is dreaming of white lilies on the arid hills and plains of Palestine. When the soldier says “my country / is to drink my mother's coffee” (*Al-'amāl al-'Ūlā* 203), the poet-speaker states “I asked: ‘and the land?’” (203). Promptly the soldier answers, “I don't know it” (203). The soldier goes on to explain that his belonging is shallow and imposed upon him. “They taught me to love her love, / and I never felt my heart its heart” (204). “Would you die for it,” (204) the speaker asks him, and again the soldier answers curtly, “No” (204). He is willing to kill for the nation, but not to die for the land. The poet, upholding Darwish's standard of love for the land as the equivalent of romantic love, insists on the nature of this relationship with the land, and reveals the soldier's lack of affection for it.

And how was its love?  
Did it sting like the sun, like longing?  
He answered me, confronting:  
—my way of love is a rifle  
and a festival retrieved from old ruins,  
the silence of an old statue  
lost in time, of an unknown source. (204-205)

Darwish repeats what he said in interviews about Israelis belonging to the land, how it arises from “mythical dreams” and “illustrated pages” of old books, not from ages

of physical contact and historical corporeal familiarity. The soldier, standing in for other Israelis, belongs to the land by excavating non-living, human-made things, ruins and statues, while for the Palestinian love for the land stings as if it is a living creature. Darwish also suggests that all the victories for which the Israeli soldier has won his medals, and for which he cares more than for those whom he killed, do nothing to create a sense of belonging. To highlight the difference between the Palestinian sense of belonging to the land and that of the Israelis who have fought for it and won, Darwish's speaker, even after hearing of the soldier's travails and heavy heart, expresses surprise at the soldier's desire to leave "the homeland." The poet seems to suggest that the Palestinian simply cannot fathom the idea of leaving his homeland, no matter the burden that being there exerts upon him. The irony of course is obvious; those who are being killed and oppressed cannot fathom leaving the land, while those doing the conquering are so half-hearted about their belonging that they ready to leave. This difference for Darwish's Palestinian readers, this unshakable attachment to the land, marks their eternal advantage over the Israelis who resemble the lilies they dream of, on the land to which they are not native.



#### D. POET OF NATIONAL LIBERATION (1971-1986)

Referring to “A Soldier Who Dreams of White Lilies” in a 1969 interview with an Israeli magazine, Darwish says “I wish to express pride in my own humanity in that I am the first Arab poet to portray an Israeli soldier, even after the June War, in his full human essence” (Darwish, *Shai` ‘an al-Waṭan* 231). He goes on to inform his Israeli readers about how the poetry of his generation of Palestinians living in Israel had gained a great deal of attention in the Arab world, with critics and readers well aware that “the starting points for these poets is the recognition of the rights of Jews and Arabs to exist in Palestine” (Darwish, *Shai` ‘an al-Waṭan* 334). The pairing of a clear political stance with an esthetic achievement that facilitates the breakdown of psychological barriers exemplifies Darwish’s sense of how poetry and politics ought to progress in step together. The poets of his generation are working on both sides of the conflict, he explains, decreasing animosity among Arabs and demonstrating to Israelis a capacity for understanding. In Darwish’s view, the poet’s art and his presence in society can help others make the imaginative leap toward action in a time of crisis.

In interviews and articles on the dialogues he and other Palestinian writers had had with their Israeli counterparts in the late 1960s, Darwish seemed confident that the Palestinian side was ready for such a leap and that poetry had helped galvanize them to act in a unified manner. For those inside Israel the struggle was for their right for equality as citizens is to be conducted through “peaceful protest and opposition” (Darwish, *Shai` ‘an al-Waṭan* 234). He supported the Palestinians’ armed struggle to end Israeli occupation and to establish their own state in the West Bank and Gaza. Furthermore, he argued that the Palestinians inside and outside Israel were capable of speaking for

themselves and need no Arab tutelage. The dialogues, he felt, would assist both sides in establishing some sort of trust, but the real exposure to the Palestinians' ideas would be found in their poetry "where national belonging is woven with our universal and human belonging" (236).

Examining the context of Darwish's poetry and the statements he makes in interviews, I wonder about the reach of Darwish's message. When a poet addresses an issue in a poem, we assume that there is someone listening, but the poet's relationship with the listener/reader begins to be complicated here by the language barrier. Though not stated by Darwish, the dialogues that took place between Palestinian and Israeli writers did so in Hebrew while Darwish's articles and poems appeared in Rakah's Arabic publications. Only a few of his interviews appeared in Hebrew; in fact, he was more available in other languages than he was in Hebrew (Shalat 153). In discussing "Soldier," we noted how the poem manages to address Israeli, Palestinian, and Arab anxieties and concerns, and how the poem grants each of these audiences an array of elements with which to identify while they are also forced to acknowledge the humanity of the Other. But what if this poem and others like it are not made available in the Other's language? What happens to the poet's interdependently connected process of gaining agency? What happens to the poet's process of writing when the circuit of poet/poem/reader is not completed?

### 1. Reconfiguring the Poem's Social Unit

In his early essay "Discourse in Life and Discourse in Poetry" Bakhtin outlines the social exchange that takes place in poetry between the poet, the poet-speaker (protagonist), and

the reader/listener. Bakhtin assumes that the bond between the poet-speaker and the poet is so strong that there's hardly "any distance between the poet and his discourse" (Todorov, 65), which through identification makes the reader "a natural ally of the poet" (Bakhtin, 1997, 57). Because of this strong relationship between the listener/reader and the poet-speaker, poetic texts allow the listener/reader some ability to direct the meaning and shape of the poetic utterance. Nonetheless, relations between poet, poet-speaker, and reader/listener sometimes shift depending on modes of poetic discourse. Sometimes "the listener and the poet-speaker bond, ignoring the poet" (as in satire); alternately "the poet and poem-speaker are sometimes allied against the listener" (as in romantic poetry); and finally sometimes "both poet and protagonist are placed at the mercy of the reader/listener and he is set up to judge them" (as in confessions/diaries) (57). As much as the poetic utterance demands and must be certain of the listener's sympathy, a struggle with the listener ensues as soon the poetic discourse begins and they remain separate throughout the compositional process, explains Bakhtin.

The poet, the poet-speaker and the listener-reader never melt and become unified. Rather they occupy independent positions. They are... *part of an artistic event that has a particular social structure that is inspired by that very artistic act or event...* The listener we refer to is *a participant from inside* the artistic event and he is determined from within the form of the art work. [italics mine] (59)

The poet therefore unconsciously invents a poet-speaker and a reader/listener as he or she begins to write. This reader/listener is not a doppel-ganger and a life-long imaginary friend, etc., but one that emerges with the demands of a given poetic composition or a phase of writing or a subject matter and who is concerned with form and content.

For Bakhtin the reader/listener in poetic discourse must never be mixed up in way or manner with the public, or real reader, who are, ought to remain, totally outside the work and its inception:

If the poet's consciousness and consideration of the outside public begins to occupy an important role in the poet's work, the work will lose its artistic purity and will fall to a lower social level. When he begins to pay attention to outside factors, the poet then loses the listener that is closest to him [inside him] and he begins to break the social totality that the work of art has already configured within it. (60)

Bakhtin here is telling us that a poetic discourse (the lyric poem or monologue) results from an internal dialogue between the poet, the speaker of the poem, and an invented intimate listener. The aforementioned attraction and struggle—between the poet, his poet-speaker who is re-invented perhaps with each poem, and the listener—takes place within the poet. The poet therefore must reshape a stand-in for himself and create a listener who offers trust, but who is not easy to convince. The poem is thus a social act (a dialogue) that takes place within the poet after or while he internalizes various social, historical, and political developments that influence the creation of the poem.

Let's now return briefly to Darwish's "Soldier" and see what happened to the poet shortly after he prided himself in authoring it. In "Soldier"—and in several later poems such as "Imraa Jamila fi Sadum" (A Beautiful Woman in Sodom), "Kitaba 'ala Dhaw Bunduqiya" (Writing in the Light of a Rifle), and "Al-Jissr" (The Bridge)—Darwish's sense of his potential reader expands quite impressively since his earliest poems. He had continued to write within the contingencies of Palestinian experience and here manages to create a composite internal reader who is part Palestinian, part Arab, part Israeli, part victim, part victimizer, and part observer. This new reader transcends the poet's individual constituencies and perhaps approaches the one the young Darwish addressed

in his very first book and of whom he asked forgiveness for having to express his anger. However, as Darwish continued to pursue an internal reader that would challenge him and trust him, the real readership, the public, was becoming increasingly divided.

On the one hand, the pan-Arab literary scene, when it discovered Darwish and the other Palestinian poets inside Israel, began to heap praise upon them and to hang the Arab world's hopes on them. One of the Arab world's most popular and esteemed poets at the time, Nizar Qabbani, who had been a model for Darwish, places Darwish's generation at the forefront and hands them the reins to Arab poetry:

Poets of the occupied lands  
most beautiful birds  
that have reached from nights of captivity...  
we learn from you what poetry can become  
we will learn from your for years to come  
we the defeated poets  
we who have been estranged from history,  
and from the sorrows of the aggrieved.  
(quoted in Al-Naqqash, 302-303)

Qabbani was one of Darwish's major influences. And while he did not react to this poem particularly, he did respond to similar burdensome urging and unqualified praise by calling on Arab critics to cease pouring their "ruthless love" (Darwish, *Shai` 'an al-Waṭan* 25). upon him and his fellow young poets.

On the other side, as Darwish had noted, the Israelis, both writers and public, were not keen on listening to the Palestinian poets who were fellow citizens of their country. Despite several attempts at dialogue, the two groups remained divided as to what the central issues ought to be. For the Palestinian writers the cause of the tension between them and the state of Israel was the "result of land confiscation, discrimination, exclusion, lower education, higher unemployment and lower income" (Schultz 74).

Palestinian activism in Israeli politics, in which Darwish had been active through Rakah, was an example of what Smooha called their “Israelization” and “Palestinification” taking place simultaneously among Palestinians living in Israel (Smooha, 1989). Palestinian integration within Israeli society had begun as soon as Israeli government allowed it, opening sector by sector, and could be seen in their “participation in institutions of higher education, mobilization for Knesset participation and their rights, in popular culture, in the labor market etc” (Schultz 78).

Very little of this seemed to matter to the Israeli writers Darwish tried to engage. For the vast majority of them, the cause of the Palestinians’ sufferings was their hatred of Israel. The hardships the Palestinians faced and their non-integration were unfortunate results of protective measures established by the Israelis due to wariness of the Palestinians’ loyalty (Darwish, *Shai`an al-Waṭan*, 68). Some of the Israeli writers were indignant at the Palestinians. Dahlia Ravikovich, one of Israel’s leading poets, left a meeting with Palestinian authors saying “I came to this meeting a socialist and I leave fascist” (79), blaming the Palestinians for turning her into one. Most indicative of the Israeli writers’ refusal to acknowledge their Palestinians counterparts is what Darwish perceived as a double-standard. He noted how Israeli intellectual circles regularly responded to the imprisonment, harassment, and censorship of writers in all parts of the world, but remained silent as these actions were taken by the Israeli authorities against Palestinians (50).

Darwish’s fifth and last imprisonment in Israel created a qualitatively different threat to his sense of agency. In his previous four imprisonments the charges were for traveling without permission (1965), political incitement (1965, 1966) and eluding

detention during a state of emergency (1967). His last imprisonment, in 1969, took place after Palestinian militants blew up several houses in Haifa. The Israeli authorities detained him in the case, thus connecting him with military activities against the state. This association with militancy would have set Darwish on a different course of interaction with the Israeli legal system where he would be indicted on a different set of laws and where his temporary detention orders could be renewed endlessly.

In a statement he released a year after leaving Israel for Moscow, Darwish writes: I had become filled with a feeling that I was no longer able to fill my obligations as a citizen first and as a poet second. I had become paralyzed in terms of mobility and the freedom of expression, and I had become an easy morsel in the jaws of Israeli racism... The delicate thread of push and pull between me and Israeli law had snapped and my ability to evade, contrive, and prevail had come to an end... (Yaḥyā 167)

We note here how Darwish strongly associated his sense of duty as a citizen with that of being a poet, and how the obstruction of the fulfillment of one duty equally affects the other. Having examined the poetry he wrote prior to his decision to leave Israel, we can see how the poetry itself was part of this push and pull between himself and Israeli society at large:

They have taught me all the director's wishes—  
to dance to the beat of his lies  
and I'm tired now  
that my myths are hung out on a rope to dry...

O my blood  
their brushes are drawing pictures of the Lidd region  
and you are their ink.  
Jaffa is nothing but the skin on their drums  
and my bones are like a bludgeon in the director's hand,  
and I keep saying,  
I'll perfect this role by tomorrow.  
And so for this reason, I resign.  
Ladies  
and Gentlemen  
I have entertained you for twenty years

and today it's time to leave  
time to escape this throng  
and to sing in Galilee  
to the sparrows that live in the nest of the impossible.  
For this reason I resign,  
resign,  
resign.  
(*Al-'amāl al-'Ūlā* 322)

A sense of futility permeates this poem where Darwish's speaker is a stage actor who has grown tired of his role and his audience. He had been merely an entertainment for them, having absorbed the role given to him, but never having perfected it to the director's and the audience's satisfaction. He also feels that they are playing a kind of waiting game with him as they exploit him. They are busy claiming places that belong to him, inscribing them as their own, while using his labor to achieve their conquest. He names Galilee as his destination, but in adding that it is "the nest of the impossible" we are unsure of where he will end up and what his fate will be. In another poem of this period, Darwish expresses his deep sense of fatigue and exasperation offering to exchange his love for his beloved and "the history of our ancestors" for "a day of freedom" (334). The time had come for him to leave.

## 2. Psalmist of Exile: Poet of the Palestinian Diaspora

In 1971, after spending part of a year in Moscow, Darwish arrived in Cairo. A little more than a year later he relocated to Beirut to join the Palestinian resistance "in the nest of the impossible." As he begins to travel extensively around the world and to become familiar with the region, Darwish's life is changed from that of the confined poet who has to check into a police station of Haifa at sunset and spend the evening and night at home, and who is often denied permission to visit with his family in the village of al-Jadida. He



now begins to travel and to feel the restlessness of displacement. Understandably, his subject matter would change, if only due to his own new experiences.

It should be noted that Darwish's few travels out of Israel before he left in 1970 had been highly visible. A few years before deciding to leave, he and fellow poet Samih al-Qassem were caught up in a controversy in the Arab world for being part of an Israeli delegation. And while in Moscow, he was a regular subject of interest to visiting Arab journalists and writers who reported on him.

His decision to leave Israel was a headline grabbing event. He was immediately embraced by the PLO and welcomed to Cairo by high government officials. Nonetheless many Palestinians objected and thought he would have been more effective had he remained. One important objection to Darwish's departure came from Ghassan Kanafani no less, who wrote a major article in the Lebanese weekly *Al-Hawadith* (Al-Naqqash, 274). The Israeli Communist Party (Rakah) to which Darwish belonged also issued a public statement, authored by Emile Habibi, expressing regret at having lost Darwish, but also blaming the Israeli government for forcing his hand.

In moving to Cairo in 1971 and later to Beirut in 1973, Darwish transitioned from living in a deterritorialized community within the belly of the settler-colonial beast to the wide land-ocean of the Arab world; from working as an editor in a struggling publication to a regular contributor to the Arab world's largest and most influential newspapers; from being ignored and doubted by the people whom he most wanted to influence to being embraced by the "ruthless love" of an audience that had placed such high expectations on him: and, finally, from being an activist in a fringe party to being a member of the political establishment, albeit of a beleaguered people. By the late sixties Darwish's

books had been smuggled out of Israel, reprinted multiple times in Lebanon, and sold all over the Arab world. The question at this point in Darwish's career relates to his ability to create the invented, or internalized, social context his poems continued need. For Bakhtin, this social setting is "the only social unit to which the poet belongs" (Bakhtin, 1997, 60). Of interest at this point is the degree to which "the demands of the external public" (60) have impacted his creative "social unit" after leaving Israel. Furthermore, we will investigate the kinds of poems that this transition produces and how Darwish reshapes his role as a poet agent at this time.

During this period (1971-1986) Darwish's poetry becomes pre-occupied with Palestinian life in the diaspora. Whereas the Palestinians in exile prefigured in his earlier poetry as "the banished"—with only snippets of their phone conversations heard or their letters quoted—they now become a major preoccupation of Darwish. Continuing the experiments with dialogue and narrations that he utilized in "Soldier Dreams of White Lilies," Darwish presents a character no less controversial and complicated than Sirhan Sirhan, the Jordanian-born Palestinian-American who assassinated Sen. Robert Kennedy in 1968, though the poem leaves some room for speculation about its protagonist. Darwish's Sirhan, like the assassin, is a highly confused and enigmatic Palestinian young man, made delusional by the loss of his homeland and victimized by the disfiguration of his identity:

And we wrap ourselves in your name [Palestine],  
but it was not love.  
Two hands utter something, then their light goes out.  
And Sirhan lies when he says he suckled on your [Palestine's] milk.  
Sirhan is the child of a travel ticket.  
He was raised in the kitchen of a ship that never sailed your waters.  
— What's your name?  
— I forgot.

- What's your father's name?
- I forgot.
- Your mother's
- I forgot.
- Did you sleep well last night?
- I slept a lifetime.
- Did you dream?
- A lot.
- Of what?
- Of things I never saw in my life.

Then he suddenly shouted at them:

- Why did you eat vegetables smuggled from the fields of Jericho.
- Why did you drink olive oil stolen from Christ's wounds?

And Sirhan is accused of being a strange exception from the norm.

*(Al-'amāl al-'Ūlā, vol. 2, 99-100)*

Sirhan is motherless, fatherless murderer who dreams of things he never saw in his life. His grievances of a lost homeland and endless displacement have shaken his vision of reality. In exile, he is haunted by the milk he never suckled and the waters he never sailed.

In the poem “What Was to Happen Did Happen” (*kana ma sawfa yakun*), Darwish provides a tender, evocative portrait of his fellow Palestinian poet, Rashed Hussein, who, a few years older than Darwish, was considered the leader of the young Palestinian poets inside Israel. The poet speaker reunites with Hussein on Fifth Avenue in New York City where, now “gray like the sun in the forest of concrete” (248) Hussein had relocated, permanently barred from returning to his homeland. A year later, Hussein visits the poet in Cairo, and after thirty minutes in the city he says, “ ‘I wish I were as free/ as I was in the Nazareth prison.’ ” (251) The poem provides a heartbreaking portrait of the displaced poet intellectual, banished from his language and from his cause, and tragically from poetry. This is what Hussein says in Darwish's poem:

From café to café, I seek another language.  
I seek the difference between memory and fire.

I seek the first frontier of my own limbs.  
Give me my arm to embrace others.  
Give me some wind so that I can walk.

From café to café,  
why does poetry escape my heart the further  
I travel away from Jaffa?  
Why does Jaffa disappear when I embrace her?  
This time is not my time...

.....  
.....  
This time is not my time.  
No, this country is not my country.  
No, this body is not my body.  
(*Al-'amāl al-'Ūlā*, vol. 2, 250-251)

The first line of this passage echoes Darwish's own sense of physical incapacitation in his last days in Israel. Hussein as represented in this poem is not merely paralyzed; he has lost his limbs and is roving from café to café unable to connect with others, burned by his memories. Hussein is existentially displaced by exile belonging to neither his time, nor the country he lives in, nor even to his own body.

Darwish returns to this subject matter and language with greater depth and formal innovation in the following decades. What distinguishes Darwish's poetry of exile at the beginning of this period is perhaps the distinction between memory and fire. Darwish devotes much of his poetry in the early to mid 1970s to this subject matter in poems such "Returning to Jaffa" (47-51), "An Occupied City" (87-88), "Descending Mt. Carmel" (118-125), and "Leaving the Mediterranean Shore" (126-135), all lyrics that evoke the homeland, its landscape and people, and repeatedly feeling the burn of memory spread across his exiled body. Fifteen years later we find him adrift among cities outside the Arab world, his poems hardly ever mentioning his homeland. His exile-themed poems in

the mid-1980s are set in Andalusia (401-408), Samarkand (409-418), Paris (431-444), and Rome (445-454).

### 3. Poems of Exodus: Poet of the Armed Struggle

During the bulk of the period from 1971-1986, we find Darwish in Beirut. His departure from Cairo in 1973 appears to have taken place without rancor between him and his Egyptian hosts. Cairo at the time was still the pan-Arab political capital, but the cultural dynamism and innovation radiated from Beirut. Most importantly, Beirut was then the headquarters of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), along with other Palestinian political and militant organizations. From Beirut, Palestinians conducted armed resistance to Israel and pursued political efforts for statehood. Darwish quickly joined the PLO structure, directing one of its cultural research centers and editing *Shu-un Falastiniya* (Palestinian Affairs). There he came into close contact with PLO leader Yasser Arafat, becoming one of his leading speech writers, especially noted for writing Arafat's 1976 speech to U.N.'s General Assembly. Arriving in Beirut Darwish was already considered "the poet symbol" (al-sha'ir al-ramz) for his poetry written in Palestine. But the Beirut period, as Nazim Al-Sayyid reports, was full of contentions as he had to engage the complicated machinations and inside politics of the revolution (Al-Sayyid, 2008). The unofficial poet laureate of the Palestinian resistance when Darwish arrived in Beirut was Mu'in Bsisu, with whom Darwish had to contend for leading the cultural side of the Palestinian struggle. Arafat played the two poets off of each other, repeatedly siding with Darwish, but never diminishing Bsisu's power and influence (Al-Sayyid, 7). Needless to say, the tensions between the two poets grew heated, and because

both accused each other of being Arafat's poetic mouthpiece, both derogatorily called each other "The Poet-in-Chief" (al-qā'id al-ċām), a play on Arafat's title "Commander-in-Chief" (7).

In Beirut, Darwish became a producer of what Barbara Harlow defined as resistance poetry in its strictest sense. According to Harlow, resistance poetry accompanies an armed struggle, and is made up of poems "often composed on the battlefield or commemorating its casualties" (Harlow, 35). Even while in Israel, Darwish, as previously noted, supported the Palestinian armed struggle for the territories occupied by Israel in the 1967 war. His poems, however, did not quickly become directly identified with the Palestinian armed struggle. His first two volumes of poetry published after leaving Israel, *Uḥibuki aw lā Uḥibuki (I Love You or I Don't Love You 1972)* and *Muhāwala Raqam Sab'a (Attempt Number Seven, 1973)*, elegize victims of Israeli violence, but none are focused on the armed struggle, or the figure of the Palestinian freedom fighter, the fidaii, who "leads his people to freedom, without himself participating in it" (Neuwirth, 178). The celebration of the fidaii had been a popular subject matter for Arabic and Palestinian poetry, especially since the 1967 defeat when it became clear that the only fight in the region would have to take place between Palestinians and Israeli since all the Arab state armies had been defeated (Sulaiman, 139).

The point to be made about Darwish's poetry of this time concerns the freedom he had in choosing his approach to his subject matter and his obligation to remain steadfast and loyal to the struggle and its institutions. Any conscious participant in such "collective and concerted struggle against hegemonic domination and oppression" (Harlow 29) where much was at stake would feel constrained about pointing to the movement's

failings. But resistance movements would not be sustainable if participants did not point to these contradictions and if there such criticism is not heeded. “It is precisely these self-critical controversies that sustain the movements’ active agency in the historical arena of world politics. (29) Regarding the role of the poet as agent here—even according to Harlow’s formulation of resistance literature—it is unclear whether poetry or literature as such can be part of that “self-critical process,” or if poetry is reserved for “the arena of struggle” against occupying and hegemonic forces. It would seem that Darwish felt that his poetry needed to be obliged to the latter. Two decades later he would say that he felt the tension between the poet and the politician in him (Yaḥyā, 198), a split that did not seem to exist when he lived in Israel. And when confronted, also two decades later, by poet Ghassan Zaqtan in an interview, “for making compromises to the audience” (Darwish, *La `Aḥad Yaşil*, 28) during the Beirut years, Darwish replies only that his poetry “stumbled during this period” (28) without giving any reasons why.

As a creative dilemma, and a crisis in poetic agency, the issue facing Darwish here can understand with the Bakhtinian model of the creative social unit adopted for this discussion. The difficulty is twofold: First, Darwish is addressing an audience that does not resist him—and a fully accepting audience demands to be fed what it is used to and insists on being paid back for the unquestionable authority it has given the poet. Second, Darwish, having become the poet-symbol, has little room to maneuver between the public voice of his poet-speaker and the private life of a poet. With this gap between autobiographical private self and the public poetic self, the poet is forced to deliver an uncomplicated message due to the small creative space in which he is allowed to maneuver. In Bakhtin’s terms, the social unit that the poet creates is no longer sound-

proof here. We cannot tell whether the poet is absorbing impressions of the world through his inner dialogue and utilizing them for creative work, or if he is directly responding to the dissonance penetrating his creative enclosure.

The complexity of Darwish's situation is best addressed by turning to poems from his Beirut period. In the poem "Praise for A Thing That Did Not Arrive," Darwish celebrates Palestinian martyrs whose death he presents as an endless wedding procession:

This is the wedding that never ends  
in a battlefield that has no end  
on a night that never ends.  
This is the Palestinian wedding  
where lover never reaches beloved  
except as a martyr or a refugee.  
(*Al-'amāl al-`Ūlā*, vol. 2, 158)

Here Darwish participates in the then newly-fashioned symbol of the martyr as groom, where a wedding instead of a wake is held for the martyred fighter or victim. According to Muhawi such mock weddings were traditionally given at the funeral of "a young man who died before he had the chance to get married and have children" (Muhawi 38). On the way to the mosque or church the deceased young man is carried is as in "a wedding procession, with dabke dancing and singing" (38). Most significantly this ritual took place regardless of the manner of death and was practiced by both Muslims and Christians. For Muhawi "the existential irony implied in this behavior is deeply rooted in Palestinian culture" (38).

As the Palestinian quest for self-determination began, this tradition was stripped of its "existential irony" and the funeral of a young man who died at the hands of the enemy became a politically charged wedding. The martyred young man became groom to the feminized land for whose sake he died. Taking up this motif along with other poets



such as Ahmad Dahbour and Mu'in Bsisu, Darwish declares that the martyrs and their sacrifices are creating the path for Palestinians to return to their homeland and toward Palestinian unity:

Their blood is before me,  
inhabiting the city that approach us  
as if their wounds are the ships of exodus,  
except that they do not return...  
Their blood is before me...  
I cannot see it  
as if it is my country  
before me and I do not see it  
as the roads of Jaffa, before  
I cannot see them  
as if the red roof-tiles of Haifa—  
I cannot see them.  
as if all the homeland's windows  
have disappeared inside my blood  
Only they martyrs can see...  
Only they can see  
because they have been released from the skin of defeat  
and from mirrors  
Here they are flying about their old rooftops  
like swallows, like shrapnel..  
They are becoming free  
(*Al-'amāl al-'Ūlā*, vol. 2, 158-59)

Only the martyred ones are free and are capable of seeing the future because they have been freed from defeat. Such an embrace of the martyr is an “act of inventing sacred history: elevating the fighter to the rank of a redeemer figure” argues Neuwirth (178). She adds that Darwish was articulating the aspirations of “a decisive movement promising liberation, to live the miracle of an Exodus” (178).

#### 4. Muffled Epical Screams

Darwish's best-known poem celebrating the fidaii is “Ahmad Al- Za<sup>c</sup>tar” which appeared in the volume titled *A'aras* (*Weddings*, 1977). Framed within the martyrdom-wedding

motif, the character of Ahmad Al-Za<sup>ʿ</sup>tar brings forth Darwish's most ambitious articulation of Palestinian armed resistance. The poem's poet-speaker, whose voice often overlaps with al-Za<sup>ʿ</sup>tar's, makes the poem seem like both a eulogy given before the dead al-Za<sup>ʿ</sup>tar's body and a song of praise delivered to him while alive. Like the martyrs in the previously quoted poem, those who died for the homeland are not granted the afterlife of Islamic theology, but they nonetheless hover as benign spirits among the living. Al-Za<sup>ʿ</sup>tar exists in the present tense: he is presently dead and alive, hero and victim, plaintiff and judge who promises justice.

Ahmad al-Za<sup>ʿ</sup>tar's name refers to Tel Al-Za<sup>ʿ</sup>tar (Hill of Thyme), a Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon. Accusing the Palestinian Liberation Organization PLO of supporting their leftist adversaries, Lebanese Maronite Christian "Phalangist" forces began to target the largely under-armed Palestinian refugee camps and, in the spring of 1976, surrounded Tel Al-Za<sup>ʿ</sup>tar. After a seven-month siege, and with the aid of Syrian armed forces, Phalangist forces managed to break Palestinian resistance in the camp and killed 3,000 Palestinian refugees (Schultz, 76-78). The difficulty the poem presents has to do with the limitations, if not censorship, it faces. The poem hardly addresses the reality of the Palestinian situation in Lebanon. Indeed, the poem does not address the specifics of the Tel Al-Za<sup>ʿ</sup>tar events or that they occurred in Lebanon to begin with. There is no date given to commemorate the siege or the massacre. Nor does the poem name the culprits—neither the Syrians nor the Phalangist. In his earlier poetic sequence, "Azhar al-Damm" (Flowers of Blood), Darwish commemorates the victims of the Kafr Qassem massacre of Palestinian by Israeli soldiers in 1956. We are given the number of the victims and some information on the events of the massacre. As in "He Returned in A Coffin" Darwish in

“al-Za<sup>c</sup>tar” refuses to name the victims, only offering indicative titles for the poems such as “Victim No. 18” and “Victim No. 48.” Nonetheless, the victims are presented as sons and brothers, mothers and daughters, and so on. Victim No. 48 was found “with coins in his pocket/a book of matches, and a travel pass/and some tattoos drawn on his forearm” (*Al-’amāl al-’Ūlā*, vol. 1, 227).

None of this particularity is granted to Ahmad al-Za<sup>c</sup>tar. The protagonist’s common name, Ahmad, suggests that he is a Palestinian everyman. In this case we are given an established persona ready to be filled with all the symbolism we bring to it. In earlier practices, Darwish refuses to name his victims so that their essence can remain in the details, and so that they “are not lost in the forest of names” (27). Now he offers us a name of a hero that stands for all the names, perhaps blocking them. Al-Za<sup>c</sup>tar, we learn from the poem, is self-sufficient and god-like: “His mother gave birth to him and withdrew” (vol. 2, 259,). “He grew as a refugee camp, blooming into thyme and freedom fighters” (260). A male fighter himself, Al-Za<sup>c</sup>tar replaced his mother’s withdrawal by becoming mother to other fighters and to the vegetation that surrounds the camp. “Alone, O how alone was Ahmad” He seeks an identity and he is “flung by a volcano” (260). Al-Za<sup>c</sup>tar’s life seems to be a cycle of these great triumphs coupled with tragic events due to betrayal.

In the first stanza below, Al-Za<sup>c</sup>tar reaches a moment of spiritual union with land much like the biblical Joseph who has a dream that grants a high place among God’s creatures. This realization of a special gift in the cases both Al-Za<sup>c</sup>tar and Josep is followed by betrayal by jealous murderous brothers:

I am the land and here it has come  
and dressed itself in me.

I am the endless return to the homeland  
and I found myself filled with myself...

From Atlantic Ocean to the Arabian Gulf  
they were counting spears  
while Ahmad climbed to see Haifa  
and he leapt.

Now Ahmad is the captive.

The city left its streets  
and came to toward him  
to kill him.

From the Atlantic Ocean to the Arabian Gulf  
they were preparing the guillotine.

They held an election for the sharpest blade.

I am Ahmad the Arab—let the siege come.  
My body is the walls—let the siege come.  
I am the edge of fire—let the siege come.  
And I now besiege you with my besiegement,  
I now besiege you  
and my chest is the door to all the people—  
let the siege come. (261-62)

The Palestinian fighter is the embodiment of the land and he is the dream of the return of the homeland. In his mission and abidance to the land—as well as in the land's reliance on him—he finds his identity.

The Palestinian Ahmad is working toward regaining his homeland; he is leaping “to see Haifa.” This is when his Arab brothers, from the Ocean to the Gulf, betray him and prepare their spears to upend him. Ahmad “the Arab” will survive, as he is the true link between the Arab masses. As for his betrayers, he will besiege them with the siege they have imposed upon him. With its use of repetition and turns of phrase, the poem exemplifies Darwish's turn toward the *nashid* (an anthem-like song), where ideas circulate and repeat musically, accruing in emotional resonance with less focus on narrative or rhetorical arcs. Reading the poem we are nonetheless struck by the gap between the desperate situation in which the Palestinians found themselves at the time of

this massacre and the poem's grandiloquent resonances. Bridging the poem's sonorous, uplifting rhythm with the facts one knows of Tel- Al-Za<sup>c</sup>tar makes for a difficult exercise in the suspension of disbelief.

Darwish, it should be noted, was at this time considered part of the Palestinian political establishment. His poems up to then refer in passing to his disappointment with "the brothers", but Ahmad Al-Za<sup>c</sup>tar such self-imposed gag order becomes clearly suffocating. To be sure, a poet need not name the culprit and a poem about a massacre or an act of ethnic cleansing need not become a police report or a criminal investigation of a human right report. Darwish clearly felt at this time that the killings at Tel Al-Za<sup>c</sup>tar deserved a response, and one that would take all the artist's capacities to honor the event. Whereas in Israel, Darwish names his victimizer, here we detect political machinations and self-censorship at play for fear that some, even within the Palestinian camp, would be offended by what might be an undermining of Arab solidarity.

Most writers and poet from the region exercise a form of self-censorship to begin with, and what is important in self-censorship is the ability to subvert as well as acquiesce. In other words, the poet under self-censorship can manage to express the self and also satisfy the censor. In Darwish's case the censor, an internal and internalized one in this case, proved stronger than the self. One may even argue that *Madih* is a poem about what the Palestinian intellectual/politician could not say by saying so much. Such external pressure on poetry, where the poet must withhold what he knows, and where his concern for not offending overwhelms his ability to express, makes for a farce, especially given the highly dramatic nature of the poem.

Adding to the poem's shortcoming is its very content which is focused on a single hero who boldly resisted, rather than a whole community victimized and blindsided by betrayal. *Madih* was quickly perceived indeed as a *madih* (panegyric ode) of Yasser Arafat for enduring this challenge to his leadership, a charge that Darwish had to repeatedly deny (Yaḥyā, 200). It did not help the poem's reputation or Darwish's that he read it in public as Arafat gleefully listened (Ibrahim, 16).

In 1983, after a silence of six years, and one year after the PLO's expulsion from Beirut, Darwish published a book-length poem titled *Madih al-Dhul al-A'li: Qassida Tasjiliya (Praise of the High Shadow: A Documentary Poem, 1983)*. The expulsion of the Palestinian resistance from Beirut was such a great blow to the Palestinian cause that Tel Al-Za<sup>c</sup>tar pales before it in comparison. Israel occupied most of Lebanon for three months in 1982 and its march of devastation descended upon Beirut with fury, bombing the city from land, air and sea causing the death of 19,000 civilians (Khalidi, 200). The PLO negotiated a withdrawal of their fighters in August of that year leaving Palestinian refugee camps vulnerable. In coordination with the Israeli invading forces, Phalangist militias descended upon the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps, murdering an estimated 2,000 Palestinian civilians. Darwish's poetic response to the Israeli invasion of Beirut, the civilian killings, and massacres that followed differed only slightly in terms of form and approach from his work five year earlier. In *Madih* we come across many echoes of "Ahmad Al-Za<sup>c</sup>tar":

Besiege your besiegement, no way out  
Your arms fell, pick them up  
Strike your enemy, no way out.  
(*Al-'amāl al-`Ulā*, vol. 2, 348).

The lines are shorter, as if indicating the smaller space allowed for heroism. The repetition of words, such as “no way out” and “Either you are/or you shall not become” (349), occur frequently and in close proximity create a sense of sonic claustrophobia. They are chants to help the addressee in the poem survive, but they also indicate the dire predicament in which he finds himself.

Parts of *Madih* are devoted to Beirut, where the poet speaks in We for the Palestinians addressing the paralyzed Arab brothers, the people of Lebanon, and the city of Beirut. The poet feminizes the city and speaks to her as a lover and later his dismay that she has betrayed him so blatantly. Beirut, described as the legendary female lover Laila, had always “refused to surrender to the husband” (365). She and the poet, standing in for the Palestinians, “were a life-boat for a continent floating on a mirage” (352), a reference to how the Palestinian cause had been a central component of the Arab postcolonial renaissance. Beirut, home to many publishing houses, newspapers, and publication rallied around the Palestinian cause which helped give shape to its progressive and liberal milieu. As such, the pro-Palestinian intellectual and artist as well as the pro-Palestinian fighter (neither of which were always Palestinian) were Beirut’s righteous and romantic suitors whose union bore the promise of Arab cultural rejuvenation. Now, however, “Beirut leaves the poet’s poem/and enters the soldier’s helmet” (369), a reference to the collaboration of many Lebanese with Israel, or at least their welcoming attitude toward the expulsion of Palestinians from their midst. Darwish also notes how Beirut had decided to embrace the petro-dollars of the reactionary and philandering Arab princes. The feminized Beirut in *Madih* proves to be a treacherous

lover who betrays him outright, unlike Rita, the Israeli conscript who at least demurs, and certainly unlike Palestine for whose embrace he still longs.

“Ahmad Al-Za<sup>c</sup>tar” and *Madih* have been considered epical-lyrics by Arab critics such as Nāşir (2001), Al-Hāj Şaleḥ (1999) and Al-Nabūlsī (1987). The poems are perhaps epical only in their size and in their focus on a hero as is to be expected in the classical definition of an epic. Significantly, however, they lack the inclusive narrative and the clarity of purpose that chronology and an understanding of conflict that epics require. Called “a documentary poem,” *Madih* is long on bombast and short on documentation. As in “Al-Za<sup>c</sup>tar,” only snippets of the experience of that siege appear in the poem. In fact, only the speaker and an agreeable, unskeptical addressee know the circumstances at hand. To know what the poem is about, we would have to bring to it, in terms of facts, much more than it offers us to weigh them. The poem’s musicality, emphasized through incantation and repetition, rises into a kind of high shadow that neither the poet nor the reader can surmount. Trapped within a poetic discourse that promises documentation and cannot deliver, the poet circles around obscure images and dives into the self. “Go into yourself, /you are wider than people’s lands, /wider than the width/ of the guillotine blade” (391). Perhaps what the poem documents more than anything is the impossibility at that time for the poet to “document.” A host of reasons cause this impediment, one of which is the fact that Darwish’s poetry at that time was read as quasi-official statement, a mode that does not allow the poet free reign and where he is forced to write with the shadow of such implications hovering over him.



### 5. Prose Rescues Poetry

The issue of poetic agency derives its discursive thrust from the ability of a poet to change gears and to change the type of poem he writes. The aim of the poet-agent as Darwish understood so well is to be engaged and to help facilitate change. This process involves bearing witness through poetry, rewriting history, and challenging or affirming given concepts by confronting them or retooling them. One of the means also available to the poet is to acknowledge the failure of poetry in addressing a subject matter and turn the material over to another genre. One of Darwish's significant revelations after Beirut is perhaps encapsulated in the title of his poem "It is time for the first lines to die" (*Al-'amāl al-'Ūlā*, vol. 3, 72). By that we perhaps understand that the poet's projected persona and the role he had assumed by then have reached their creative ends. The poet Darwish had been up to then needed to be reborn if he was to remain relevant and alive as a poet. Announcing the death of the poet he had been and the discursive approach he had been practicing up, Darwish acknowledges the need for a new approach to writing poetry.

I've already alluded to a generic division of labor in Palestinian literature between poetry and prose where factual, realist material found its way to prose fiction and the visionary and dramatic expressed itself in poetry. Darwish's prose memoir, *Dākīrah lil-Nisyān* (*A Memory of Forgetfulness*, 1984), seems an acknowledgement of this division, and an assertion of the beginning of individual and national self-examination. Here we find the Darwish of *Madīh* stripped of elevated eloquence. At times his descent is like Shakespeare's Othello's in the latter half of his play. Foul-mouthed, loquacious, and suffering from lack of sleep, he is free to tell it like it is. We read about him and friends scrounging for food, one of them carrying a lamb carcass hoping to find a place to cook

it. “Why don’t you take this thing, poke a hole in it, and fuck it, I told him” (*Dākirah*, 79). A remarkable passage describes the poet’s effort to try to cross a small hallway in his apartment to reach the kitchen to make his morning coffee in the midst of intense bombardment. Unlike Othello, however, Darwish is clear eyed about the experience he is narrating. He presents his Lebanese neighbor’s disdain of his people with little interference. And in the midst of the painful silence of the Arab street, he finds ironic hope in the protests that broke in several Arab cities when the Algerian national team was treated unjustly at the World Cup that summer in Spain.

Darwish’s account attempts to inscribe what would otherwise be lost to forgetfulness: “events that collective and cultural memory, let alone history, can’t bring themselves to say” (Bernard-Donals, 42). We might add poetry to “collective and cultural memory” and to “history” here since it is prose that enables Darwish to demystify the complexity of the Palestinian situation in Beirut. In *Dākirah* the major actors appear under their own names (Arafat, Begin, Sharon, Jemayael, Saad Haddad, and so on). And whereas in “Ahmad Al-Za<sup>ʿ</sup>tar” and *Madih* Darwish had drowned the complexity with accusations of betrayal directed at the Arab capitals here we learn of the depth of the Palestinian tragedy. Working as clients of Arab regimes that wished to be seen as champions of the struggle for Palestine, Palestinian leaders were instrumental in sapping their own national liberation movement. Darwish reiterates his praise for the Palestinian *fidaii* (freedom fighter) and celebration here counteracts the lyricism of his previous grandiloquent portrayals. The fighters, we learn, were short on ammunition, water and food, yet through their tactical cunning and perseverance they forced the Israelis to stay on the fringes of the city.

*Dākirah* does not commemorate the freedom fighters or realign Darwish's version of recent contemporary history, though it does a much more superior job at documenting than *Madih*. Rather, the focus in *Dākirah* centers on the experience of being besieged and on attempting to assure the Palestinians cultural and national relevance past Lebanon experience. In Beirut's Commodore Hotel, where opportunists, hedonists, and adventurers hid out during the war, Darwish has this conversation with an American journalist:

- What are you writing now, poet?
- I am writing my silence.
- Do you mean that only the guns are talking now?
- Yes, their voice is louder than mine.
- So what are you doing?
- I am encouraging people to persevere.
- Will you win this war?
- No. What's important is that we survive. Our survival is victory.
- And what happens after that?
- A new time will begin.
- And when will you return to writing poems?
- After the guns fall quiet for a bit. Then I can explode my silence which is filled with all these voices. (*Dākirah*, 65)

Here Darwish already has a sense that a new era is emerging and a new poetry needs to emerge with it. He quotes passages from his poetry, citing these previously discussed lines in *Madih* describing his writing as “the stutters of a scream” (61): “Besiege your besiegement, no way out/Your arms fell, pick them up...” In providing this critique of his own *Madih*, Darwish manages to stitch these stutters into lucid prose, suggesting that what was needed for him as a poet-agent is a degree of sobriety rather than the exhilaration of battle-born poetry. His incorporation of long passages from the ancient books of the three major monotheist religions hint at the ingredients of a new mythology of Palestine. In *Dākirah* Darwish also turns to history, digging through chronicles of the

Crusades for parallels to his Beirut experience. The Crusades prove to be a rich resource for studying a prolonged state of ambivalence, displacement, and continuous disorientation. This focus on mythology, history, and the machinations of survival indicate that Darwish's imagination, even while in Beirut, was already refashioning its Bakhtinian literary social unit for a new Palestinian era and the poetic articulation it would require.

## E. TO SURVIVE IN THE WORLD:

### WRITING THE DEEP PRESENT AND THE DEEP PAST (1986-1993)

Having worked within the framework of *adab al-iltizam* (committed literature), but also having had misgivings about “a poetry that ignites revolution,” (*Yawmīyāt* 113), in the mid-1980s Darwish faced a new chapter in the Palestinian saga and a new challenge to his ideas about poetry as a means of agency for poet and reader. Like many Palestinian intellectuals at the time, Darwish recognized that the fight for Palestinian statehood and self-determination had to take on a more varied, strategic, long-term course of action. Palestinian writers and poets begin to sense that their literature, their internal debates, and even their cultural negotiations with the enemy would also have to take place on the global stage. By the time Beirut fell, many Palestinians had realized the durability of Zionist ideology, and its ability to dominate the fate of Palestine and its native people. Steeped in Biblical mythology, but taken as history, the Zionist vision of Palestine contributed, at least within global circles of power, to tacit acceptance of the Palestinians’ marginalization. Now that the military option had become almost moot, the battle for Palestinian statehood, as far as the exiled Palestinians were concerned, would take place in the cultural arena as well as the political one. Within the arts, the Palestinians’ struggle would depend on providing compelling portraits and metaphors for their suffering, replacing propaganda with artistry and intellectual rigor. And while this process would require the development of diverse visions of a peaceful future for Palestinians and Israelis, it would also aim to destabilize the entrenched racist paradigms that have legitimated their displacement and suffering since the establishment of Israel on their

historical homeland.

Toward this end two books, now considered masterpieces of Palestinian literature, were published, one in Arabic and one in English: Mahmoud Darwish's poetry collection *Ward Aqall (Lesser Roses)* and Edward Said's *After the Last Sky*, a book of short essays by the author and photographs by the Swiss photographer Jean Mohr. Said's book, significantly, takes its title from a line that appears in *Ward Aqall*. Said acknowledges Darwish's involvement in *After the Last Sky* and intersperses his texts with lines from *Ward Aqall*. The extent to which Darwish and Said worked together may never be determined, but it is evident that the books were written around the same time and can be read as a unified project. Together they point the way toward a new esthetics of Palestinian art and a new approach toward agency gained through art.

Said's introduction to *After the Last Sky*, in which he provides what amounts to a national and cultural manifesto, outlines an approach to the role of esthetics within the Palestinian scene to which Palestinian artists, within the homeland and without, have largely adhered ever since. Said's prescriptions are highly informative in outlining Darwish's new direction as a poet. His program can be summarized in this point-by-point outline:

- Said shifts the focus of the Palestinian fight for recognition toward the West, especially toward the US, where the Palestinians, realizing that they lost their public relations battle to the Israelis and their supporters, must combat their image as terrorists.
- The Palestinians' affiliation with and reliance on their Arab brothers has brought them a great deal of grief and time has come for the Palestinians to take matters

(political, social, and cultural) fully into their own hands.

- Said's condemnation of violence covers that committed by the Israelis, their allies, and the Palestinians. Most harmful to the Palestinians has been the violence they have committed against each other. In its condemnation of violence, Said's esthetic program implies that the Palestinians' armed resistance ought to come to an end and that artists part ways from militant organizations if they wish to be heard by the outside world.
- Despite their decades-long hardship, the Palestinians have formed a community that embraces their multiple affiliations and experiences.
- In order to persevere as a people and achieve their goal of self-determination, the main challenge for Palestinians in the decades to come is to better convey the experiences and achievements of their collectivity.
- Palestinians need to experiment with various forms and means of expression to provide an engaging, even avant-gardist counter-discourse to their representation in the Western popular media and to Zionist hegemony.
- Palestinians should be encouraged to have their conversations with the world and amongst themselves in public, through art and literature.
- Palestinian artwork should be made available everywhere possible and Palestinian literature should be made readily available through translation. (Said 5-7)

Just as the intifada was about to ignite, the late 1980s saw increased exposure of Palestinian art and literature in the West. Darwish's relocation to Paris facilitated the translation of much of his work up to then into French and other Western European languages; Michel Khleifi's feature film "Wedding in Galilee" won the Critics Prize at

the Cannes Film Festival in 1987; Anton Shammas's novel *Arabesques*, the first novel written in Hebrew by a non-Jew, in fact by a Palestinian, caused a huge stir in Israeli cultural circles and among American Jewish intellectuals. *Arabesques* was recognized for its literary excellence by leading Israeli critics and translated into many languages. A few years following these developments, the renowned Palestinian scholar Salma Khadra Jayussi published her voluminous *Anthology of Palestinian Literature*, thus canonizing a national body of work. Significantly, Jayussi's anthology appeared in English several years before it appeared in Arabic, suggesting that this canonization of the Palestinian national literature was an outward gesture, and that indeed Palestinian culture was shaping itself, performing its identity, before the eyes of the world.

### 1. Collective Soliloquies

In *Ward Aqall* (*Lesser Roses*, 1986) Darwish begins by responding to a poem in his previous book *Hiya Ughniy, Hiya Ughnia* (*It's a Song, It's a Song*) which he ended the startling declaration that "It's time for the poet to kill himself / not for anything, / but to kill himself" (*Al-'amāl al-'Ūlā*, vol. 3, 75). In *Ward Aqall* the poet begins with a vow "to walk this long, long road to its end," (107) convinced that "in this life there is much to love" (111). Darwish's embrace of life is coupled with an embrace of poetry as he emerges as a new poet with a new look to his poems. Armed with formal innovations and speaking in a more immediate, wide-reaching timbre, Darwish returns forcefully to language because "it is all he has recourse to... eager to show that as a poet he cannot be but a poet" (Snir 126).

The titles of the poems in *Ward Aqall* are usually the first few words of the poem.



It is common for poems to be known for their first lines, but not to be titled as such. With titles that do not encapsulate or shed a retrospective light, the poems gush forth as whole utterances until they reach their end. This immediate leap into the poems' content is marked by the absence of sections or stanzas in the vast majority of the book, as if there is no time to pause. Shifts in rhetoric, focus, or subject matter within the poem have to be taken as part of the whole and are indicative of the turbulence of the moment experienced. *Ward Aqall*, as a volume, contrasts with Darwish's foray into the lyric-epics of Beirut. Most of the poems occupy a single page and are written in long lines—suggestive of “the long, long road” that the poem must walk. This combination, of long lines in short poems, is new to Darwish. And the fact that the poems are all of similar length suggests that in many ways they are a studied variation on a theme. The places—Córdoba, Aden, and others—of the poems change, but the circumstances remain similar. Repeatedly, we find ourselves caught within the same prolonged delay, mired in the hurry-up-and-wait of the Palestinian exilic experience. Several poems employ rhyme, but unlike the variations on rhyme that Darwish and other *taf'ila* poets had used, in *Ward Aqall* he typically uses only a single rhyming sound. Darwish's lines are longer even than the classical *bahr al-tawil* (long measure, or foot) lines of classical poetry, which can contain up to 20 syllables in Arabic. The combination of very long lines with a mono-rhyme scheme thus provides a looping track that lands us back where we started, caught up in a cycle of repeated sounds, perhaps learning a great deal, but making little physical progress.

In *Ward Aqall* we sense that Darwish is addressing a different reader, and has to start off with a clean referential slate. The poems in *Ward Aqall* do not require the reader

to share the poet's history or know a great deal of history since whatever history the poet refers to here is made explicit in the poems. Instead, the poems attempt to establish a relationship with the reader by anchoring themselves in the elements, reaching a point of agreement and moving on from there. Darwish's poem "On This Earth There Is What Deserves Life" is a case in point:

On this earth there is what deserves life: April's hesitancy, the smell  
of bread  
at dawn, a woman's invocation toward men, Aeschylus's writings,  
the beginning  
of love, grass on a stone, mothers standing on a thread issued from  
the notes of a flute,  
and the conqueror's dread of memories.

On this earth there is what deserves life: the end of September,  
a woman who leaves  
her forties with her apricots still in bloom, the hour of sun in  
the prison yard, clouds  
imitating a herd of creatures, the salutations given to those who  
walk smiling  
to their executions, and the tyrants' fear of songs.

On this earth there is what deserves life: on this earth there is the  
mistress of  
the earth, mother of beginnings and mother of ends. She used to  
be called Palestine.  
And she is still called Palestine. My lady, I deserve, because you  
are my lady,  
I deserve life. (*Al-'amāl al-'Ūlā*, vol. 3, 111-112)

In the first two stanzas, Darwish begins by trying to reach consensus with the reader. The first thing he mentions as a reason to live is April's hesitancy, an observation about nature and climate that humans must have observed before any civilization came into being. Then he cites the smell of bread at dawn, which ties the joys of food with the exhilaration of early morning and the satisfaction of fulfilling labor. A woman's invocation toward a man combines the world of desire and the world of superstition. As

soon as he mentions Aeschylus's writings, the poet-speaker realizes he may have made a complex allusion, a point that would not be immediately clear to the reader, and he quickly returns to recognizable experiences, such as the beginning of love and the beautiful, yet incongruous image of grass growing on a stone. The speaker saves the images more pertinent to the Palestinian experience for the last line in the first stanza, though Palestine itself gets no mention. Indeed, the image of mothers standing on a thread of anxiety, their sense of hope as fragile and whispery as the notes of a flute, offers a primordial anxiety with universal resonance. Finally, Darwish's reader must agree that any conqueror dreads, to some extent, his memory of the conquest. He dreads his own memories because they evoke acts of violence and perhaps guilt; he dreads the memory of the conquered because it fuels their resistance. They are two contrary drives, and most people have experienced at least one. Beginning with reasons to live, with which many can identify, Darwish inches closer toward the reasons that Palestinians know more deeply.

The second stanza here follows a similar pattern. The images of "the end of September" and "a woman who leaves her forties with her apricots still in bloom" as reasons to go on living should cause no confusion in the reader; both of these autumnal images celebrate beauty's ability to survive. In "the hour of sun in the prison yard" the poet inches closer to his people's experience, as detention was the fate of many Palestinian men and women. Perhaps fearing he has gotten too specific, the poet veers back to "clouds imitating a herd of creatures," a pleasure associated with childhood anywhere. The stanza concludes with the political image of fearless heroes facing execution and a tyrant's fear of popular sentiment as expressed in song. These images are

not particular to the Palestinians, but are easily associated with Palestine.

Darwish subtly imbeds his own autobiography and his earlier poetry in the images of this poem. The smell of bread and the image of the anxious mother are part of Darwish's own autobiographical references, especially "My Mother," one of his best-known compositions. A grass growing on a stone echoes Darwish's protagonist, Ahmad Al-Za<sup>ʿ</sup>tar, who is described in these very terms. And finally, the hour of sun in the prison yard evokes Darwish's own imprisonments in Israel. By inserting the Palestinian experience within the universal joys and achievements of life, Darwish presents himself as "synecdoche... of an entire people" (Snir 127) and, indeed, the whole of humanity.

In the third stanza, we realize that the poet has saved his best reason to live for last. It is his country, of course. He has shown us that he and we have a great deal in common, and has carefully brought us to the experience of his people. Whenever he senses that we may not agree with him, he presents more points of agreement that implicate us in the poem's search for existential affirmation. When he finally mentions Palestine, he presents it not merely as one more thing that makes life worth living, but as a special being, place, and entity, a woman indeed, perhaps foreshadowed by the woman who has maintained her beauty after decades of being longed for. At the end of the poem, we realize that the poet may have not been speaking to us at all, but was speaking to his beloved lady / homeland all along. We realize that we have merely been given the privilege of overhearing this intimate declaration of love. This pleasurable destabilization places us momentarily outside of the poem, but through identification with the poet-speaker, we are compelled, in order to re-enter the poem, to give serious consideration to his adoration for his homeland.

Darwish continues these inclusive gestures when he begins to speak in the first-person plural. The poems in this volume have no hesitancy about speaking in We, their confidence arising from the urgency of the situations described in the poems as they encapsulate the moment of an identity's birth. We see before us the evolution of a new Palestinian identity, a new "positioning," to use Stuart Hall's term (392). This reshaped identity as expressed in Darwish's poems is "constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative, and myth" (392) like all identities, but since this identity requires for its emergence that the world witness it, it relies more strongly on metaphor and sharp imagery as a means of dissolving the reader/viewer's skepticism and defensiveness. Metaphor, as in the poem "Earth Is Pressing Against Us" tells the Palestinians' "story" to others, and to themselves, in a much more urgent and existentially explicit manner than their "history" could.

Earth is pressing against us, trapping us in the final passage, so we  
pull off our limbs to make it through.  
Earth is squeezing us. If only we were its wheat, so that we die then  
live. If only it were our mother  
so she might have mercy on us...  
Where do we go after the last frontier? Where do birds fly after the last  
sky?

Where will plants sleep after the last breath of air? We will write our  
names with crimson  
mist! We will cut off the hymn's hand so that our flesh completes it.

Here we will die. Here, in the final passage. Here or there, our blood  
will plant its olive trees. (*Al-'amāl al-'Ūlā*, vol. 3, 115-116)

The questions at the center of this poem have a dramatic quality. Darwish starts the poem by making a case through metaphor. If the reader does not understand how hard life has been for the Palestinians, how their movement as individuals and as a community has been constricted, let the reader then imagine having to tear off his or her limbs in order to

keep moving. The culprit is not a single enemy here, but the whole earth. Life under such pressure is so difficult that the poet wishes that he or his people were wheat so that this life would end and they could start again. Life, therefore, takes priority over one's background or history, and the desire to live is itself more powerful than the desire to live as a human being.

No such option is available, however, and at it is at this point that the poem turns to the reader or listener and asks its powerful questions: Now that you understand our situation, through metaphor and analogy, and now that it has been presented to you in sharp, crisp images, what do you suggest we do, Dear Reader? With the apostrophic and repeated use of the word "here," the reader is pulled deeper into the poem by the immediacy of the poet's utterance. These situations in *Ward Aqall*, written in present tense, appear to take place in front the reader / viewer. Before the reader can answer the questions posed by the poet, the world continues to press the people depicted in the poem and they are forced to respond. They write their names with the blood of their massacred bodies; they will attach their corpses to a severed song so that it is completed. And when their bodies are all bled out, their blood will plant its olive trees, a powerful symbol of peace, and a metaphor for Palestinian resilience and endurance.

Whereas "The Earth Is Pressing Against Us" provides a metaphorical portrait of the Palestinians' agony, Darwish's "Athens Airport" brings the reader closer to their concrete reality.

Athens airport disperses us to other airports. Where can I fight, asks the fighter Where can I deliver your child? a pregnant woman shouts back. Where can I invest my money? asks the banker. This is none of my business, the intellectual says. Where did you come from? asks the customs official. And we answer: From the sea! Where are you going? To the sea, we answer. What is your address? A woman of our group says: My village is my bundle on my back. We have waited

in the Athens airport for years. A young man marries a girl but they have no place for their wedding night. He asks: Where can I make love to her? We laugh and say: This is not the right time for that question. The analyst says: In order to live, they die by mistake. The literary man says: Our camp will certainly fall. What do they want from us? Athens airport welcomes its visitors without end. Yet, like the benches in the terminal, we remain, impatiently waiting for the sea. O Athens airport, how many more years will this waiting take? (*Al-'amāl al-'Ūlā*, vol. 3, 120)

As in the early poem “Identity Card,” in which Darwish took a fact from his autobiography and enlarged his voice to become others’, here we have a poem borne of Darwish’s personal experience. In his letters to Samih al-Qassem he makes two references to meeting old friends while in transit between flights, people he never expected to see again, and one of these incidents takes place in Athens airport (*al-Rassaiil* 33); in the 1980s Greece was one of the easiest European countries for Palestinians and other Arabs to visit.

The poem points to Palestinian history after the PLO’s expulsion from Beirut by including a fighter among the crowd of waiting Palestinians. The fighter’s presence among the stranded travelers suggests that the armed facet of the Palestinian struggle is on hold. The trauma of separation and discontinuity unfolds very quickly as the fighter’s wife has nowhere to bear her child, the banker has nowhere to invest his money, and so on. It is important to note how the Palestinians are presented as “normal” in this poem. They represent various professional classes, the type of people we would see at an airport. The liminal condition of the Palestinians is expressed in the image of the woman who says that her bundle is her village. In her character Darwish preserves the Palestinians’ peasant roots; the traveling woman has become a cosmopolitan traveler but still considers the village her basic social unit. Furthermore, Darwish’s reference to her village celebrates a long-held tradition among displaced Palestinians of naming their

ancestral villages (most of which no longer exist) when they are asked about their origins. The Palestinians' existential sense of irony, as Muhawi called it, appears here too. The crowd waiting at the airport finds humor in the dilemma of the newlyweds whose wedding itself was held at the airport. But gravity soon returns to the poem, and the poet turns to the reader, wondering what the world wants from him and his people, and how long this waiting will go on.

In another poem Darwish's poet-speaker, directly addressing an international gathering, directly asks:

And I ask you kind ladies and gentlemen, is this people's earth  
For all of the earth's people...  
Where is my small hut then, where am I?...  
You have all agreed to our right to return like all hens and horses  
To a dream of stone...  
but I continue to travel on to another country,  
so that I ask you again, kind ladies and gentlemen, is this people's earth  
for all of the earth's people? (*Al-'amāl al-'Ūlā*, vol. 3, 121-122)

This last passage makes explicit the kind of stage on which Darwish is performing his poetry, and on which the Palestinian experience has been dramatizing itself before the world audience. Darwish, again speaking as We, now that the Palestinians' case has been made with images, metaphors, and in dramatic representations that can be easily understood, directly challenges the global community's nonchalance and urges his reader toward fairness.

## 2. The Battle over Myth and History

Earlier in his career, Darwish had argued that his and his people's sense of belonging to Palestine differs from that of the Israeli occupiers. The Palestinians belong to Palestine and their belonging does not have to be "excavated" to be proven. Their presence is



rooted in their peasant traditions and in the lives they have been shaping on the land, not in dreams or myths. He asserted that the Israelis suffer from their lack of belonging. His soldier who dreams of white lilies says that his love for Israel was retrieved “from old ruins...an old statue lost in time...an unknown source” (*Al-'amāl al-'Ūlā*, vol. 1, 111). The message of “Soldier Who Dreams of White Lilies” is that Israelis have a great deal to learn from the Palestinians about loving one’s homeland and belonging to it, as their attachment does not compare to the Palestinians’.

The main textual source of the Israelis’ sense of land entitlement is the Hebrew Bible. Though Israel established itself as a modern, democratic, secularly managed state for Jews, the Bible is at the center of its legitimacy. Though most of the early Zionist leaders, including Herzl and Ben-Gurion, were skeptics, if not non-believers, the Bible is nonetheless at the center of the Zionists’ claim on Palestine and has guided their approach to and treatment of the land’s native inhabitants. Like the other European national movements in the nineteenth century by which it was inspired, the evolution of Zionism involved the invention of tradition, the creation of a national culture, and the construction of national identities from a mixture of folk history and historical myth (Hobsbawm 1990).

As a colonial movement, Zionism intended to settle European-born Jews in historical Palestine even at the expense of the land’s native inhabitants. The Hebrew Bible helped define their parameters; in this case the national collectivity was to be made up of only ethnic Jews, including Jews all over the world, and was instrumental in positioning the Palestinians as indisputable Others, whose presence on the land was undesirable. The Bible and Jewish tradition were sources for symbols for the new nation-

state, including a national language, Hebrew, which was not a modern language and therefore needed to be secularized and transformed (Masalha 21-22). Most importantly, the Hebrew Bible was to serve as a cornerstone of Zionist political ideology and governance. Israeli historian Baruch Kimmerling writes:

The book of Joshua provided the muscular and militaristic dimension of conquest of and annihilation of the Canaanites and other ancient people that populated the Promised Land, while the Books of Isaiah and Amos were considered as preaching for social justice and equality (a kind of proto-socialism). (339)

As the Zionist movement evolved from its early stages of drawing on biblical sources to construct its national vision and character, it began to assert the biblical myth as valid history. This was in keeping with other efforts in the West aimed at validating the historicity of the Bible. These efforts, both religious and secular, penetrated many fields of study, especially archeology. During much of the twentieth century “many archeologists were optimistic that archeological discoveries had validated many of the historical claims of the Bible, if not the theological interpretations given to that history by biblical authors” (Laughlin 12). Much of the energy for historicizing the Bible radiated from Protestant literalist scholars beginning in the late eighteenth century. “The central absorbing interest” of much of archeology in the Holy Land, according to Laughlin, “is the understanding and exposition of the scriptures” (12). He adds that “many Israeli archeologist[s] still seem to operate from this perspective” (12), such that secularization of the Bible is a national enterprise in Israel, carried out by hundreds of scholars, Jews and non-Jews, at all universities.

Biblical scholarship in historical Palestine has served to support a nationalist ideology that seeks to root itself in history by utilizing a text that bears a great deal of

religious authority, even while its veracity is highly debatable. Israeli historian Benjamin Beit-Hallami writes,

Most Israelis today... regard the Bible as a source of reliable historical information of a secular political kind... The Zionist version of Jewish history accepts most biblical legends about the beginnings of Jewish history, minus divine intervention... The descent into Egypt and the Exodus era phases of a secular history of a developing people, as is the conquest of Canaan by Joshua. The Biblical order of events is accepted, but the interpretation is nationalist and secular. (119)

Such entrenched beliefs flow directly into the Israeli political and military establishment and provide a central component of the indoctrination of citizens serving in its institutions. For example, the Israeli Defense ministry has published a chronology of biblical events giving exact dates for the creation of the world (Masalha 26). According to their prophetic vision of history, Abraham is the first Zionist immigrant to Canaan, a parallel for Zionist immigration to Palestine beginning in the late nineteenth century, Joshua's conquest of Palestine and the killing and expulsion of the Canaanites maps onto the 1948 war, and King David's conquest of Jerusalem represents the 1967 six-day war through which Israel came to occupy the holy city and the rest of the West Bank.

Darwish's writings in the late 1980s and early 1990s comprise a new phase in his work as a poet spokesman and cultural agent. He begins to investigate historiography and myth-making, looking into the ways both are responsible for the occupation of his homeland, the disempowerment of his own people, and their alienation from their native landscape. His poetry delves into the politics of narrating history and sustaining myth, in order to reveal the complexities and contingencies within that history. The poet argues that some central myths, taken as history and established as tradition, have helped justify Israel's relentless hostility toward the Palestinians and delegitimized their claims to their

historical homeland, ultimately estranging them from it. As destabilizing for the Palestinians as Zionist mythology has been, the Israelis' own secularization of biblical myth into history provides ample evidence of the possibilities offered by diluting myth and transforming it into a modern force for the twentieth century. Such revised myths now exist on their own accord and their authority rests as much as on their separation from their biblical origins as on their association with them.

Darwish recognized how Zionist ideology, assisted by such myth-making, has managed to root European Jews in Palestine within a few generations. Myth for him becomes an area of contention and a potential means to retool the deep ideological structures of all those living in or belonging to Palestine. "The problem of Palestinian poetry," writes Darwish, "is that it set out without extra resources, without historians, without anthropologists; it therefore had to equip itself with all the necessary baggage needed to defend its right to exist" (Darwish, *boundary 2* 82). Given that the Israelis have written their national myth and history using the Bible, a "narrative of birth that no one dreams of denying," (82) how could the Palestinians "write a less mythic narrative?" (82). Describing the quotidian life of the Palestinians was meant to assert their organic belonging to the land. Still, demonstrating the historical existence of the Palestinians on their land by depicting their lives has proved less powerful than the geographical settings of mythical tales, when those myths are coupled with power (82). In other words, the real history of the land belonging to the Palestinians does not withstand the assault of Zionist mythology. What the powerful believed mattered more than the facts. Hence, it was time for poets to enter this belief system, this mythical construct, to rewrite it and provide contentious alternatives to it. Poetry as an art form can evoke hymnal resonances

associated with the practice of faith, and can convey narratives with the authority of scripture and parable. Combining these two modes, Darwish begins to write lyrical epics in this period.

In the poem “The Hoopoe,” Darwish mixes a variety of biblical and Quranic narratives to compose a myth (or perhaps a very large metaphor) of Palestinian existence and the state of suspension in which they find themselves. The poem combines the story of the biblical King Solomon (Suleiman, considered a prophet in Islam), the story of Noah and the flood (narrated in the Bible and the Quran), and to a lesser extent, the Israelites’ years of wandering in the Sinai desert after the Exodus. In the biblical version, the Queen of Sheba learns of Solomon and journeys to him carrying exotic gifts. She had heard of his wisdom and wanted to quiz him, and she eventually converts to his faith, having found him the wisest man that ever was. In the Quranic version, Solomon had at his command human armies, jinns, and animals, all of whose languages he spoke. Asking for the whereabouts of the hoopoe, Solomon learns that the bird had been surveying the realm. The hoopoe tells him that he has discovered a sun-worshipping kingdom ruled by a woman named Belqees. And so it is Solomon that seeks Belqees in the Quran, and she, threatened by his power and wishing to protect her people, decides to consider his offer and eventually converts to monotheism (referred to as “Islam” in the Quran).

Solomon’s Quranic hoopoe is not mentioned in the Bible. In Darwish’s treatment, the hoopoe replaces Noah’s biblical dove that surveyed the land after the flood and informed him when to leave the ark. The Quranic version of Noah’s story does not include a dove, and the hoopoe, which is detested and considered unclean in the Hebrew Bible, is considered an intelligent, dutiful believer in God in the Quranic tale. Darwish’s

mixing of the biblical and Quranic versions of the stories of Solomon and Noah is superimposed on the forty years of wandering in the desert that comprises a major chapter in Jewish mythology. Here is how “The Hoopoe” starts:

We haven't approached the land of our distant star. The poem takes us  
from the eye of our needle to weave for space a cape for the new horizon  
to wear.  
Captives, even if our wheat spikes leap over the fences and swallows  
emerge  
from the hold of our broken chains, captives of what we love and what we  
want and what we are.  
In us there is a hoopoe that dictates its letters to the distant olive trees of  
exile.  
From our letters our alphabets returned to rewrite  
what the rain inscribes in wild flowers on the distant stones.  
And travel itself now travels, an echo from us and aimed at us. We were  
not to  
return in spring to our small windows, and we were not leaves  
for the wind to push on toward our coasts. Here and there a clearly  
defined line  
for loss. For now, and for many years, we will hoist for sweet obscurity  
our dead as mirrors.  
How many times will we lift the wounded to the small mountain to find  
the commandments?  
Our message has re-emerged from our message. Here and there a clearly  
defined line  
outlines the shade. How many seas will we cross in the desert? How  
many tablets will we forget?  
How many prophets will we kill before our midday rest? And how many  
other people must we resemble to become  
a tribe of our own. This road, our road is a grove of reeds on words  
ruffling  
the edge of the cape between our homesickness and the land as it nears  
and dozes  
in the saffron of our sunsets. Let's spread our will to raise our era to the  
time of the gods.  
I am a hoopoe, said the guide to the master of creation. I am searching for  
a lost sky. (*Al-'amāl al-'Ulā*, vol. 3, 249-250)

The “We” speaking this poem are caught between stages of becoming: Solomon’s people are waiting for Sheba’s arrival, or alternately, Suleiman’s army is waiting for a report from the hoopoe; Noah’s followers on his ark are waiting for the signal to disembark;

Moses's followers are wondering when their wandering will come to an end. They are in a state of captivity even as they continue to nurture themselves and others—"even if our wheat spikes leap over the fences."

Nonetheless, they seem to generate freedom for others through their captivity—"swallows emerge / from the hold of our broken chains." The speakers of the poem have created art that honors the lives of exiles like them. Their recollections have become so seemingly palpable that their words have become a force of nature: "From our letters our alphabets returned to rewrite / what the rain inscribes in wild flowers on the distant stones." There's no journey in the world that does find them—"travel itself now travels, an echo from us and aimed at us"—and that does not carry their experiences with it. They have paid their dues to have their "era" raised "to the time of the gods." Like the Israelites in Sinai, they have offered many sacrifices to the mountain to reach their own commandments, crossed "many a sea in the desert." Now they ask, "how many other people must we resemble to become a tribe of our own?"

The poem establishes the speakers' dilemma as they await an answer from their hoopoe who appears and departs unpredictably, continuing his search. After he fails to "find the city in the city / and... a house of tenderness to spread over us the silk of calm" (251), he at last urges them to fly. They answer, "In our longings there's a great desire for flight, but people are birds that do not fly." (251) The hoopoe can only offer them a radical transformation, an inner flight toward transcendence.

He said, abandon your bodies to follow me and abandon this earth-mirage  
to follow me. Abandon your names. Don't ask me for an answer.  
The answer is the road, and there is no road that does not vanish in fog.  
Fly higher than flying, higher than your sky so that you may fly  
higher than the greatest love, higher than holiness,  
higher than godliness, higher than feeling and free yourself

of the wing of the question of beginning and of destiny.  
The universe is smaller than the wing of a butterfly  
In the great courtyard of the heart. (*Al-'amāl al-'Ūlā*, vol. 3, 257-260)

Darwish is closer to mystical and religious language here than he has been in the past. The hoopoe advises them to “soar so that you may soar,” to develop a uniqueness based on their spiritual, intellectual, and emotional experiences, a collective identity founded in attachment to the eternal.

But the physical world still aches and still bears reminders of what was lost, of the land they left that lies under “the flood.”

How many times we've addressed the scent of a place saying, "Turn to  
stone so that we may sleep." How many times  
have we asked the trees of a place to strip themselves of the conquerors'  
adornments so that we may find a place of our own.  
But “nowhere” is the place, and it has lodged itself deeply in the soul,  
away from its history.  
Exile is this soul that distances us away from our land, asking us to our  
beloved.  
Exile is this land that distances us from our souls toward strangers.  
(*Al-'amāl al-'Ūlā*, vol. 3, 258-259)

The senses bring constant reminders of what was lost. Nature itself reminds the wanderers of their tragedy. It is interesting that Darwish here switches back and forth between his main portrait of a wandering people, a composite of Suleiman’s, Noah’s, and Moses’s followers, to that of the Palestinians. Having structured the poem to incorporate more of the Palestinian experience, and having fitted their saga of loss into these biblical legends, Darwish can then switch the metaphor around. By the end of the poem, the tenor no longer needs to be contained within its vehicle to have its meaning carried to the reader, and the Palestinians do not need an elaborate myth to tell their story.

It is precisely as this shift occurs and as more of the Palestinian experience is incorporated that the protagonists in the poem take charge of their lives. When the



hoopoe tells them that his “roads don’t end at [your beloved’s] door,” they reply, “Our rituals will be complete / when we sail through this archipelago and release the captives from their tablets” (260). The speakers’ mission for their own salvation will grow into the liberation of others. They have, through their long suffering, come to realize that the world is one, and that human experience is undivided. As they explore this vision, they attest to the incompleteness of any single Judeo-Christian-Islamic myth, and of the monotheist vision as a whole. Instead, their vision of a unified humanity is born out of devotion to the earth as a mother figure and granter of knowledge through her diverse offspring:

On the earth there was once a spirit  
that the winds blew out and made destitute. Noah didn't leave us all his  
divine knowledge  
and Christ walked away to Hebron...  
Here  
a body of apples is swimming in orbit. Water is its waist belt  
as it traverses the eternity embedded in our praises, and returns aiming for  
itself,  
a mother wrapping us in the conquest of her bared tenderness, and hides  
what damage we'd done...  
Our mother is our mother.  
Mother of Athenians and ancient Persians, mother of Plato, Zoroaster,  
Plotinus, mother of Saharudi,  
mother of all. (*Al-'amāl al-'Ūlā*, vol. 3, 261-262)

The biblical, monotheist creeds are let go in favor of devotion to earth as mother, who nurtures and heals all and who supercedes them. This embrace of the earth becomes an embrace of human history and culture capable of dissolving differences among mother earth’s most antagonistic children, all of whose accomplishments are celebrated. As “The Hoopoe” continues, the bird as guide becomes less significant and the speakers’ appeals widen toward the forces of love, birth and death. To the mother, the speakers say, “You nurtured us and fed us, mother, so that you’ll feed our children as well. / But when will

the weaning come?” (262). To love, whose “spider” has stung them, they say “have mercy on us” (263). But the speakers see a purpose through what loss and exile have given them. “Let this emptiness stretch to its delight, and let the human race complete through us its migrations” (263). Encapsulating their history, they see the power of their ongoing march and their ongoing journey:

We have now learned that we came to return from an absence we had no wish for.  
And we have a life we have yet to try, and a salt whose eternity has not made us eternal.  
And we have steps no one has ever walked... (265)

Perhaps Darwish’s other most innovative re-inscription of biblical legend is his poem “A Canaanite Stone by the Dead Sea” which plays off the story of the discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls, as well as their content. The Dead Sea scrolls were discovered in 1947 right as the Palestinian Nakba (catastrophe) ensued after the imposition of the state of Israel on historical Palestine. First discovered by a Palestinian shepherd in caves close to the Dead Sea, the scrolls were caught up in the conflict and had to be moved to Beirut for safekeeping. Darwish presents his Canaanite stone as a relic to be studied like the scrolls, presumably found near them and therefore just as valid. Like the scrolls, his stone is meant to provide evidence of the considerable diversity of beliefs and practices in the Holy Land and affirms that “the origin” of Palestine is in “the multiplicity of cultural origins” (Darwish, *boundary 2* 80). As a Canaanite relic, Darwish’s stone tablet stands as testament to the natives whose existence on the land predated that of the invading Jews both in contemporary history and biblical myth. Made of stone, it is meant to last longer than the Dead Sea scrolls made of parchment. The poem challenges the Hebrewfication of the history of Palestine undertaken by modern-day Israelis, and emphasizes the

multiple influences that have historically been brought to bear on the land and all its people.

The speaker in Darwish's poem is addressing a stranger, a war-like newcomer who stands for modern Zionists as well as for the biblical prophet Joshua. Darwish's underlying political assumption in the poem is that all that has taken place on the land of Palestine naturally belongs to the natives there, the descendants of all the populations that have lived on the land (Yaḥyā 188). In the 1990s, he urged Palestinians "to pragmatically distinguish between their historical homeland and a possible national state on the 'liberated' parts, and to differentiate between the geographical Palestine as a territory, and the political Palestine as a country" (Al-Shaikh 2006). This pragmatic acceptance of a political Palestine as only a part of the greater Palestine does not deny him or his fellow Palestinians the claim that they belong to the whole of the land. The Palestinians may give up their ownership of most of the land, but will not give up their history on any of it. Speaking as a Canaanite, Darwish's speaker is a resident native who has a sense of ownership of all of Canaan. He is an ancient and contemporary figure, "one of the salt shepherds at al-Aghwar" (the Jordan Valley Gorge), a reference to the shepherds who discovered the Dead Sea Scrolls. Darwish's shepherd speaker extends a hand of welcome to the armed visitor and invites him to stay on.

Stranger,  
rest your horse under our palm trees. On Syrian roads,  
foreigners exchange war helmets bristling with basil  
sown from doves that fly to the ground from the housetops.  
And the sea died of boredom in the immortal testament.

Stranger,  
hang your weapon in our palm tree and let me plant my wheat  
in Canaan's sacred soil. Take wine from my jars.  
Take a page from the book of my gods. Take a portion of my meal,  
take the gazelle from the traps of our shepherds' song. Take

the Canaanite woman's prayers at the feast of her vines. Learn how  
we water our crops, how we build with stone. Lay a single brick  
down and raise a tower for doves.  
Go ahead, be one of us, if that's your wish, neighbor to our wheat.  
Stranger, take the stars of our alphabet  
and together we'll write heaven's message to man's fear  
of nature and man's fear of himself. Leave Jericho under her palm tree  
but don't steal my dream, don't steal my woman's breast milk  
or the ant's food stored in the cracks in the marble.  
Did you come, then kill, then inherit  
so that you add salt to the sea? (*Al-'amāl al-'Ūlā*, vol. 3, 315-316)

Speaking to the stranger, who stands for Joshua and his invading armies after the sack of Jericho and for modern-day Israelis, the poet-speaker extends a rather broad hand of welcome. The stranger only brings arms to the land, and is lacking in civility, failing to notice the exchange among soldiers of helmets brimming with basil. After instructing the stranger to put his weapon away, the shepherd offers him wine and a place to rest. He then offers to teach him to plant crops in this soil and how to build a home out of the stones of the region. The gesture goes beyond material things, and the shepherd goes on to invite the potential neighbor to co-author a new holy book with him.

As welcoming as the shepherd's message is, it also establishes the shepherd as the native whose traditions ought to be followed. Addressing his guest, the poet-speaker repeats the word "stranger" three times in the passage above, emphasizing his ownership and the guest's act of trespass. His welcome falls into the long-held traditions of hospitality still practiced in much of the Arab world today. "Houses are marked by a strong desire to receive visitors and, at the same time, to safeguard their own interiority, which is often described as *hurma* (sacredness or inviolability)" (Shryock 35). The poet-speaker immediately teaches the stranger what these inviolable possessions and places are—the shepherd's wife and his children, and the share of other creatures in the bounty

of the land. And though an invitation has been extended to the stranger to co-write a book inspired by heaven to allay “man’s fear / of nature and man’s fear of man”, the new communal philosophy ought not impinge on the individual’s dream. The passage above outlines in mythic terms a vision of natives and invading strangers (Palestinians and Israelis) in a single society where physical needs and shared labor and knowledge are the basis of harmony as they write a new life and myth together. The shepherd cannot fathom any reason for the stranger’s arrival other than to join his society and help shape it. “Did you come, then kill, then inherit / so that you add salt to the sea?” says the shepherd incredulously.

History, continues the shepherd, should teach the stranger that attempts at conquest are “futile.” “You will not rise from history, and you cannot wash the sea’s mist from your body” (*Al-’amāl al-’Ūlā*, vol. 3, 317). The stranger does not realize that the place “has turned armies into wreckage and dust” (317) and that all those who wished to erase the traces of the shepherd’s ancestors were “enacting a farce from beginning to end” (317). Steering the poem toward the current Palestinian predicament, Darwish writes:

No one  
conquers the sea. Cyrus, Pharaoh, Caesar, the Negus and others  
came to write their names with my hand on its tablets.  
So I wrote: The land is in my name and the name of the land  
is the gods who share my place on its seat of stone.  
I have not gone. I have not returned bearing elusive time.  
*(Al-’amāl al-’Ūlā*, vol. 3, 318)

Like the contemporary Palestinians’ assertion of non-absence from the land even while in exile, the Canaanite shepherd declares his presence in real time. Again, Darwish contrasts imaginary time and historical claims with concrete experience. The shepherd

senses eternity through habitual exchanges with nature and the elements, human practices that refuse to bow to invading armies and their dictates. Even when powerful invaders hold his hand to inscribe their names on the land, his hand disobeys them and instead affirms his name as belonging to the land and vice versa. Nor will self-reflexivity and isolation serve to grant the stranger a sense of autonomy, or erase all traces of the native. “Of what use are mirrors to each other? My face is in your face,” say the shepherd. In other translations, the latter part of the line reads, “we have a bond between us” (*Adam of Two Edens* 159). In either case, the stranger and the native, in blood and in text, have come into being under “the laws of crossbreeding” (Darwish, *boundary 2* 83) and will continue to do so.

Darwish’s project of inserting the Palestinian saga into myths of historical Palestine expands to include verifiable history in other poems during this period. In his references to the Crusades and to Mongol invasions of the region, Darwish finds a way to “observe the shadows of self and other, graspable in a more complex human journeying” (81). In such long poems as “Hudna ma’a al-Maghul amama Gahabat al-Sindiyan” (a truce with the Mongols before a pine forest) and “Ahda Ashara Kawkaban a’la akhir al-Mashhad al-Andulusi” (Eleven Planets in the Last Andalusian Sky), he begins to “inscribe the national on the universal, so that Palestine not limit itself to Palestine” (Darwish, *boundary 2* 84). Honing in on the Muslims’ expulsion from Andalusia, Darwish recognizes how Arab Spain has remained “a unique placeless space... a fleeting heterotopia” (Al-Shaikh 2006) upon which visions of heterogeneity can be projected and pursued.

Darwish thinks the Palestinian cause needs to absorb other experiences of

displacements and set itself alongside them. Darwish's poem "Khitab al-Hindi al-Ahmar ma qabal al-Akhir lil Rajull al-Abyad," ("The Red Indian's Penultimate Speech to the White Man") based on a text by Seattle, chief of Suquamish and Duwamish Native North American tribes, presents this desire to articulate a fellow subaltern's grief and to internalize his experience. In fact, much of "The Red Indian's Speech" proves to be a source for "A Canaanite Stone," and vice versa, suggesting that Palestinian identity can, and needs to, draw on heterogeneous sources, and that it is capable of providing a discursive anchor in the midst of past, present, and future exilic turmoil for all who experience such displacement.

### 3. Poetic Agency of the Deep Present and Deep Past

In this period, considered by many to be Darwish's most ambitious, we see his poems working on two temporal planes, or perhaps two different means of cinematic conveyance. The poems in *Ward Aqall* operate in the deep present, their imagery that of a hand-held camera. The point of view does not provide long shots, keeping us in medium range at most. The spatial and temporal presentation of the poems negates the potential for irony as any perspective depends on what the people viewed, in this case as they are trapped in airports or tight passages, say and feel. Much also depends on the projection of these situations over appropriate metaphors and startling images. *Ward Aqall* provides the reader immersion in the strange mix of claustrophobia and utter displacement that Palestinians feel. Like Kanafani's protagonists, in *Men in the Sun*, trapped inside the water tank of a tanker truck in the middle of a vast desert, they are in the flux of their dilemma and no sense of irony, historical or philosophical, can provide them solace.

In the longer myth-based and historical poems discussed in this section that appeared in *Ara ma Urid (I See what I wish to See)* and *Ahada-ashara Kawkaban (Eleven Planets)*, Darwish finds in history “a scene through which people, civilizations and cultures could circulate freely” (Darwish, *boundary 2* 81). Emphasizing the ambiguity of history becomes an important tool to counter the single-minded Zionist vision of the past that claims historical certainty as the basis for its politics of exclusion. Darwish’s rewriting of myth depends on fissures in national myths and hones in on past spaces of heterogeneity that had been erased. Expanding these spaces to include the present as well as mythic and historical times, “Darwish’s depictions of an expanded Palestinian identity and memory—which includes the Israeli Other as well as similar communities of the dispossessed—transgresses the paradigmatic boundaries of homogeneity in nationalism” (Celik 290). His rewriting of history and myth provides a reconciling rather than divisive narrative for Palestinians and Israelis, expansive and inclusive in its past and future.



## F. WHO AM I WITHOUT CONTINGENCY? (1995-2008)

### A. Anxieties of Renewal and a National Late Style

In the summer of 2000, I visited the city of Ramallah to run a creative writing workshop for young writers at the Khalil Sakakini Center, which happened to house Darwish's office where he edited the journal *al-Karmal*. I had very few chances to meet Darwish and so I have little to report about him at that time. Rather, my revelation about the role of poetry in Palestinian culture came from the young poets I met and how they expressed their burgeoning poetic projects and ambitions, in which Darwish figured prominently, albeit as a shadow. The young poets' anxieties resembled those expressed by earlier groups of poets throughout the Arab world. Raised on Darwish's early and politically direct poems, new Arab poets since the 1970s have had to contend with Darwish's centrality, (largely due to his being the uncontested poet of Palestine, which left them on the margins (See Nasser and Beydoun). Even as Darwish began to adopt new techniques and more subtle approaches, any poet, especially one starting out, perhaps gifted but lacking Darwish's historical and cultural knowledge, would have fared badly if he or she were to compete with or even try to compliment the great poet.

What remained for the young writers in Palestine, like the previous generation of poets in the Arab world, was the personal realm, an area of investigation that did not require vast cultural knowledge or any simplification to appeal to the masses. Given that the young poets were extremely skeptical of their national political structures and suspicious of the masses' need for perpetual uplift, their ventures into internal landscapes took on idiosyncratic forms. One of the poets I met in Ramallah was Anas al-<sup>c</sup>Aili, who

was twenty-three. At the age of twelve he was shot during the intifada as he and other boys threw stones at Israeli soldiers. He needed to be rushed to a hospital in Qalqilia and it took an eight-hour operation to patch him up. I asked al-<sup>ḥ</sup>Aili if he had written any poems about his injury or the intifada. He did not, he told me, partly because his heroism had become part of the uprising and it was the street, the city, and its people that claimed his experience. He said it would take a great deal of effort for him to reclaim that incident from the collective memory even as that memory keeps eroding, in the same way that successive martyrs' names are overwritten by those of new martyrs on city walls. Furthermore, he did not want to be identified with that incident alone, and did not want to be identified with politics in any manner. In fact, he did not even want to be identified only with Palestine, but seen as a person and poet outside all cultural and national frameworks.

Al-<sup>ḥ</sup>Aili explores this search for self-sufficiency in "Plant," a poem in which the poet-speaker adopts the persona of a plant.

I am my home and my distance  
I inhabit my self  
and die in it  
My roots are sails in the dirt  
and my trunk the throne of the wind  
and the creatures' resting place  
They throb into the earth  
and I throb toward the sky  
I travel my branches  
I breathe the sun-filled horizon  
and I knead water into birthless children  
I am my home and my distance  
I inhabit myself  
and I die in it (*Ḍuyūf al-Nār* 7)

Al-<sup>ḥ</sup>Aili's speaker manages to transcend human experience altogether and inhabit another form of life. Written as a dramatic monologue, the poem resounds with confidence as the

plant describes its strengths and admirable qualities in terms a human being can understand. The plant's existence combines "home" and "distance," two opposing elements in our sense of space and mobility. The tree's roots and trunk hardly move, but become necessary to other creatures that do—sails for ships, a seat for the ever-moving wind, and a nesting place for the scurrying creatures. When these creatures return to the earth, the tree "throbs" toward the sky. The tree's own body provides enough space for a journey, making it a contained universe, wide enough to breathe in the whole horizon. Its life promises to continue endlessly since all it needs is some water to breed its "birthless children."

Al-<sup>ʿ</sup>Aili's poem appears in *Ḍuyūf al-Nār al-Da'imūn: Šu'arā' min Falasṭīn* (*Fire's Eternal Guests: Poets from Palestine*), an anthology of Palestinian poets under thirty compiled by the Palestinian House of Poetry in Ramallah, and published by one of the largest and most prestigious publishers in Beirut. *Ḍuyūf* includes no introduction, only a short postscript by Ghassan Zaqtān, an important Palestinian poet and literary journalist a generation younger than Darwish. All the poems in *Dhuyuf* are in a vein similar to Al-<sup>ʿ</sup>Aili's. The vast majority of them are in free verse, their tone varying from lofty to everyday speech, their content from symbolist-inspired moods to quotidian deep imagery. None of the poems mention Palestine or Israel, nor do they address events or locations associated with the Israeli occupation or the Palestinian history of displacement, victimization, and struggle.

Zaqtān, aware of the stark presentation these poems make, states that the poems in *Dhuyuf* "offer a new and different point of view of the Palestinian poetry scene." He claims that this approach to poetry has been part of Palestinian literature all along and

adds:

The centrality of the Palestinian cause has demanded that a text written in Palestine fall into the suggestions and references outlined by the politician's wish and conditions. And due to this perspective all writings that did not match this kind of reading and these conditions were repeatedly excluded. These marginalized writings began to pile up and grew outside our public media and platforms and began to penetrate unknown venues and explore obscure areas. Now it has come to pass that the margin (or writings from the margin) has become a majority, a wide connected belt that is approaching the center and is about to overwhelm it. It is to this growing margin that these poems belong. (Zaqṭān 163)

Zaqṭān backtracks from this incisive though triumphant note when he adds that this new poetry "is not the whole of the Palestinian poetry scene per se" (163). Most important to Zaqṭān is that these poems demonstrate Palestinian contribution to new developments in Arabic poetry, especially free verse (*qassidat al-nathr*). The poems demonstrate that Palestinian poets can exercise their full creativity despite their commitment to their national cause and the political demands placed on their individuality. The poets here are brought together because it is "their right to contribute to the Arab poetry of today to which they belong" (164). This new Palestinian poetry, adds Zaqṭān, is "distinguished by a deep feeling for life and a highly selective approach toward language" which earns it "a place as a creative partner in the Arab cultural project" (164).

Zaqṭān's statement recalls, ironically, Darwish's early years, when the young Darwish urged Arab critics not to consider him and the new poets of Palestine an extraordinary phenomenon, but to see their poetry as part of the evolution of Arab verse. Yet whereas Darwish had urged that critics take him and his fellow poets to task and not lavish them with the "cruel love" (Darwish, *Shai`an al-Waṭan* 23) of undeserved praise, Zaqṭān finds himself in the opposite situation, trying to insert a new Palestinian poetry into the Arab consciousness in spite of the large place that Darwish occupies, and

demonstrate that young Palestinian poets are as good as their Arab peers.

Most fascinating here is how *Dhuyuf al-Nar* asserts itself as an internal conversation among Palestinians and that this conversation is a public display for all to see. Zaqtān's project of highlighting the young Palestinian poets' poetic accomplishments continues in the same track that Jayyusi followed in introducing her nation's literature to the world. "Palestinian poets are now among the foremost avant-garde poets of the Arab world" (5), she writes. Like Jayyusi, Zaqtān wishes to demonstrate that Palestinians have not lost their capacity to make art, or their general capacity for sensitive expression, compelling thought, and refinement even after all these years of occupation, war, and banishment. In fact, they have become better artists in spite of it.

Zaqtān's description of this new burst of energy in Palestinian literature echoes Said's meditations on late style, in which he contemplates why and how an artist, late in life, discovers a new and perhaps radicalizing source of inspiration. In his posthumously published essay "Thoughts on Late Style," Said offers a succinct description of late style for which he drew on Adorno's analysis of Beethoven's last works. Said agrees with Adorno that Beethoven's late work represents a series of continuous ruptures that obfuscate time and closure, producing a sense of suspended agitation coupled with awe. Beethoven's late works, Said contends, "remain unco-opted by a higher synthesis" as "they do not fit any scheme, and they cannot be reconciled and resolved, since their irresolution and fragmentariness are constitutive, neither ornamental nor symbolic of something else. These late works are about 'lost totality'" (Said 2004). Said attempts to tease out of Adorno's reading of Beethoven a paradigm for formal "lateness" that goes beyond the artist's sense of impending mortality and the desire to make a lasting mark on

the world.

Said's interest in late style as a moment of artistic creation, under extreme conditions and at seminal junctures, that forces the artist to disregard conventions (including his own), unsettling his world despite the sense of purpose and identity it has given him in response to a sense of "lost totality"—and almost assuring that that totality is undone—is relevant in the context of Palestinian poetry. Late style represents a condition in its own right: the unsettling effort toward a seemingly limited and immutable situation, and even toward one's own history, having brought this situation into being and grown adapted to it. Said sums up "the prerogative of late style" as an effort

to render disenchantment and pleasure without resolving the contradiction between them. What holds them in tension, as equal forces straining in opposite directions, is the artist's mature subjectivity, stripped of hubris and pomposity, unashamed either of its fallibility or of the modest assurance it has gained as a result of age and exile. (Said 2004)

Late style, as such, demands that one remain committed to one's vision without losing sight of the ghost of mortality or the concrete limits and opportunities within which individuals can affect the world around them even as they face an obscure future.

I find Said's description extremely useful in discussing Darwish and the Palestinian cultural scene from the Oslo years of the 1990s onward. The variety in Darwish's last works and the self-interrogation that takes place within them demonstrate some of the energy and anxious determination that Said suggests are components of late style. One can sense the same urgent desire for renewal within all facets of Palestinian society since the first Palestinian intifada began in 1987. By then, the PLO, Palestinians' primary means of challenging Israel militarily, had lost on that front. Instead of impending mortality, the Palestinians have felt the force of impending deterritoriality as

they witness the last of their internationally designated homeland clawed away by colonial land grabs.

Palestinian artists sensed a failing in their approach to art and in the process of shaping and pronouncing their identity. Still, many Palestinians disagreed with the approach that Darwish began to articulate in the late 1990s (Al-Shaikh, 2009 and 2006), which happened to coincide with Jayyusi's creation of a Palestinian canon. Critiquing her designation of Darwish as a special case in Palestinian letters, Hassan contends that Jayyusi's assemblage of Palestinian literature in her anthology, which veered away from resistance literature and dismissed its future potential, "produced authoritative documents that surrender the radicalism of Palestinian liberation in favor of U.S. recognition" (Hassan 15; see also Al-shqar 2005 and Ibrahim 2005). Nonetheless, the Palestinians' push since Oslo to renew their art and internal conversation is evident in the proliferation of Palestinian arts venues and associations even during occupation (Boulata 2006), and in the continued increase in exhibits, publications, and performances by Palestinian artists throughout the world (Laidi-Hanieh 2008). While receiving US recognition helped politically, what they needed was to see themselves "stripped of hubris and pomposity" (Said 2004) in their own literature, now that the nation and its history had become a "mature" source for its individuals' "subjectivity." For the young Palestinian poets in *Dhuyuf*, this meant that they needed to explore spheres of time and space outside the Palestinian dilemma and its conventional vocabulary, and outside Darwish's sphere of influence. In so doing they were operating within a larger national project, characterized by elements of late style, in which Darwish, nonetheless, still figures prominently.

## 2. Toward a New Esthetic Agency: From Identity to Identification

Earlier in this discussion of Darwish, we saw that Darwish, from various places of exile, provided powerful depictions of the Palestinian condition (deep present) and also took on history and myth (deep past) as fields of poetic action inclusive of various audiences, with an anticipated outcome that was discursive, conceptual, and by nature, long-term. For another new start, with a more radical approach, Darwish needed to re-assess Palestinian literature and his role within it. Darwish begins to do this by stating that his early work “lacked cultural understanding of the relationship between poetry and reality” (Darwish, *La `Aḥad Yaşil* 22). The notion that “it is the poet’s duty to comment on events, and to provide an indictment against the ills of his time is an old concept of poetry” (23), he added. The kind of incitement and commentary on Palestinian life the poet had been offering had become mannered and cliché. Darwish began to argue that “the literature of provocation” is no longer “capable of surviving on its own through the next moment or epoch” (24). He doubted that “a whole literary tradition” could “stand on the inciting poem or the literature of direct struggle” (20).

We have about fifty terms that we must liberate ourselves from even if these words are necessary to express our historical moment and our psychological condition, but esthetically it’s become necessary that we give them up because they’ve been so overused that it’s become a joke that you can take these fifty words and write a poem out of them. (Darwish, *La `Aḥad Yaşil* 34)

The literature of incitement, as Darwish terms it, covers only part of the Palestinian experience and as such could not contribute to the larger project of Palestinian modernization. “Modernization could not continuously remain tied to a liberation project once the individual is dealing with a natural and normal setting” (25). The “modernization” project Darwish posits in this 1999 interview assumes that Palestinians



as a collective will experience more normative existential experiences that are not all the result of political contingencies. In the past, Palestinian literature was judged on the basis of these contingencies upon its creation, and by literary standards that arose from the content that addressed these conditions (24). As such the literature as a whole was an act of contingency tied to the collective cause and its success dependent on its contribution to it. In Darwish's view this has not produced great art, and it is time to "begin to pay attention to the general rules and great ambitions of writing. We should stop refusing to address Palestinian literature with normal literary critical skills and tools" (Yaḥyā 234). Darwish expressed these views during the Oslo years and held on to them even as the second intifada ensued and the Palestinian/Israeli peace process came to a halt.

Darwish's continued investment in the esthetic component of cultural rejuvenation arises from his confidence in Palestinian national identity and culture. "I am one of those who firmly hold that the danger of physical, cultural and spiritual obliteration of the Palestinians has become so remote" (Imaginary 19), he argued. Less threatened and their survival somewhat secured, Palestinians no longer need "to praise [their] identity and to protect it...if you are safe, why would you praise yourself for being Palestinian?" (Darwish, *La `Aḥad Yaṣil* 44). Darwish was already looking forward to the moment in 1998 when he urged Palestinians to begin writing as if there were no occupation, and to prepare themselves for their future (45). Palestinians had already begun this work, he argued, and had stopped waiting for a collective vision as an ideological guide. "Each one of us has started to look to his personal voice...We have ceased to wish to become heroes or victims" (Darwish, *Imaginary* 22).

For Darwish, the end of heroism signifies a new awareness of recent political

history that takes into account contemporary developments in literary and cultural criticism around the world. He states,

The hero / protagonist is a notion that has reached new challenges. The hero has become bored with his role. He is tired of maneuvering between the role of hero and victim, he has desire to be a hero, and he no longer wants to enjoy the status of being a victim. He wants to become a normal human being. This transformation has taken place in numerous literary examples that cannot be denied because *heroism has ended in modern literature*, and there is even an excessiveness in his normality to the point of marginalizing him. Now the marginalized is being glorified, *because history works differently now*, and because the poet is now aware that he is not a savior or rescuer, not a messiah or a prophet. (Darwish, La `Aḥad Yaşil 16, italics mine)

Darwish is perhaps speaking pragmatically and alluding to the Palestinian situation when he says that the hero has reached new challenges. In the eyes of the world the Palestinian has moved from being “a refugee to being a freedom fighter to being a stone-throwing youth to finally a pragmatic political negotiator” (Imaginary 83) explains Darwish. Heroism’s end in Palestine coincides with the end of the hero as an existential model in literature and with the end of grand, totalizing narratives around the world. For Darwish the “normalization” of Palestinian literature is in keeping with contemporary global esthetic standards and historical paradigms.

Besides this paradigmatic shift in the perception of the hero and the agency of the common man, Darwish also acknowledges that the Palestinians have lost to the Zionists in the struggle for control of their ancestral homeland. “We have been defeated” (Yaḥyā 235), he acknowledges, adding that “Palestine is defeated Troy” (Barghouthi 230). This powerful parallel goes back to some of Darwish’s earliest writings, in which Palestinian women sang, “We are the women of Troy...the conquerors receive what they wish / for they are strong (*Al-`amāl al-`Ūlā*, vol.1, 223). The defeated need not despair, however, as they continue resistance through the candor and artistry of their cultural achievements:

We have been defeated, but should we throw away all our weapons. No! But language must re-examine itself and poetry too and should not contribute to distributing delusions. Poetry should try to raise hope through an esthetic force and presence and not the force of preaching, with the force of poetry not the force of the message contained inside of it, which repeatedly says we're victorious. (Yaḥyā 235)

The weak and the losers can write their history too, adds Darwish, since poetry as an art form already has within it a "bias toward the victims and the weak" (Imaginary 18), especially contemporary poetry. The defeated must, therefore, create his own myth to "resist the myths of power and the powerful, and the songs of the victor that erase him from history" (Barghouthi 230). Defeat can be turned into a source of energy, a way of confronting the fact of one's existence, and such deep awareness can compel one to keep working, striving and expressing one's self. "I renew myself by acknowledging defeat, and I resist through poetry and language because this area is not defeatable" (Yaḥyā 235).

I believe what Darwish means when he says that by the esthetic realm, or poetry, is undefeatable because it provides an area closed to the contingencies of history. Focused on the senses, esthetic endeavors appeal to elemental responses to visual, aural, and other sensory stimuli, even as standards change with time. The lyrics of a song may change with events, but our sense of who has a good voice and who can play an instrument well goes beyond what we think of the song's content. Similarly, in poetry changing tastes have revolved around the basic musical, narrative, linguistic pleasure to be expected from the art form. Darwish's positing of esthetics as an independent realm echoes the thinking of Kant and Modernist, Formalist theoreticians.

In *Critique of Judgment*, Kant avoids discussing art's relationship to produced goods and the rationality, need, and desire tied to their production because the aesthetic field engages elements that exemplify intention, but not purposefulness. "We recognize

an art in everything formed in such a way that its actuality must have been preceded by a representation of the thing in its cause although the effect could not have been thought by the cause” (124). Works of art, according to Kant, are the willful acts of those who make them, but are wide open to interpretation by those who perceive them since their makers may not have designated a purpose or rational need to their creations. And since the cause of a work of art precludes its effects, a piece of art, and the whole aesthetic realm, by extension, cannot be engaged in relation to the circumstances or the social and material conditions in which it is produced. Works of art are therefore transcendental, since they do not rationally engage the material needs and conditions of their time and instead must be engaged without the context of history and location. In the preface to *Critique of Judgment*, Kant makes an effort to distinguish the “transcendental” analysis of aesthetic judgment from a study of the history or culture of taste. He defines the field of aesthetics as a domain in which particular feelings of pleasure and pain, independent of the laws of cognition and morality, are universal.

Similarly, in Darwish’s proposal esthetics, as a transcendental force enlarging the imaginary and the sense of possibility, provides a space that the repressive policies of the oppressor cannot enter. In fact, such spaces are created precisely because they are impenetrable, and esthetic activity has rules to which the political and social do not apply. “We have our story as human beings, and we have our existential questions, and our fear of the unknown. We have our instincts, and this is the work of literature, and this is something that Israel has nothing to do with” (Darwish, *La `Aḥad Yaşil* 44). These areas that “Israel has nothing to do with” are “the eternal human questions that bear no direct relation to the occupation or liberation, nor the homeland or exile or the state or self-rule”

(19). These areas, Darwish contends, can foster a Palestinian space for expression and identity formation, and more importantly, preservation and exploration.

In this sense, for Darwish the esthetic endeavor becomes a form of resistance to forces of occupation that wish to corner the Palestinian subject even in his daily physical needs and concerns. To write literature that reiterates only this aspect of Palestinian life and to forbid the Palestinian writer from other explorations and sensations is to impose those limits on him:

The occupation wishes to imprison the Palestinian poet in the cage of speaking about the occupation, and to keep him weeping about his symbolic mother, and keep him rotating around the first questions of existence, our rights for primary rights. Do we have the right to cross the checkpoint, etc. *But for the person to exercise his full rights, if only in his imagination, or in his relation to his language, is an act of resistance to the conditions of occupation*, which has so far succeeded in cornering the Palestinian literary language into expressing the momentary and the present and only in relation to him and with unexceptional skill. (La `Aḥad Yaşil 19, italics mine)

Darwish held on to these ideas even during the second intifada, which began in the fall of 2000 and resulted in a great deal of suffering for the Palestinians and shattered their hopes for peace with Israel.

For you to be able to cross the checkpoint and to exercise your human life is a good thing, because the occupation is long and not temporary, not so short that we can say we wrote a poetry of resistance or poetry of emergency or contingency. This is a long-term occupation. Let's imagine that for fifty years, a people have written nothing except the occupation or that it is an occupied people, and about the compulsion to fight the occupation. *But what is amazing and miraculous is for us to write something else, for me to write my humanity in the middle of darkness and siege*. For us to continue to write what the occupation dictates to us is an expected reaction for which the occupier is ready to respond, it is a surrender of language. (20, italics mine)

Palestinians can innovate new tools to consolidate their existence in their country and to consolidate their country in its language. Darwish insisted that this enterprise should be undertaken by Palestinians everywhere, for "it seems that our real and imaginary

deliverance is a cultural one” (Imaginary 22). The movement of Palestinian culture in various open spheres, languages and media “delivers it from the pressure of the enclosed political present” (Imaginary 22-23).

But Darwish does not want these external factors to completely disappear. The Palestinian work of art has to win its admirers throughout the world on the basis of its engagement with esthetic concerns and universal questions. In the work of art, formal pleasures “seduce” (Segal 30) the viewer to identify with the artist’s own unconscious fantasies, which then transmit various pleasures and sensations associated with the artist to the viewer or reader. For psychoanalyst Hanna Segal, the esthetic pleasure proper—that is, the unique kind of pleasure derived from a work of art—is due to this process of identification. “Aesthetic pleasure arises due to an identification of ourselves with the work of art as a whole and with the whole internal world of the artist as represented by his work” (Segal, 33). In other words, every esthetic pleasure has to do with reliving the artist’s experience of creation. Darwish’s call for the esthetic intensification of his and other Palestinians’ art stems from a desire to enhance the possibilities for identification with their works.

Earlier works of Palestinian art, including his own, helped shape Palestinian identity by reflecting common experiences that Palestinians recognized as clearly and undeniably their own. But in Darwish’s opinion such works lay fallow, incapable of generating identification even among Palestinians. The questions Palestinian art addressed had to arise from personal points of view and personal experiences, to which unexpected perspectives and the rules of artistry, pleasure, and affectation apply. Only through a deep engagement with esthetics, through which readers and perceivers are

artistically transported and seduced by the recreation of their experiences, can Palestinian artists truly generate identification with their concerns.

Darwish argues that he does not advocate that Palestinians “transcend their reality,” only that “we write our story better” (Yaḥyā 235), with greater attention to esthetics. The Palestinian component need not therefore appear directly or at all in the Palestinian work of art. What is important or “amazing and miraculous is for us to write something else, for me to write my humanity in the middle of darkness and siege” (Darwish, *La `Aḥad Yaşil* 21). The Palestinian artist should therefore seek first and foremost to cause what Shklovsky called “intensified perception” (20) of his work of art, so that the reader can create “a vision of the work” (21) from which she or he can draw meaning. Once the reader or viewer has come to share an experience and to generate his or her own experience through a work of art, he or she comes to identify with the artist who provided this human connection. Realizing that the artist is a Palestinian, the reader or viewer can then *re-perceive* the work’s importance given its “amazing and miraculous” inception.

As he adopts the Kantian definition of esthetics for a Formalist rather than functional approach to the creation and perception of art, Darwish also incorporates criticisms of this outlook, especially Adorno’s. Adorno argued that one cannot hope to understand art without comprehending the economic and political circumstances in which it was created (485-486). As such, even as we are asked to read a Palestinian poem guided “first and foremost by elements intrinsic to the poetic art itself” (Zaqṭān 237), we are also invited to read such a poem as an assumption of agency, since it is created as a response to a given socioeconomic and political setting.

I want to revisit Al-<sup>c</sup>Aili's "Plant" to further probe this point. We read the poem with a dislocated, formal approach and saw how the poem is itself an attempt to transcend location and circumstance and in that manner provides a metaphor that can illuminate human longing, especially when mobility and growth seem irreconcilable. But when placed within a Palestinian context, the poem begins to offer other readings, and can be seen as an attempt to make the best out of the poet-speaker's immobility. Even during the relatively calm years of the Oslo period, during which the poem was written, most young men like Al-<sup>c</sup>Aili, especially those with a record of confronting the Israeli army, were liable for arrest and detention. The poet states, "I am my home and my distance" (*Dhuyuf* 7) not simply to celebrate autonomy, but also to tell us that he is stationary, like a tree. Only through the use of metaphor can he sail away and fly with the wind, and only by celebrating his immobility can he overcome the need for such freedom. Adopting the persona of a tree is a way of overcoming the forces that have obliged the poet to stay put against his will. We had read the poem as a celebration of the ability to nurture an inner life by internalizing the life processes of other creatures, but knowing that the poet is a Palestinian transforms the poem into a statement of psychological resistance. The Palestinian presence becomes a salient critical subtext that can be bought in by the outsider/reader if he or she wishes, and can enrich their perception. But before the reader can celebrate the poem's miraculous making, the work of art itself has to succeed on esthetic terms, on its form and technique, not its context.

### 3. The Travails of Separation of Poet and Nation-State

In 2000 Darwish published a book-length lyric poem titled *Jidariya (Mural)* to wide



acclaim in the Arab world. Two years before, perhaps while writing *Sareer al-Ghariba*, Darwish had told a documentary filmmaker that he wished for the Palestinian trauma to end, just so that he would know how good a poet he is (Bitton 1997). The poet was still suspicious that his work, attached as it was to Palestine and the Palestinians, could only be judged on the basis of that attachment. The shadow of “the content” obscured and marginalized the hard work of his poetic artistry (see *Shai`an al-Waṭan*, *Yawmīyāt al-ḥuzn al-`ādī*, and *Wazen*). He longed for an opportunity to demonstrate his skills in the daylight of artistic judgment alone. With *Jidariya* Darwish appeared to do that, and received the acclaim he needed. For poet Qassim Haddad, *Jidariya* was the first time he was able to “read Darwish without his Palestinianness and I must say that that feeling pleased me” (Haddad 2009). Such a sentiment would have pleased Darwish too. Written in France shortly after he survived major heart surgery, during which he was briefly in a coma and had a near-death experience (Wazen 46), *Jidariya* celebrates the poet’s survival and his new lease on life and poetry.

Darwish’s speaker in this poem is exhilarated by oblivion.

Nothing ails me at the gate of Judgment day  
 not time or emotions  
 I feel neither the lightness of things  
 nor the heaviness of premonitions...  
 There is no nothingness here  
 in the no-here, in the no-time,  
 of no existence. (*Al-`amāl al-Jadīdah* 442-443)

The world is white in “this sky of the absolute” (443). The speaker suspects he has died before because he “know[s] this vision” (443), and knows that he is heading somewhere he does not know. From this nexus of oblivion and erasure emerges renewal and possibility—reminiscent of Walcott’s dictum “where there is nothing, everything can be

made”—and the clean slate is the poet himself, achieving the state he had told the aforementioned filmmaker he wished he could achieve.

Maybe

I am still alive somewhere and I know  
what I want to be...  
one day I will be what I wish to be  
one day I will be an idea, carried by a sword  
to free a wasteland with a book in hand,  
as if it were rain falling on a mountain aching  
aching with the grass bursting through its soil  
somewhere where power had not won  
nor where justice has become a fugitive  
one day I will be what I wish to be...  
one day I will be a poet...  
I am the message and the messenger  
I am the small addresses and I am the mail  
one day I will be what I wish to be. (*Al-'amāl al-Jadīdah* 446-447)

Darwish's repetition of "one day I will be what I wish to be" vacillates between chant and plaint; the hope it seeks is singed by a long struggle with despair. Most inspiring, and also humbling, to the young poets I worked with in Ramallah was Darwish's declaration that he will be a poet one day. What horizons, esthetic or otherwise, could this poet be seeking if thinks he has never been a poet to begin with? Implied in the sketch of the new poet Darwish would be is the whiteness (of death) which he wished to fill (in defiance) with his poetry, which is the whiteness of the blank page, the pages he filled with poetry erased and forgotten, and the whiteness of the identity card on which his fate had been inscribed. All the poet needed to do in this new space/place, as the nurse instructed him, was to "remember your name to keep it safe / do not betray it / pay no mind to the banners of the tribes / be a good friend to your name" (*Al-'amāl al-Jadīdah* 249). Darwish went on to recite this poem to thousands of listeners and television viewers, aware that the audiences had come to hear him because of Palestine, but they stayed

attentive because of the poetry, which was rhythmic, engaging, and pleasurable, and had little to do with Palestine.

What happens to the Palestinian poet as stand-in for the national subject after years of displacement when these national pressures ease? Even before *Jidariya*, Darwish knew there was another side to the luminous world discovered upon defeating death, a side that repeatedly tells the poet that because he has been an exile for so long, he cannot in fact be what he always wished. In *Sareer al-Ghariba (The Stranger's Bed, 1996)* we find Darwish's poet-speaker alone, outside the borders and national mood of Palestine, and at a loss as to what do with his freedom:

Who will tell me now,  
“Forget your yesterday, and dream with  
the whole of you free subconscious mind”?  
My freedom sits near me, with me, on my knee  
like a house cat. She stares at me and all that you'd left  
behind last night. Your lilac shawl,  
video tapes about dancing with wolves, a necklace  
of jasmine grown on the moss of the heart.  
What will my freedom make of itself, after your night,  
the night of your last winter?...  
My freedom and I sat silent staring at our night.  
Who am I? Who am I after the night of your last winter?  
*(Al-'amāl al-Jadīdah 575-576)*

The poet and his freedom have become docile and domesticated like a cat. His beloved had urged him to forget his yesterday and engage his imagination, though unlike other poems in *Sareer*, in which the poet cannot stop himself from alluding to his beloved in mythical and historical terms, here we find him conscious of the need to let go of the past, but unable to do so. The poem itself is titled “A Cloud from Sodom,” as if to emphasize this inability. In other parts of the poem the more recent past, like that which haunts a shell-shocked soldier, also exerts its presence. The speaker notes how the street

is now empty, how no shadow followed him, and how, unlike the days of “Identity Card” or even “Athens Airport,” there is no “guardsman to ask me? ‘What is your name?’” (576).

And just as the female beloved commands the speaker, ““Forget your yesterday, and dream with the whole of you free subconscious mind”” (574), trying to steer him toward a new source of inspiration, the poet is also forced to confront the emotional and conceptual paradigms that have oriented his life and artistry. Another female speaker in *Sareer* (this time Ulysses’s wife Penelope), tells him “I am not a land / or a journey. / I am a woman, no less and no more” (*Al-’amāl al-Jadīdah*, 575). Darwish’s female interlocutors in *Sareer* understand that there is no conflict between the imagination and the body, aware that things need not be transformed into myth or abstraction to reveal their “essence.” But Darwish’s male speaker in *Sareer* is deeply attached to placing the real into the legendary—he needed to, culturally and politically. He is not comfortable with the mind free from a guiding mission or a threatening force.

This estrangement from the self and from the beloved is what Darwish’s speaker repeatedly fails to escape. It becomes the mindset into which he retreats because it has been his most comfortable existential mode—a cycle of perpetual departures and separations, best expressed in the poem “Who Am I Without Exile?”:

A stranger by the river bank,  
and like a river, water ties me to your name.  
Nothing returns me from my distance  
to my date palm, not peace or war.  
Nothing can insert me in the scriptures. Nothing,  
nothing, shines from the high tide or low,  
swaying between the Euphrates and the Nile.  
Nothing can force me to disembark  
from the Pharaoh’s ships. Nothing carries me  
or places a thought on my shoulder.

Not longing or a promise.  
What shall I do?  
What shall I do without exile  
on this long night  
of staring at the water?...

Nothing can make leave  
the butterflies of my dream  
to face my reality, not dust or fire...

We have become weightless like our houses  
in the distant winds...

We have been released  
from the gravity of the land of our identity.  
What shall we do?  
What shall we do without exile,  
and this long night of staring at the water?

Nothing of me remains except you,  
nothing of you remains except me,  
a stranger caressing his beloved stranger's thighs.  
Woman, stranger, what shall we do  
with all the quiet that surrounds us?

What shall we do without exile. (648-651)

The word “nothing” erases what comes before it and leaves the heavy traces of itself everywhere in the poem. Return from long absence is impossible even if, in the case of Darwish, the return is possible. Exile has sown memories in the mind, rooted and reared like trees until they become separate creations, bearing all the traces of the past and surpassing it in beauty, and therefore impossible to replant in the soil of reality. Here again in *Sareer* the poet-speaker attempts to insert himself in myth in order to bear, and even embrace reality as it fails him. His return is not the Exodus, and cannot be likened to anything foretold in the scriptures and myth. Nostalgia fails to make the return attractive, and the promise of a better future also fails. Without the gravity of the land of his identity the speaker and his beloved have become weightless like the tents that sheltered his

people upon their fearful escape from home in 1948. Love itself fails to overcome the sense of nothingness. The two lovers have subsumed each other; their presence is marked only by what they see of themselves in each other. The crisis, therefore, is not that lovers cannot join to make each other whole, but that the sense of nothingness persists.

In exile, however, the binaries that the poet had placed opposing each other are set precisely so as not to cancel one another out. In exile the poet can keep his “distance” and his “date palm,” his “nostalgia” and the “promise” of the future, his departures and landings, his Nile and Euphrates; traversing among them he can become the tide swaying between. Exile, despite all the pain associated with it, gave the poet an inflated appreciation of his capacity to contain division. The poem’s repetition of “staring at the water” points to this narcissism, longing directed inward and all forms of identification with the other reflecting only the self (“nothing of you is left except me”). But now—or perhaps it had always been so, we are not sure—this gazing at oneself takes place in the dark (“this long night of staring at the water”). The old narcissistic pleasure of self-reflection is failing the poet, and contemplating his actions, he repeatedly receives nothing.

Darwish’s portrayal of this scene by the river does not merely suggest the melancholy of his speaker and the reader, but resounds with dread. Earlier in this same volume, there are two references to Paul Celan, the great poet and Holocaust survivor, who committed suicide perhaps because he “realized that once you have penetrated the kingdom of night you have reached the end” (Weisel 8). Celan killed himself by leaping into the freezing Seine, the same river by whose banks Darwish wrote most of *Sareer*. For Darwish, the largesse of exile has been aligned with the grandeur of his and his

people's vision of Palestine. As early as 1984 he anticipated a future disillusionment in the utopian vision of their lost homeland he and his countrymen had built and predicted disappointment in his return to it, as unlikely as that seemed at the time.

How wide the revolution,  
how narrow the journey!  
How grand the thought,  
how small the nation! (*Al-'amāl al-'Ulā*, vol. 2, 411)

The dream of Palestine reared in exile had become a mode of existence, difficult but familiar. Allowing one to defer arrival and settlement perpetually, exile detains the poet in the self he knows best, but also keeps the stranger estranged, even in the homeland, even as he lies in his beloved's bed.

## G. PARTING WORDS: THE POET APPROPRIATES CONTINGENCY

The beginning of the second intifada and the collapse of the peace process, especially the return of Israeli military occupation and the sieges imposed on the major Palestinian cities, brought on a new era of Palestinian history which one would expect to have intruded on Darwish's private existential investigations. The mind meditating on the white slates of death and oblivion and the dark seas of life beyond the familiar waterways of exile would now have to address the grays and khakis of military convoys and their soldiers and the red of firepower and blood. Darwish's response to the second intifada was in fact to protect the project he had begun with *Sareer*, to shield the impenetrable spaces he had encouraged all Palestinian writers to create for themselves. He did not lapse, as he did in Beirut, "by becoming one with his reader" (Darwish, *La `Aḥad Yaşil* 33); rather, he sought a way to stop the "relative" circumstances that ensued after 2000 from encroaching upon his conceptual investigations.

Yet retaining his focus on his art did not mean that the poet stopped responding in poetry to the events of the second intifada; he did so almost right away, and continued to do so with a tactful sense of timing and in an immediate, but collected tone. One of Darwish's most-read poems at the time of its publication was an elegy to Muhammad al-Durra, a 10-year-old Palestinian boy whose death by Israeli fire was televised and broadcast around the world in the fall of 2000, a few days after the al-Aqsa intifada ignited. For Darwish, writing about such an incident seemed inevitable, "an expression of the organic connection between poetic language and the reality it confronts and the world from which it comes" (Yaḥyā 204). Not to respond would be to uproot the poet from



spontaneous interaction with the world, a faculty that could not be allowed to grow dull. But Darwish states that he has begun to approach writing this kind of occasional poem differently. “I tried in the Muhammad al Durra poem to write what would be an objective poem, empty of oratory riches or ornate allusions, a poem that depicts and not scream” (Yaḥyā 204).

The challenge to poetry on an occasion such as the death of a child, televised to millions of viewers, was that “language could not match the level of shock” (Yaḥyā 204) rendered by the camera. “Poetry had to become a second, hidden camera, so that it can quietly create the needed effect. Poetry must attempt to have its whispers heard because its screams and shouts could never be heard in the midst of the loudness of violence” (Yaḥyā 204). The poem, by snatching the event out of the silence-inducing hegemony of the electronic image, can then contribute to the creation of meaning through a quieter retelling that provides the needed catharsis of elegy.

Darwish published another poem shortly afterward that became an event itself. “Al-Qurban” (“Blood Offering”) was written as Palestinian militant groups began to use suicide bombers in response to the Israeli reoccupation of Palestinian territories. The poem is an address to the martyr by the leaders of his society, who sent him to martyr himself on their behalf. Darwish recognizes the essential ambivalence of “the priests” who offer the martyr as “scapegoat” to the gods and to eternity in order to achieve success on earth. They have no access to heaven but the martyr, and no other way to free their society or purify it. They ask the martyr who was “born out of fire and light” to “go alone, alone” and to proceed quietly toward paradise. “Al-Qurban” threw Darwish into the fray of a heated debate among Palestinians between those who felt the need to fight

back by any means necessary, and those who saw the use of suicide bombers as unethical and counterproductive to the national cause.

A few years later, Darwish published another timely poem, “Anta mundhu al-ana ghairak” (“you from now are not yourself”), in which he addressed the strife in Gaza between Palestinian forces loyal to the democratically elected Hamas and those of the PLO-dominated Palestinian Authority, which led to expulsion of the latter from the area.

You from now are not yourself.  
Did we have to fall from such a high place, did we have to see our blood  
on our own hands, to realize that we are not angels?  
Did we have to reveal our immodesty to the world so that our truth no  
longer remains virginal?  
O how we lied when said we are an exception! (Darwish 2007)

Unlike earlier works, such as those written during the bombardment of Beirut in 1982, in which the urgency of the situation had its own generative and animated vigor, here Darwish’s pace is slow and deliberate, issuing a judgment against the Palestinian subject and collective with the sobriety of deep disappointment and grievance. Most devastatingly, the poem admonishes by stating, “you are not who you had said, and believed, yourself to be” (Darwish 2007). The poet becomes the nation’s confessor and priest, taking his people to the depths of their despair to show them just how far they have fallen. The poem is painful, and its effect undeniably cathartic.

Emailed and texted to and from hundreds of thousands of readers and reprinted in tens of Arabic publications, none of these powerful, timely, highly popular poems appeared in Darwish’s recent books. Asked about the elegy “Muhammad al-Durra” and the poem “Blood Offering,” Darwish stated that he would not “spend a great deal of effort in defending their esthetic qualities” (Yahyā 205), and hence their exclusion from his books. Having written such poems, Darwish recognizes poetry’s ability to contribute

to and influence its historical moment, if only in the short term. In the case of the Al-Durra elegy, which is probably the most conventional of the poems discussed above, poetry can help sustain a beleaguered population by articulating its grief. And in the case of “Blood Offering” and “You from now on,” the poet engages contingencies deeply, aided by music, metaphor, and allusion, and his poetry provides an important, broad and perhaps revolutionary critique with immediate consequences.

But immersed in the moment and wielded as a political gesture, the poem ceases its claim on posterity. Such conventional poems do not rise to the highest esthetic level, according to Darwish’s discourse as outlined earlier, because they refuse to engage the experience they address beyond its context. Written out of emotion justifiable only in its moment, these poems are meant to affect change immediately; the emotion that produced them could not reasonably be sustained beyond the crisis they address. They will not on their own be viable works of art, among the poet’s esthetically successful poems. The short shelf life that Darwish has assigned these poems in which he critiques his society’s failings also suggests that he believes these failings are correctable and do not constitute a flaw in the character and shape of the nation, and that the poet’s passionate grief or enraged anger at his nation is only temporary. The poet has the right to scold briefly, but not to condemn for eternity; he has the right to weep for a victim, but not to turn his poetry into funereal sentimentality.

Darwish’s dual approach to poetic composition (with some poems meant to expire and others meant to endure) suggests an understanding of temporality as an ingredient in poetic agency, and a facet of the poet’s authority. To begin with, the poet should not rely on events to guide the intervention of his agency, but on his poetry as

poetry. He cannot afford to rely on continuous political change as a source for poetic vision, in the same way that he cannot afford to write according to the dictates of his audience. The poet earns authority through the works that endure beyond their context and continue to provide a renewable philosophical, existential, and political outlook for his reader. This ability to endure grants the poet authority to speak on immediate contingencies. Interventions in contemporaneous discourse have the weight of the poet's achievements behind them and are seen as necessary detours from the poet's usual focus on larger abiding subjects and concerns. Such interventions, in Darwish's approach, need not become part of the poet's recognized corpus but must pass on as exceptional direct engagements in the nation's immediate affairs.

It is therefore interesting to look at Darwish's book of poems *Halat Hissar* (*State of Siege*, 2002), given the poet's focus in his late period on "absolute" rather than relative issues. *Hissar* was written in the second year of the Al-Aqsa intifada (2000-2005), during which the Israeli army re-imposed military rule on the West Bank, placing several Palestinian cities under siege. Darwish's justification for writing such a responsive book perhaps falls within his belief that Palestinians must retain some "defensive nationalism" that would preserve their collective memory" (Al-Shaikh 2009, 201), especially as they remain "a country on the verge of dawn," as he says in *Hissar* (*Al-'amāl al-Jadīdah* 178), their statehood perpetually deferred. Darwish's concept of defensive nationalism alludes to the beginning of Palestinian nationalist struggles in the 1960s, when diverse groups with contending political ideologies were forming the founding institutions of the Palestinian liberation movement (Farsoun and Aruri 190-200). In articulating the Palestinian national charter in 1968, the then strong leftist current stressed that

Palestinian nationalism “transcend chauvinistic nationalism so that Palestinians do not produce a replica of the Zionist dream” (Al-Shaikh 2009), but instead present a vision of an alternative multi-sectarian, multinational state with a secular, progressive government geographically comprising the whole of historical Palestine. In Darwish’s view a sense of nationalism was needed then, as well as now, for the Palestinians to sustain the structures needed to unite the population and hold on to their territory when both are at risk.

Darwish’s sketchy notion of defensive nationalism resembles what Spivak called “strategic essentialism,” a political stance taken by subaltern groups that involves the strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulous manner to achieve political ends. The subalterns temporarily essentialize themselves and bring forward their group identity in a simplified way while debating issues related to group diversity and identity (Spivak 4). In Darwish’s defensive nationalism the “temporary” use of strategic essentialization becomes “defensive,” by which we understand a sense of minimalism, and whereby defensive nationalism becomes “minimal nationalism” (Darwish, *La `Aḥad Yaşil* 44). In their stateless situation, Palestinian writers and artists thus have a role in “protecting the essence” (44) of a culture by providing conscientious responses to the suffering of the people around them and to whom they belong. Palestinian writers, like the rest of their fellow citizens, cannot avoid this suffering, and cannot avoid being impacted by politics (Imaginary 9). Engaged as they are in creating impenetrable individual spaces, Palestinian artists must continue to respond to the suffering around them lest they fall into solipsism and nihilism (Yahyā 213).

*Hissar* arises from this protective impulse. Darwish subtitles the poetic sequence with the statement “This text was written in January 2002 in Ramallah,” thus

emphasizing the time and conditions under which the writing occurred. We note also that the poet calls his work a “text” and not a poem, and we are invited to see it as a journal of sorts. These cautionary gestures are reminiscent of the poet’s subtling of his *Madih al-Dhul al-A’ali* (1983) as a documentary poem. *Hissar* is a poetic text nonetheless since it is broken into lines of verse, mostly metered, a great many of which are in rhyme. Yet whereas *Madih* launches into an incantatory mode from the very beginning, *Hissar* is episodic and meditative. Having decided to make a book out of his immediate response to being under siege, Darwish appears to be testing his own waters by proposing a work of art to us (according to his definition and practice) while also demonstrating a degree of caution about the work’s artistry. He had argued that writing about immediate circumstances cages the Palestinian artist in the prison the occupier built. The challenge for Darwish in *Hissar* is to take on this “relative” situation and find the absolute and cosmic elements in it.

Cautious or not, Darwish assumes the role of a collective spokesperson with a great deal of ease.

Here on these low slung hills, facing the sunset,  
here within time’s shot range  
near gardens of severed shadows  
we do what prisoners do  
we do what the unemployed do—  
we nurture hope. (*Al-’amāl al-Jadīdah* 177)

Darwish’s use of the first-person plural is emphatic and unencumbered, as if he had not cried out in *Jidariya* (*Mural*) that he has yet to become who he wants to be, or as if he has not cried repeatedly “I am not for myself, I am not for me” (357). The steadiness and collected tone suggest that the poet is indeed who he is, that speaking in We is a conscious, calculated decision, and that such a responsibility has not be imposed upon

him by others. Perhaps it is the force of habit, or the poet's aforementioned confidence that the annihilation of Palestinian culture has become impossible. The sense of confidence in the poet's ability to deliver his poetic effect without raising his voice or demarcating his musical skills is also reflected in the poet's prosodic choices. The structure of the book, made up of 115 generally short stanzas that vary in length and subject matter, allows the poet to shift and vary his focus in unpredictable ways, throwing poetic unity to the wind and favoring a postmodern sense of closure, the parts creating a tenuous whole. These formal choices make *Hissar* a spontaneous as well as heavy-handed text. While the poet is free to say what he wants in whatever way he wishes, he also demonstrates a great deal of control over the poem with short, almost aphoristic stanzas. He avoids mere venting and neutral description, and focuses on squeezing insight and wisdom out of his condition. Eschewing a sequential arc, the poet offers us a view of the state of siege and its implications in multiple, collage-like pieces, as if we are walking through a site of devastation, deciding what remains and what has been lost.

Continuing in Darwish's revamped (late) style, *Hissar* is also a retrospective look at the poet's corpus. We encounter in this poem images from his early work of the grieving mother and the adversary's soldiers, who seek understanding and sympathy from the occupied they murder; we read about the martyrs who led the struggle and hear the poet-speaker lament his imprisonment, and that of his people, in time and place; Biblical and mythical figures such as Job and Achilles make an appearance, as well as the poet's beloved stranger and her bed. *Hissar*, while providing a means to comprehend the poet and his people's perennial Trojan crisis, also provides the poet an opportunity to critique his own work and his previous approaches to poetic agency. Darwish is the supplicant

before the confessor, the besieged before the befuddled besieger, the champion of lyric and quotidian time standing over the corpse of epic heroism.

Of specific interest here is Darwish's self-interrogation on these issues and on the motifs and strategies with which he shaped the Palestinian subject and Palestinian culture. The poet takes on the fertility motifs he presented in his early work, especially the metaphor of the martyred bridegroom wed to the feminized land. In a remarkable passage the poet presents a mother seeking her lost son. She is told that her son has just gotten married, a euphemism for his martyrdom. After the wedding celebration, she asks after the whereabouts of the newlyweds and is told they are "there above the sky, two angels / consummating their marriage" (214).

So I sang out my ululations  
and danced and sang and danced until I fell down  
with a stroke. And so dying I asked,  
"O my beloveds, when will this honeymoon end?" (214)

In this short passage Darwish undermines a paradigm he had championed for years, and to which his countrymen still adhered by holding wedding ceremonies at the funerals of martyrs. Having gone along with the celebration, the grieving mother wonders how long this fiction will go on, how long her people will continue to delude her. As Darwish presents in this poem, celebrating martyrdom and pairing fertility with death have been an unsatisfactory response to personal loss, an unsatisfactory solution to collective trauma, because it requires the perpetuation of self-deception.

Later in *Hissar*, the icon of the martyr that the poet celebrated in earlier work confronts him directly. "Where were you?" the martyr asks the poet, and then commands the poet to erase the praise he has heaped on the martyrs.

Toss back into to the dictionaries all the words



you gave to me as gifts.  
And be gentle on the sleepers and lower the drone of your echoes. (234)

The martyr goes on to “besiege” the poet-speaker several more times, telling him that he never wished for the virgins of paradise and that he loved his earthly freedom most. Finally, the martyr tells the poet not to walk in his funeral procession, for he only wanted those who knew him to do so. “I need no one’s cordiality,” (235) he tells the poet.

The distrust that the martyr expresses of the poet’s earlier declamations, and of poetry in general, occupies a central place in Darwish’s discourse in *Hissar*. The poet, addressing poetry and mocking his verse, states: “To poetry, besiege you siege” (225), quoting the words he used in his highly enthusiastic, combative earlier poetry in “Ahmad al-Za<sup>c</sup>tar” and *Madih*. With evident self-mockery the poet commands poetry to end its siege and to release its grip on his imagination, perhaps by lowering “the drone of [its] echoes.” The poet later cautions the reader, “don’t trust the poem” (251), suggesting the reader should be skeptical of the poet’s authority. Pursuits and claims of heroism are also not to be trusted. The poet-speaker in *Hissar*, addressing both besiegers and besieged, emphatically states that there “will be no Homeric echo” (184), suggesting that there will be no victor or vanquished in this struggle. Those under siege are aware of the end of heroism, and it is up to the besiegers to understand this now as well.

Deconstructing these motifs (the feminized land, martyrdom, and the quest for heroism) and setting them alongside poetry in which he promoted them, Darwish bolsters the poetic approach he undertook in the last two decades of his life. Resuming the project initiated long ago in the poem “A Soldier Dreams of White Lilies” and in later poems such as “Canaanite Stone by the Dead Sea,” the poet, now much more confrontational, devotes several passages to “a killer” and “a guard,” in reference to the Israeli soldiers

who thronged his street. The occupiers are barbarians, the poet stresses in *Hissar*, their only superior quality that they possess “the wisdom of rifles” (197). Darwish adds that the besiegers are treating their own souls callously, and are betraying the suffering of their ancestors in the gas chambers by launching such attacks on those clearly weaker than they (197). Echoing earlier gestures, the poet invites the soldiers around his house to share his coffee (186). Then the poet positions himself as teacher to the uncivilized soldier with his advanced weapons. By refusing to die “at the gate of [his] deferred death” (236) he offers to teach patience to the soldier who wants to push history along, and push the Palestinians out if it. He instructs him on the need for patience as one seeks love “at the entrance to a cafe, your heart slowing down, speeding up” (237). Finally, the poet offers to teach the guard about the simple fact of their shared humanity and their shared destiny on the same land, assuring him that their estrangement from each other’s dining tables will ultimately be brief.

I’ll teach you...  
you have a mother  
and I have a mother  
and we have the same rain  
and we have the same moon  
and a short absence from each other’s dining tables (238)

Darwish manages to steer the poem to images of ordinary life, and concludes *Hissar* with a sequence in which he makes incantatory offerings of peace. Without surrendering to sentimentality, the poet describes what is needed for peace as he visualizes this tranquil state.

Peace is to confess the truth publicly:  
What have you done to the ghost of those you murdered?

Peace is to take up another task in the garden:  
What will we plant next? (263)

These two stanzas make up a single section and are to be read as one unit. Peace has great potential to bring about the cooperation and advancement of all forms of life in this earthly garden. However, peace requires that one tell the truth about one's crimes, calming the spirits of the dead and the living. The two stanzas of this section stand in confrontation, the white space between a chasm the aggressor would need to cross for peace to begin. The difference between the two situations, between the judgment of the first question and the reconciliation offered by the next, is stark: in one we imagine a soul in turbulent confrontation with the past, while the other offers us a simple, Edenic vision of the future. And there is no way to peace but through the dark night of the soul, as the lines of poetry containing these two visions refuse to be welded.

In this short lyric we are indeed inside the Palestinian/Israeli conflict, and its implications and suffering surround the passage. We witness a mythical moment in which a soul faces a difficult choice that could change the course of its life and that of others. As the poet-speaker dreams of peace, we can begin to imagine that Darwish's words are perhaps inspired by contemporary efforts at peace and reconciliation around the world, an opportunity yet to be offered to his people by their adversaries. We can even imagine these concluding sections of *Hissar* as a manifesto for conflict resolution that posits poetry as a guide to these difficult, but necessary undertakings. *Hissar* transforms Palestine from a contentious, incomprehensible part of the world that alternately arouses passions and encourages resignation into a place for continuous and rewarding contemplation of the human condition. As for the poet's own agency, he manages to make a national contingency, after recognizing its historical and traumatic specificity, into a matter from which transcendental lyric can be created. The four books following

*Hissar* are also guided by Darwish's stated ambition to be a poet of the absolute, convinced that only spiritual and intellectual strength will assure him and his people presence on their tenuous ground.

**CONCLUSION:**  
**WHEN THE POET IS A STRANGER:**  
**AN EPILOGUE IN THREE STORIES**

As this study comes to its dénouement, I am hoping that it will encourage further critical interest in the works of Tagore, Walcott, and Darwish. Beside their poetry, all three poets have provided us with solid conceptual work in their essays and interviews. I arrived at these specific poets after being interested in the subject of the poet-stranger for almost two decades. One of my first projects while in a graduate creative writing program was to collect the works of U.S.-based foreign-born poets whose native language was not English but who wrote in it. I went on to assemble a large anthology of the sixty-two poets from all over the world and the list has grown longer and more varied since then. As a writer starting out in the early 1990s, I wanted the company of these fellow immigrants who worked in the language of their adopted homeland, chiseling away at their exile and making a home for themselves in poetry.

Eventually this interest led me to the postcolonial shelves in the library and soon enough I wanted to know my older siblings. I learned that the earliest likely candidate for the first serious non-English poet writing in English was Henry Louis Vivian Dorozi (1809-1831), an Anglo-Indian from Bengal of mixed Portuguese descent. A fiery revolutionary figure, Dorozi, who died at the tender age of twenty-two was expelled from his job as a teacher at the Hindu College of Calcutta. Raised a Christian, he was denied burial in the city's Christian church and was buried outside it, along the road. I

was drawn also to the poetry of Toru Dutt (1856-1877), another prodigy who died at the age of twenty-one, after having completed two novels (one in English and one in French), a book of her own poems, and a volume of translations of modern French poems.

My search led to other parts of the world and to how power prefigured in issues of language whether it was in colonial courts or in the translation of foreign, ancient texts to European languages. Interested in how these dynamics played out when colonized-postcolonial authors tried to address the world, I found my way back to poetry. I wanted to know how poets came about and evolved in colonial, postcolonial, and neocolonial eras, how they shaped their voices and their personae and how these personae evolved. I wanted full careers that I could track in stages, and compelling works that had empowered the poets and inspired those touched by their words. Tagore, Walcott, and Darwish, representing three different eras, regions, and challenges presented fascinating individual cases with wide-ranging implications for contemporary poets who want to speak to multiple populations, who had a sense of the discursive barriers before them and tried to write their way through these barriers. As outsiders—or what I will refer to from now on as poet-strangers—Tagore, Walcott, and Darwish reached out and chiseled at and at times hammered at dominant discourses with their poetry and their engagement. As such they have a great deal to teach my fellow fork-tongued diasporic poets and me about addressing our difference, and the advantages and disadvantages of highlighting or diminishing it. There is also a great deal to learn about the opportunities and pitfalls of translation, in the specific and broad senses of the word, about the many ways that poetry can foster community, and about how contingencies influence self-presentation in terms of shaping a presence and inscribing it on the page. They teach us that poetry, however

private an utterance it may be, is never far away from places of friction, from where the wheels of power grind, and that poets, strangers or not, empowered by poetry can project significant and enduring intervention into important and consequential cultural and political conversations.

An important factor that helped me proceed in writing this study was my conviction that an understanding of Tagore, Walcott, and Darwish together needs to be passed on as the world, as the Anglophone poetry world, continues to expand, and as more and more poet-strangers appear in stranger and stranger surroundings<sup>1</sup>. Looking at these three poets, we find three different sensibilities and circumstances, and as a whole we see poetry's potential to empower the postcolonial subject at various stages of colonial hegemony. Connected deeply to the issues that the experiences and writings of Tagore, Walcott, and Darwish posed to me, I have also been mesmerized by the details of these poets' experiences and inspired by their creative energies and transformations. As a trio, they may not exhaust any typology of the postcolonial as a "stranger," but as educators, reformers, assimilators, spiritual gurus, political theoreticians, esthetes, freedom fighters, memoirists, and historians, they provide a great many manifestations of how to break through the barriers of strangeness.

I was also struck by the fact that I was telling a story of a different era, a story of circumstances that were themselves shifting as the poets tried to respond to their changing worlds. What Tagore, Walcott, and Darwish had experienced is not likely to

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<sup>1</sup> One of the first poets I translated was Hatif Janabi, an Iraq who has been living in Poland for almost thirty years. Writing in Arabic, he published four books of his poetry in Polish translation before the English selection of his work that I translated appeared in 1996. His first book in Arabic appeared in 1999. Syrian authorities recently deported a Chinese poet who had been living in Syria and who wrote in Arabic. North African authors whose countries were colonized by France are now writing and publishing in Dutch and Italian. An Eritrean friend of mine living in Tripoli, Libya has published his first novel which he wrote in Arabic.

occur in a similar fashion to any poet from their hinterlands of empire. The London in which Tagore felt lonely and despondent in the 1890's is now full of people from South Asia and it is their home. They may be disliked, discriminated against, and ghettoized, but they are not strangers in the earlier understanding of the word. Among Palestinians and Israelis, the estrangement continues, but that estrangement does not mean they are strangers; they are adversaries living in close proximity. Both are in a different world from the one in which Darwish started out.

Obviously, one of the most evident changes relates to the postcolonial poet's presence on the metropolitan scene. As exemplified by Walcott, the Syrian poet Adonis, the Jamaican Kamau Braithwaite and the Iraqi Saadi Youssef, the postcolonial poet is a resident of the metropolis—at least for part of the time, where he or she is an exile, a dual citizen, a member of an ethnic minority, a member of a sectarian group, and a cosmopolitan all together or in some combination. With the development of new and varied zones in which he or she can operate, the foreign poet, living in the metropolis or not, has greater chances for closer proximity to it. Other opportunities for the poet's presence are also opening up in unprecedented places outside the Western metropolis. One of the most elaborate literary festivals in the world now takes place in Dubai. The poetry festival of Medellin, Colombia annually features at least sixty poets who come from all corners of the globe to be heard and viewed by audiences who turn out in the thousands every night.

Even the most "national" of poets have had to become international. With the effusion of migration and the development of multiplicities of diasporic communities, poets can continue to be within their nations as they hop from one capital to another.



Over the past few years, the prominent Iraqi poet Mudhaffar al-Nawwab has come to the U.S. on several occasions to give readings to the Arab diasporic communities who invited him. Like an itinerant priest of a minor religion whose population is scattered over a broad territory, Al-Nawwab interacts almost exclusively with the Arab community then he goes back to Damascus where he lives in exile. With only a few of his poems translated into other languages, he is and he is not an international postcolonial poet.

### A. THREE STORIES

Looking forward beyond Tagore, Walcott and Darwish to the new manifestations of the poet-stranger, I am thinking about the pertinence of the issues raised in this study regarding the poet's agency. I would like to present three recent stories about the poet-stranger's presence, in the world and in text, to examine forms of estrangement that persist in the metropolitan setting now. My analysis will also demonstrate that contemporary poet-strangers have developed interesting strategies to reach out and to undermine hegemonic discourses. Here are my three stories:

#### Story # 1

At a memorial evening for the poet Agha Shahid Ali in March of 2002, a celebrated American poet relayed the following story. The reader, I hope will, pardon me in attempting to restate what she said:

One year Shahid and I were applying for jobs as poets in universities. We had been both selected as finalists for two of the best jobs. We'd talked throughout the process trying to help each other. In the end each of us was offered a job. He got the job I really wanted and I got the job he wanted. I was upset and when we talked on the phone after we both heard the news he tried to console me. He said, "Don't worry, darling, they gave me the job only because they wanted a darkie."

The audience in attendance laughed and the poet went on talking for a few more minutes. Other authors of Shahid Ali's generation also spoke expressing great admiration of him as a poet and as a person. Ali was a great charmer, a wonderful cook and conversationalist, and gay in every sense of the word; so went the stories. After the presentations, as people milled about the hall, and later at a reception that included several of the guest speakers, no one that I met talked about the "darkie" story.

### Story # 2

In 2001 I completed a manuscript of selected poem of the Iraqi poet Saadi Youssef that covered five decades of his writing from 1952 to 1997. While the manuscript was being considered by several publishers, another publisher that I respected contacted me and asked to see the manuscript. I received a contract a month later and signed with them. This happened before 9/11 as interest in all things having to do with Iraq and the Arab and Muslim world was peaking yet again. I should say that to the publisher's credit this book was not the first book by an Arab author that they had published, and the idea of the publication of this book being a response to a fad was out of the question. In the fall of 2002 the publisher sent me a press kit for the book that they had developed. Here is the poem that the press decided to feature:

#### A Vision

This Iraq will reach  
the ends of the graveyard.  
It will bury its sons in open country  
generation after generation,  
and it will forgive its despot.  
It will not be the Iraq  
that once held the name.  
And the larks will not sing.

So walk—if you wish—a long time.  
And call—if you wish—on all  
the world's angels and all its demons.  
Call on the bulls of Assyria.  
Call on a westward phoenix.  
Call them  
and through the haze of phantoms  
watch for miracles to emerge  
from clouds of incense. (Youssef, 178)

I had chosen to translate this poem and to include it in the selection because it was one of Youssef's many meditations on his country. The poet imagines this pessimistic scenario while observing Iraq after twenty years of exile (the poem was written in 1997), seeing it choked by Saddam Hussein and suffering under brutal economic sanctions while opposition parties in exile quibble bitterly. He senses that his country "will not be the Iraq/ that once held the name," a feeling borne out of nostalgia and exilic despair that brings about an apocalyptic vision.

Upon seeing the press kit, I contacted the publisher and demanded that the poem not be featured so prominently as it may insinuate a position by the poet contrary to his opposition to the war that the United States was about to wage on his country. If we wanted to use this occasion to show Youssef's views on the war expressed in poetry, we could easily have excerpted one of Youssef's better known poems, "American, America," in which he deplores the first American Iraq war and the suffering that the sanctions had caused his people. I added that this would not be appropriate either since the book covers forty-five years of the poet's writing not just the then current situation. The publisher obliged and the publicity kit was issued with another poem that had nothing to do with the war. A few months later, as the book began to receive attention, "Vision" was reprinted in the *Los Angeles Times*. It was the only excerpt in the review that appeared in

*Publisher's Weekly*. And the poem was reprinted in Poetry Daily, one of the most visited poetry websites in the U.S. The genie had gotten out of the lamp and it was drafted in the coalition of the willing against its will.

### Story # 3

A few months ago a well-known university on the East Coast held a reading panel that was part of a symposium on poetry and the politics of violence, to which it invited the Iraqi poet Dunya Mikhail, author of *The War Works Hard*; the poet and Iraq-war veteran Brian Turner, author of *Here Bullet*; and myself. Mikhail read several poems about her experiences during the first two Iraq wars (the Iraq-Iran war of 1981-88 and Desert Storm 1991). She also read poems written since her migration to the U.S. in the late 1990s. Turner, who had opposed the Iraq even before it began (Turner 2009), mostly read poems relating to his service in Iraq. I read sections from a sequence addressing American militarism from a domestic angle. When the question and answer session began members of the audience lined up at two microphones and began to ask questions. After eight questions, all addressed to Turner, the moderator paused and asked the audience if anyone had any question for Mikhail or myself. No one raised a hand.

### B. MANIFOLD AGENCY: AGHA SHAHID ALI

Though none of these are uplifting stories, I think there are insights to gain from them regarding the role of the poet-stranger. Let me first address the story relating to Shahid Ali, who was probably the best-known Anglo-Indian poet in the U.S., having built a strong reputation within establishment poetry circles here as well as in Britain before his

untimely death at the age of fifty-one in December of 2001. Among his many achievements, Shahid Ali initiated a craze about the Urdu poetic form known as the ghazal. In 2000 Ali edited *Ravishing DisUnities: Real Ghazals in English*, an anthology of ghazals written by established American poets such as W.S. Merwin and Paul Muldoon along with relatively unknown poets. With his own poetry highly respected, and he himself adored by many in the poetry scene, Ali was the antithesis of Breytenbach's "guest intruder" and Walcott's "irascible guest." His case provides an excellent example of the advantages of what Bhabha calls "contiguity" and "infiltration".

Let's probe this sphere that Shahid Ali operated within a little more. The metropolis has changed considerably since the days of Tagore and even since the days of Walcott's appearances on the American scene (first as a poet from the Caribbean in the 1960s and second as a metropolitan poet in the late 1970s). And unlike Breytenbach, who came only for short visits with a postcolonial but highly useful, chip on his shoulder, Ali and other postcolonial, diasporic poets like him lived and worked here. Presently, a poet-stranger is hardly ever the only immigrant or exile from his nationality in a Northern metropolis; diasporic communities from his part of the world have grown in every metropolis he could have gone to. A more familiar figure now, the poet stranger bears less of the representational burden, and his or her sense of agency can draw more on solidarity with other individuals and communities of diverse backgrounds, and much less on solitary exilic Joycean "cunning" (*Portrait* 291).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Here's the full passage by James Joyce referred to here: "and I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can, using for my defence the only arms I allow myself to use, silence, exile and cunning."

Within the North American context the immigrant can and may become an ethnic American or Canadian rather quickly. Also, in this setting there are plenty of first-generation Americans from the poet's ethnic community among whom he can position himself, or against whom he can juxtaposition himself. What advantages does the immigrant poet gain or lose by becoming identified with his ethnic community? Is it more advantageous to be identified as *an exile from there* rather than *an ethnic from here*? Is it possible to be both and to speak these choices and positions alternately or in combination depending on the situation? What room for maneuverability can the poet have within these broader and perhaps more restrictive identifications? How can they overlap and become a larger set of concentric circles? This is where the term Kashmiri-American as it pertains to Ali becomes interesting. He is the only author that I know of in the U.S. who is identified with this category.

The content of Ali's poetry, the vast majority of which addresses his life in India and Kashmir, suggests a poet-persona whose concerns are largely shaped by exile. Ali's most American book *A Nostalgist's Map of America* (1991) includes several poems drawing on his years in Arizona and New England, and featuring a sequence of poems in homage to Emily Dickenson. *Nostalgist's* was Ali's third book appearing a few years after *The Half-Inch Himalayas* (1987), which contains exclusively poems set in India. The poems in his fourth and fifth books, *The Country Without A Post Office* (1998) and *Rooms Are Never Finished* (a finalist for the National Book award in 2001) are inspired by the conflict in Kashmir and the passing of the poet's mother who was buried there.

Perhaps the exotic aura that Shahid Ali's poet friends conveyed about him at his memorial emerges from the locale and content of his poems. Also, Ali's strong

attachment to the ghazal, which became his favored and almost exclusive form toward the end of his life, signaled a strong gesture toward esthetic distinction. Here the poet carves a place for himself within the mainstream by choosing his native prosodic form of which he is the sole expert, and also positions himself as arbiter of its utilization in English (real ghazals in English). In his preface to *Ravishing DisUnities*, Shahid Ali quotes from his own ghazals to demonstrate the “authentic” form and “the real thing” (*DisUnities* 2). Collected in a separate volume titled *Call Me Ishmael Tonight*, Shahid Ali’s ghazals were published two years after his passing, a posthumous magnum opus that strongly identifies him with the form.

As such Ali’s prosodic trajectory narrowed as he wrote and published his poetry in the U.S. His first two books were written in free verse; his third, fourth, and fifth books featured rhymed and strictly metered verse along with several ghazals; and as noted earlier, his last book featured only ghazals. Ali’s prosodic evolution moved from American free verse toward the most traditional, the longer he lived in the U.S. His ghazal however, is a hybrid, an Urdu form written in English, and so in that sense the longer he stayed in the U.S. the more hybridly traditional his prosody became. Also, the ghazal is perhaps Ali’s most consciously pan-postcolonial form in terms of the themes he raises in it. His first ghazal was dedicated to Edward Said and in its opening couplet borrows the phrase, “being exiled by exiles” (*The Country* 12) from Edward Said’s *After the Last Sky*.

The postcolonial diasporic act of reclamation came as a reaction to what Shahid Ali saw as abuse of his native form by American poets who “had got it quite wrong, far from the letter and farther from the spirit” (*DisUnities* 4). The ghazal had been utilized by

numerous American poets including Adrienne Rich and Robert Bly, but without adhering to its formal rigor, resulting in what Shahid Ali called “surreal experimentations” (4). And so “I decided to take back the gift outright,” states Shahid Ali with ironic use of Robert Frost’s inaugural poem.

Shahid Ali’s own political views could be described as liberal, progressive, left of center. His poems show open sympathy for the Palestinians under Israeli occupation and for Bosnians when they were under attack by Serb and Croat nationalist militants in the 1990s. Shahid Ali’s *Rooms Are Never Finished* features a translation of “Eleven Stars Over Andalusia,” a long poem by Mahmoud Darwish. Said had called Shahid Ali’s *The Country Without a Post Office* “an extraordinary achievement” (*The Country*). Shahid Ali was known as an upstanding fellow traveler in postcolonial/diasporic circles. Among his closest friends, and eulogists at his memorial, were the celebrated Indian author Meena Alexander and the novelist Amitav Ghosh who wrote a moving article about Shahid Ali in *The Nation* shortly after the poet’s death.

Now let’s to get back to the story that Shahid Ali’s poet friend relayed at the memorial. Clearly, Ali was seen as an important contender capable of nudging out poets of his generation for some of the best posts and awards that the literary and academic establishment had to offer. He seemed to be ubiquitous teaching at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, the University of Utah, NYU, and at several low-residency graduate programs. Taking Shahid Ali’s credentials and achievements into account, what could he have meant by telling his Caucasian friend that he was given his post only because “they wanted a darkie”? And in telling the story at his memorial, what was Ali’s friend saying about his approach toward affirmative action policies, racial representation,



multiculturalism, or diversity politics from which he may have benefited? Is she only telling the story to show how impetuous Ali was? And what may explain this impetuosity in this context?

The exchange suggests a kind of performativity marked by a postcolonial subject's awareness of metropolitan desire for the exotic. The postcolonial subject negotiates this aspect of his background and in response meets his audience, in text and in person, having developed means of addressing these expectations, and in doing so claiming a place for himself and his poetry. This is a different kind of cunning; it is not Joycean silence that grants the stranger agency, but the ability to break the silence around uncomfortable and unspoken thoughts.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps what it suggests is that the poet-stranger serves to diffuse racial and cultural tensions by being audacious, by performing an ironic acceptance of the stereotypes regarding his abilities and those of his community or race or nation. The point is that the stranger is aware of the discomfort he causes. He has to speak to claim it and to diffuse it, stressing that he is esthetically and politically harmless. He is not claiming equality, to reiterate Breytenbach's term, and that disclaimer becomes in turn a way of claiming agency. In Ali's repetition of the accusation that he only got his job because he was a darkie we hear a form of mimicry that exorcises menace. By repeating uncomfortable thoughts, Ali takes them "outright" from his interlocutor's mouth. But what happens when that mimicry is mimicked again and retold—why does the menace return in tact?

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<sup>3</sup> In a similar gesture and approach, Walcott, as his biographer reports, had on occasion to calm Robert Lowell's nerves, letting him know that he was not in the U.S. to compete with him, that they were working on different subject matters (King 377).

### C. POETRY AND THE IRAQ WAR

Regarding the Saadi Youssef poem “Vision” that gained some attention during the war on Iraq, the obvious point is that a poet can say whatever he wants and his poems can be taken out of context. Still, the specifics of this situation in a neocolonial world are instructive and disturbing. We have a strange case of consensus among a diverse group of literary professionals who agreed to highlight the very same aspect of a foreign poet’s complex vision of his nation. Setting aside the *Los Angeles Times*, whose editorial board supported the war, what did the poem do for those on the left who were against the war? How did they read the poem and what did they get from it that would distinguish them from those who supported the war? Could it be a matter of pessimism, a reflection of the culture community’s resignation, in which the poem served as an unconscious rationalization for their powerlessness? In this case, Youssef’s momentary fatalism seems to have affirmed for those opposed to the war that Iraq is a lost cause and exculpates them from having to press their own government to desist from a neocolonial adventure. The poet-stranger has a long way to go if people who support him, no less, use his words against him in this complicated manner and.

Metropolitan decontextualization can transpire by less subtle means. Toward that end a small omission from “A Vision” became an act of tampering. For Youssef, and poets like Adrienne Rich and Yannis Ritsos who are committed to bearing witness, the date of the poem’s composition is an important signifier. Youssef dates “Vision” as completed on 13/August/1997. This date was not indicated in any reprinting before the war. The date was re-inserted, however, in later postings on the internet, by right-wing bloggers who found in the poem a Nostradamic vision of Iraq useful during the sectarian

violence that followed the invasion of Iraq and as Sunnis and Shiites massacred each other.

What we note in these references to the reprinting of the poem is the wide variety of uses which the native informant's words can be utilized. In the introduction to this study I praised poetry's concision, and the voice of the poet as a rich, compact, mobile, and humanizing calling card sent from one culture to another. Now we see that poetry's discursive technologies can prefigure, in whatever minor way, the indoctrination of the citizenry as a superpower gears up for war. This happens without malice or obvious intent. The poem only appears to tell us that the heart of darkness has moved to another location; it is now in Iraq and the metropolis has native testimony from that location to prove it.

Now let me turn to the poetry reading with the Iraqi poet Dunya Mikhail and the soldier-poet Brian Turner where the audience did not have any questions for Mikhail. We note the geographical reversals taking place in the two poets' work: an Iraqi woman who has experienced war in her country is no longer keen on sharing only the poetry about that part of her experience. She has lived in exile for several years now and considers this as her most relevant subject. Turner, the white male soldier poet, comes to share his experiences about a war he opposed and where at each encounter "with an Iraqi I had a flag and a gun separating me from them." She is writing away from Iraq and he is digging deeper into that subject matter. Doubtless, the neocolonial moment is complicated by the poet-stranger's gender. Is her refusal to be a victim what renders her invisible, her voice undesirable? Is she asking for equality when she speaks her current experiences and

dismissed for doing so? Is the audience ashamed of the damage they had caused her country and simply can bear asking her any questions?

The notion of poetry as exploration of the heart of darkness that entered into the public reading of Saadi Youssef's "Visions," coupled with the illuminating vision of the reluctant soldier was on display at the poetry and violence panel. The audience may not have been certain of Mikhail's story—perhaps the Iraq-Iran war seemed to them as merely ordinary business for people from that part of the world. What may have made a difference was the presence and the bearing of witness by the representative of the neocolonial power, a bona fide citizen like the members of the audience who not only went into the heart of darkness, but also now suffers the guilt of having gone there. That Mikhail wanted to transcend the violence she had witnessed and wished to celebrate and examine her new life and its exilic complication may have made her less relevant. Turner on the other hand is working on a second book about his service in Iraq and clearly there is an audience for his testimony. Who needs a foreign poet when a metropolitan poet is available to tell the war story?<sup>4</sup>

If this sounds like one of the arguments used to disparage Tagore nine decades ago, then the reader has guessed correctly. Here's what one of Tagore's English reviewers wrote about his work: "Those who wish to be impressed by glimpses of a life that is different from our own, by revelation of the Eastern mind which works in a way we can never understand, would do far better to go to Mr. Kipling for what they want" (quoted in Sen 16). The reviewer's comment is relevant, and is a blunt, hostile version of

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<sup>4</sup> The Vietnam war literature is a case in point. How many literary accounts do we have available that tell the Vietnam story from the Vietnamese point of view on the shelves of the metropolitan libraries? And if the victor is the one that gets to tell the story, who then won the war?

what can take place now. First of all, Tagore's reviewer appears to contradict himself; he seems to be saying, "if you wish to understand the Eastern mind, go to Kipling." But he is not saying that; he is saying "if you wished to be *impressed* by... *revelation* of the Eastern mind." In this now familiar Orientalist discourse, the Other can only be experienced as an "impression" and through "revelation" as something that needs to be uncovered and experienced in intermittent peripatetic glimpses. This is all that Kipling, who is the best available source for such experience and much better at it than Tagore, can offer because the Eastern mind cannot be understood. Interacting with that mind requires the use of different verbs. The native testimony therefore represents raw evidence; it is a slippery, barely visible object and the metropolitan's examination of it is the act of agency. What's the use of a native informant who does not wish to provide, in her person, and in her words, the story that needs to be studied?

What is *the story* here then, and why does the metropolitan audience want to know it? The war with Iraq is taking place *there*, and, like Vietnam before it, the danger Iraq presents is mostly hypothetical. The reason for the war, as most of the American populace convinced itself, was to avenge 9/11 rather than any elaborate threat such as the communist menace. What the metropolitan who is resigned to his nation's warring ways wants to know is how this war out there will affect him. Clearly there has to be an emotional blowback and the metropolitan has learned to anticipate it.

In his recent book *Postcolonial Melancholia*, Paul Gilroy addresses the ennui that white Britons have been feeling regarding the profound change in their circumstances that followed the end of empire and the loss of imperial prestige. He attributes this ongoing melancholia to British failure to work through complex feelings of loss and

culpability, writing that the British prefer instead to depreciate, discredit, and forget the disquieting, violent history that produced the melancholia in the first place. The American approach as represented in similar conversations with exiled and diasporic intellectuals, and led by independent metropolitan academics and intellectuals, is perhaps a pre-emptive effort to address this oncoming neocolonial melancholy. This approach compliments the several adjustments that the U.S. has made since Vietnam. Along with the reduction in the number of American casualties came a reduction of the public's visual exposure to the war (no flag-draped coffins on television or in the newspapers), the reduction of the visual appearance of the civilian victims of warfare, and finally the reduction of the soldiers' experience of the living bodies that they would end up killing through the use of robots, drones, and other advanced forms of technology where real warfare became similar to the guilt-free electronic simulation of war. The final step in this process is to anticipate the anxiety among the public about violence that is taking place in their name and about the return of soldiers suffering from post-traumatic stress disorders bearing physical and emotional scars as reminders of a greater violence. Poetry is important here as it reflects where metropolitan anxieties lie. One of the questions most addressed to Turner was if his poems had helped *him* maintain his psyche and his emotional balance (see Turner, 2007, 2008, and "Rewrite").

#### D. THE METROPOLIS AND THE POET STRANGER: THE 'TAHA' EFFECT

If the divisions in this discussion between metropolitan and postcolonial, subject and object, native informant and neocolonial agent, ethnic and exile, seem too divisive

standing as unbridgeable binaries, it is because there was much at stake in the cases I am referring to, and such contingent moments harden the membranes of the societal body in which the diasporic, exilic, or foreign poet operates. Unrelated to the Iraq conflict, the Shahid Ali story I related took place a few months after 9/11 as U.S. troops had begun their campaign in Afghanistan, not far from the poet's birthplace. And though I do not see a direct connection between the relaying of Shahid Ali's 'darkie' story and the 9/11 events, the telling of that story occurred in that atmosphere. And while taking complex individual stances, Turner and Mikhail do stand as metonyms of the two nations involved in the war at least in the panel I'm referring to. Amalgamated, hybrid identities such as Mikhail's are challenged by such crises, and so the poet-stranger speaks, aware of the continuum between the binaries where she or he stand, and the flexible positions he may need to occupy to speak his piece.

It's worth our effort now to contextualize these and similar conversations and exchanges. Cultural exchanges among modern nation-states have served various functions from creating diplomatic openings to cementing relations after the trade and military agreements have been ratified. Countries at war, on the other hand, do not invite each other's poets into their midst. Such power is the prerogative of the metropolis, and the stories I have relayed are incidents about the dynamics of uneven exchange. A metropolis can do many things at the same time—it can capture those who declare war against its plans, it can bomb their civilians, it can build schools and hospitals there, and it can write a country's constitution for it as well as vaccinate the children, remove landmines, and fertilize the farmland as it continues the killing.

Needless to say, knowledge contributes to all these advantages, and individuals, poets included, are involved in these circuits of knowledge/power exchange. If speaking to the metropolis is not teachable per se, it can be learned and a postcolonial individual can easily acquire the working paradigms and the most efficient stylistic approaches and mannerisms toward that end. Penetrable as it may be, however, the metropolis can—and often does—decide whom the spokesperson for the Other is going to be. Facing such power, it is not surprising that many poet-strangers who establish reputations in the metropolis stand in awkward positions.

The example of the Palestinian poet Taha Muhammad Ali serves as an interesting case in how these dynamics play out. Taha Ali is a former schoolteacher who has also made a living as a seller “of Christian trinkets to Jewish tourists” (*NY Times*) in his Nazareth shop. His poetry occupies only three pages in Jayyusi’s authoritative *Anthology of Modern Palestinian Literature* while a long list of other poets are given more space while Darwish occupies a lion’s share. Though he is not considered a major poet at home, Taha Ali is now one of the best-known international poets in America and Europe since the leading poetry presses in the U.S. and the U.K. published his poetry a few years ago. His volume of selected poems, *So What* has gone through several printings. Recently, Yale University Press published a major biography of Taha Ali; it is the only biography in English of a modern Arab poet. Taha Ali is virtually unknown in the rest of the Arab world and known in Palestine more as a short story writer than a poet.

It will not surprise the reader that Taha Ali’s poetry is not confrontational or that “he has rarely written declamatory political poetry” (*NY Times*). Taha Ali’s political views regarding the Palestinian-Israeli conflict are subtly expressed and may even be



considered pacifistic. His biographer and translator are an American Jewish couple who lives in West Jerusalem, the Israeli side of the city. Is this a case where the metropolis has found someone who knows to speak to it, or inversely, has it found someone whose voice it deems “authentic” ?

There are many aspects of Taha Ali that make him appeal as a natural, as opposed to a national poet. In performance, he relies on his translator to read the English versions of his poetry, but he often tells in his halting English long and amusing stories about people from his village, which the Israelis had razed in 1948. Taha Ali gives a compelling performance and often enough receives standing ovations among the U.S. audiences. Interestingly, there has been a strange silence among Palestinian intellectuals in U.S. regarding what has come to be known as “The Taha Effect.” Among the Palestinian writers I have spoken to, Taha Ali’s success is seen as at least harmless to their cause, and certainly no one wants to begrudge the man his success. But he is no Darwish and he is not considered a true spokesperson in terms of the esthetic ambitions of his work, or of the ongoing confrontation with neocolonial Israel. “Why him?” is a question I have often heard. Is it simply a case of the metropolitan researcher coming to the region and choosing the poet he wishes to export to his home country? Could the situation be as simple as that? Could it be simpler still in that it is merely a case of a poet-translator and a biographer finding a poet whose work they admire and can translate and present admirably to the metropolitan world? Is such simplicity still possible when the terms of the cultural exchange are so uneven between the two settings?

#### E. WHO AND WHAT IS TRANSLATED?

This brings us to the issue of translation in its most specific and widest sense. Taha Ali's poetry, full of imagery and direct exposition, is easy to translate. His language lacks innuendo and double entendres, and since it is written in free verse, the translator need not have a guilty conscience about losing the specific musicality of the original. Darwish's poetry on the other hand presents a greater challenge; it is extremely difficult to bring forth all the textual and aural allusions he makes in his poetry. For example, in the poem "Al-Qurban" ("Blood Offering") mentioned in the Darwish chapter, Darwish uses the rhyming end-words from "Surat Maryam," the Maryam chapter in the Quran which tells the story of the miraculous conception and birth of Christ. The use of these rhyming end-words provides a Quranic musical allusion that most of his Arabic readers and listeners easily recognize. Juxtaposing the martyr with Christ's crucifixion, Darwish blends Islamic scripture with Christian theology, a complex and daring maneuver that rests on the use of these rhyming end words. One need not worry about similarly complicated matters in Taha Ali's work. His poems do have their own power, but it is a power that does not defy translation.

As to what to choose among a poet's work and what gets to be translated, the process is irregular to say the least. I have been asked several times how I chose my selections of a poet's work and why I had chosen a given poet in the first place, and I never felt that I gave a satisfactory answer. I usually answer that my choices depended on my taste and on what I come up with in the translation. I also say that I always seek the

poet's approval of my selections of her or his work. In the case of Saadi Youssef, who is the most important poet that I have translated so far, I specifically consulted with two well-known Arabic poetry specialists and both found my choices representative of the poet's work.

But that is no consolation either, as it could be argued that the poet, the scholars and myself have, like Tagore once did, a notion of what "the West" wants—and that could also be misguided. One obvious advantage that the scholars, the poet, and I may have regarding the metropolitan audience is that we are members of it, capable of seeing it from within its poetic traditions and esthetic inclinations. I should also point out that metropolitan audiences are *not* monolithic as they were not in Tagore's time where interest in his work and persona lasted longer in the rest of Europe than it did in England and America. Furthermore, metropolitan audiences and readerships tend to prefer their own resident poet-strangers. Mahmoud Darwish who once lived in France, and the Syrian poet Adonis who lives there now, have literary agents in Paris and their works are more available in French than they are in English. Similarly, Joseph Brodsky and Czesław Miłosz, who came to the U.S during the Cold War and who lived in the U.S. and wrote in their native language were more readily available in English during that period than they were even in their native languages. In the Soviet Bloc Nazim Hikmet, the most important Turkish poet of the twentieth century, became well known shortly after World War II; his first translation into English appeared in the U.S. in the 1980s. This is to say that exiled writers can become localized; they can become more important in the metropolis than they are in their native countries and languages. Their authenticity as

representatives of their nations, regions, or languages depends on their presence in the metropolis and their statuses as exiles rather than being resident natives.

Furthermore, the agents involved in the process of translation respond and act according to the contingencies in which the cultural exchange takes place. My friend and former teacher the poet Willis Barnstone tells the story of how his translation of Mao Zedong's poetry languished at a major publishing house in New York for nine months before they called him asking if he would translate Chairman Mao. The book came out eight days after he reminded them that they already had the manuscript. This of course happened in 1973 at the heels of the famous episode of ping-pong diplomacy. Mao, the poet, was not the first author of communist lineage to benefit from translation in this manner. Certainly, Brodsky's emergence and subsequent career were affected positively by Cold War politics. For writers from Muslim countries in the post-Cold War world, the words "fatwa" and "translation" have become a natural pairing. When Muslim fundamentalists in Bangladesh issued a fatwa against the Bangladeshi poet Taslima Nasrin her profile rose dramatically in a manner reminiscent to the Rushdie affair. In Egypt for example, and elsewhere in the Arab world, there is such cynicism regarding any erotic or religiously offensive work that their authors are often accused of being opportunists seeking to have a fatwa issued against them so that they will be translated into Western languages. The case of Salwa Naimi's recent novel *Burhān al-ʿasal* (*Honey's Irrefutable Proof*, 2007) is a case in point (see Jross 2006, and "Man'a" 2008), where not long after the publication of her book she was accused of writing for the purpose of translation—in other words, of writing a book that would be banned by Arabic censors and that would immediately be picked up by Western publishers, which is where

the real money comes from. In the meantime, Nasrin continues to write and to struggle with religious censorship in India where she lives in exile. But interest in her work has decreased since the initial fatwa-driven excitement. The point I'm trying to make here is that such interest is not merely marketing gimmickry, but that such gimmickry does exploit a significant component of the nature of the dynamics of cultural exchange between the metropolis and the peripheries.

#### F. TRANSLATION AND THE DIASPORIC COMMUNITY

Increasingly translation is playing a more important role in the diasporic poet's writing process and in the lives and experiences of diasporic communities. The question here is who needs translation to assist his or her position in the metropolis and how translation can enable them. The Arab communities in the U.S. who invited Mudhaffar al-Nawwab either did not think they needed to share their cultural heritage or that he was *not* what they wish to have translated. In other words, in the same way that the metropolis decides to highlight certain figures from given cultures, diasporic representatives of these cultures also have a say, even if in a negative manner, in what gets translated. Al-Nawwab is a fiery poet, whose views are critical of Arab regimes and U.S. policies in the region. His poetry, reminiscent of Darwish's early work, utilizes simple language but has strong musical registers and includes many allusions to current and ancient Arab history, elements that make his poetry difficult to translate. His importance to his Arabic audience here in the U.S. is in remaining beyond translation.

On the other hand, Arab American literary activists have developed strong links with translation. The late Edward Said was actively involved in promoting the translation of Arabic novels to English. Said often recalled an experience with his publisher, who had asked him to prepare a list of Third World authors whose works might be translated. The publisher accepted many of the writers he recommended, Said said. But when Said asked why Egyptian writer Naguib Mahfouz was excluded, he was told that Mahfouz's "works are in Arabic and Arabic is a controversial language" (Gabriel 2002). Lending his name and prestige to various translation projects over the last three decades, Said wrote several prefaces and blurbs for works of Arab literature in translation. Also, the recent vigor to translate Darwish has been led by Arab American poets and translators. The few books of Adonis's poetry in translation have all been the work of Arab American scholars.

There is clearly a functional aspect to all of this. The diasporic Arab community, which is beset by misrepresentation of its cultural heritage and labeled as made up of religious fanatics and terrorists, is keen on showing the modernized and secular facets of its society, among which contemporary literature stands as a major achievement. Their interest in the arts coincides with Darwish's initiative in Palestine to promote esthetics as a means of generating international identification with the Palestinians.

#### G. TRANSLATION AND THE POET STRANGER

As to what the poet-stranger gets in return for his investment in his native literature and its promotion in a metropolitan setting, the case of Shahid Ali proves quite instructive

again. Along with his promotion of the ghazal, Shahid Ali, also translated and edited *The Rebels Silhouette* (1991), a volume of selected poems by Faiz Ahmad Faiz (1911-1984), the most celebrated modern poet of the Urdu language. Shahid Ali, it should be noted, had known Faiz personally since his childhood, and used to hear his parents recite Faiz's poetry while a youngster. He came to the U.S. with a healthy respect for both Faiz and the ghazal, but started off writing in American free verse. In the late 1970's and early 1980s Shahid Ali was perhaps the only poet of an Urdu-language background writing in the U.S. With his verse drawing on his eclectic knowledge of Anglo-American prosody, Shahid Ali was virtually on his own, his poetry not part of any discernable tradition. In this case, he was perhaps a typical twentieth century poet as Edward Said had argued.

Said notes that writers in the West, beginning with the late nineteenth century, have had to become autodidacts, each "gathering or making up the knowledge one needs in the course of creating." (*Beginnings* 8) This had become the case "because the past [began to] appear less useful" (8) to the modern writer. This same past—by that I mean the Western canon— would also invariably seem useless for the poet-stranger who is trying to enter the metropolitan literary culture in its present incarnation not its past. Like him, but for different reasons, the writers of his generation in the metropolis also cannot find a place for themselves in their literature or in any cultural "continuity that formerly stretched forward and backward in time" (9). The poet-stranger may not have a choice to accept or refuse such continuity, as he may find it impossible to feel as part of a past alien to him and where he cannot see himself reflected.

Nonetheless, the poet-stranger, also like writers of his generation, still needs texts for which his own work would fit in "by adjacency, not sequentially or dynastically"

(10). This is where the exiled/diasporic writer's native tradition can come to his aid. Transported to his new surroundings, his tradition will not bear on him with its weight of precedence, and will not fill him with a sense of belatedness. In this regard, translation can enable the diasporic poet by granting him the ability to actually compose texts that can be read alongside his own. Translating one's native literary inheritance, in its specific and wide senses, saves the poet-stranger "from his contemporaries" (Rexroth 1959), from sounding like them and from feeling compelled to address the subject matter they do, or from having to engage in their formal projects. Translation offers the poet-stranger his own esthetic referential plane, or at least a wider plane than his contemporaries in the metropolis have.

Translation can also offer the diasporic poet his language, and help him create a language inflected with that of his national origin. Similar to Walcott's adoption of Shabine, who imbued Walcott's verse with a regional vigor, the flavor of translation in Shahid Ali's case allowed him a claim on a variety of English that only he could write in dramatically and believably. Let's just take a look at two passages from Shahid Ali's poetry and how he moved toward an English flavored with translation (and perhaps with his translations of Faiz). Here are some lines from the poem "Postcard from Kashmir" which appeared in *The Half-Inch Himalayas* (1987):

Kashmir shrinks into my mailbox,  
my home a neat four by six inches.  
I always loved neatness. Now I hold  
the half-inch Himalayas in my hand.

And here are lines from the aforementioned "Ghazal I" first published in 1997:

Don't weep, we'll drown out the Calls to Prayer, O Saqi—  
I'll raise my glass before wine is defiled by exiles.



Was—after the last sky—this the fashion of fire:  
Autumn's mist pressed to ashes styled by exiles?

The difference in the two passages is discernable in the syntax, tone, and diction. The first passage is sentence-driven, composed of a basic structure of subject-verb-object. Its dialogue is a hushed one between poet and reader. In the second passage the sentences are divided among a congregation of subjects. First, the Saqi (the wine server) is addressed, then the utterance becomes a statement in first-person plural, then it returns to first person singular. The second sentence in the second passage is a question with two major interruptions. The utterances in both couplets of the ghazal are dramatic and full of gestures; and the language with its archaic O and commanding authority sounds as if it is being shouted from a stage.

Most importantly, while the first passage addresses the experience of exile, the second sends the poet home and places him, despite translation, deeply inside his tradition and its poetics. Furthermore, the language of the second passage is reminiscent of Edward FitzGerald's translation of Omar al-Khayyam's *Rubaiyat*. Shahid Ali in mimicking this linguistic register also makes it his own. Not only is Shahid Ali, the diasporic poet, translating his heritage, he is claiming outright the colonizer's reproductions of his tradition's gifts as he had previously claimed the term "darkie" and as he had claimed the ghazal.

#### H. HOMAGE TO CELAN: THE TRUTH IN PERFORMANCE

The poet and Holocaust survivor Paul Celan once said, "Only in one's mother tongue can one express one's own truth. In a foreign language the poet lies" (quoted in Kligerman

108 2007). Celan was raised speaking Romanian and Yiddish as well as German. Like Kafka, he was a member of what Deleuze and Guattari call a deterritorialized community. Since Celan also wrote some poems in Romanian, it is hard to be certain as to which language was foreign to him. Celan also spoke French and knew it very well, perhaps from before he moved to Paris and became an exile there. His comment about the poet lying comes as an answer to a question regarding his relationship to French and why he did not write in that language since he knew it so well and since he was a leading translator of French poetry to German. Though Celan considered French a foreign language to him, it may have aided his German and flexed his voice in his writing in that language, in the same way that Shahid Ali's Urdu had a palimpsestic echo under his English. Surely, Celan's Romanian also added another linguistic register to his poetry.

The point is that Celan's choice of German was not inevitable, and may have been strategic, not in practical but in psychological terms. "In employing [German] the language of his mother, Celan chooses to enter in conversation with those responsible for the death of his parents and the destruction of his home" argues Kligerman (108). Celan's choice of language is perhaps the opposite of a mask, a metapoetic device meant to mop up any traces of irony or detachment that the German reader may develop while hearing or reading him. A living indictment even when not speaking in those terms, Celan's poetry thus bears elements of performance, in this case the heartbreaking performance of grief and mourning.

This brings me to the adjustment I'd like to make here to Celan's declaration in which I find a grain of truth. I would like to adjust his hunch to our conversation here about postcolonial and diasporic poets by restating his dictum in this way: "In a foreign

setting, the poet-stranger performs." In the introduction to this study I had mentioned the three Iroquois kings who arrived in London in 1709 and who dressed up in clothes they chose from the Queen Theatre's wardrobe. They were there on display and decided to embellish their image, perhaps to heighten their authenticity, with an instinctive understanding that all authenticities are to some degree "planned" (Trinh 98). A version of that understanding, as I have tried to demonstrate, operated in Tagore's self-presentation as an Eastern sage in the early twentieth century, in Walcott's search for the appropriate mask, and finally in Darwish's "lover of the land" when he was bringing his community together in the early 1960's, and later still as a chronicler of the Palestinians' deep present and a re-inscriber of their legends and deep past.

The critic Rajeev Patke in his book *Postcolonial Poetry in English*, looks forward to a time when the term " 'postcolonial' will cease to function as a term of relevance, a time when people will look at their colonial past as to a ground on which lives and literatures can be built, without feeling disadvantaged, disempowered, overshadowed, or constrained" (Patke 238). Without naming any particular regions of the world, I am certain that some people in postcolonial territories are already experiencing this sense of empowerment, if only by declaring, as Walcott had advocated previously, that they need some form of temporary amnesia about the colonial experience in order to go on with their futures—a impulse we detect in Darwish's later period as well. But even in Palestine, and in Australia and the Americas, where settler colonies had become powerful nations, and where natives have been dispossessed for many generations, it is going to be quite a long time before Patke's utopian vision comes true.

I am also aware that we live in a world where the most powerful politician, Barack Obama, is the child of a postcolonial parent and was raised in postcolonial settings, Hawaii and Indonesia. I am equally aware that this stranger, who was often described as a poet, has to lead a neocolonial economic and military power engaged in war and repressive policies all over the globe. With the aid of the three major poets discussed in this study (Tagore, Walcott, and Darwish) we have been experiencing a corrosion of older hegemonic discourses, and I dare say, of the forces that have made the majority of the world's population feel "disadvantaged, disempowered, overshadowed, or constrained." But we are also seeing the development of more nuanced discourses and strategies that promote the continuation of such injustices. Through all these past struggles and in the current situations I have outlined, poets have been highly involved in opposing and undermining inequities and in trying to level the playing the fields of cultural exchange. Whether it be through a spiritual, universalist appeal, direct confrontation, evasion, appropriation, infiltration, impetuosity, the re-writing of history and myth, layered mimicry, or sophisticated claims to authenticity, postcolonial and diasporic poets, whom I've also called poet-strangers, have offered alternate visions of co-existence that respect our diversity and that affirm a shared, and indivisible humanity.

APPENDIX 1 (from Edward Said's Introduction to *The Last Sky*)

For all the writing about them, Palestinians remain virtually unknown. Especially in the West, particularly in the United States, Palestinians are not so much a people as a pretext for a call of arms. It is certainly correct to say that we are less known than our co-claimants to Palestine, the Jews. Since 1948... Many of us have been killed, many permanently scarred and silenced, without a trace. And the images used to represent us only diminish our reality further. To most people Palestinians are visible principally as fighters, terrorists, and lawless pariahs...

In the meantime, the enormous changes in the situation of the Palestinians continue to complicate our reality, almost daily. In one season some of us are massacred at Sabra and Shatila by Lebanese Maronite militiamen acting under Israeli direction...; in another season it is the Amal Shi'ite militia, probably acting under the orders of Syria... and commits many of the same atrocities...

Among Palestinians today, an increasingly urgent subject of discussion arises whenever we gather: the way in which we are treated, whether by Arab friends or Israeli enemies... Even if it is true that Israel has relentlessly pursued us both inside and outside the Arab world, fighting Palestinian nationalism and even the idea of Palestine without quarter since 1948, our experiences in the Arab states are *Arab* experiences after all, and they stand on their own. Wherever we are, we are dogged by our past, but we have also created new realities and relationships that neither fit simple categories nor conform to previously encountered forms.

The one thing that none of us can forget is that violence has been an

extraordinarily important aspect of our lives. Whether it has been the violence of our uprooting and the destruction of our society in 1948, the violence visited on us by our enemies, the violence we have visited on others, or, most horribly, the violence we have wreaked on each other—these dimensions of the Palestinian experience have brought us a great deal of attention, and have exacerbated our self-awareness as a community set apart from others. While many of us would say immediately that we have suffered more violence than we have caused others to suffer, that everything we have done has been in self-defense, and that there is an implicit agreement among Arab, Israeli, and US governments to do away with us as a political force, most of us would concede also that the dynamics of Palestinian life, at least since 1967, have developed a particular logic that does not admit of so simple and reductive an apologetic. Yes, we have been victimized and our identity has been threatened, but no, we have been neither passive nor innocent. The passions provoked by us, in other words, testify to a considerable independent power of our own, which it would be bad faith to end.

Ours has been too various and scattered a fate... but there is no doubt that we do in fact form a community, if at heart a community built on suffering and exile. How, though, to convey it?...We are at once too recently formed and too variously experienced to be a population of articulate exiles with a completely systematic vision, and too voluble and troublemaking to be simply a pathetic mass of refugees.

Since the main features of our present existence are dispossession, dispersion, and yet also a kind of power incommensurate with our stateless exile, I believe the essentially unconventional hybrid and fragmentary forms of expression should be used to represent us. What I have quite consciously designed [in *After the Last Sky*], then, is an alternative

mode of expression to the one usually encountered in the media, in works of social science, in popular fiction. It is a personal rendering of the Palestinians as a dispersed national community—acting, acted upon, proud, tender, miserable, funny, indomitable, ironic, paranoid, defensive, assertive, attractive, compelling...

Our intention was to show Palestinians through Palestinian eyes without minimizing the extent to which even to themselves they feel different, or 'other.' Many Palestinian friends who saw Jean Mohr's pictures thought that he saw us as no one else has. But we also felt that he saw us as we would have seen ourselves—at once inside and outside our world.

The same double vision informs my text. As I wrote, I found myself switching pronouns, from 'we' to 'you' to 'they', to designate Palestinians. As abrupt as these shifts are, I feel they reproduce the way 'we' experience ourselves, the way 'you' sense that others look at you, the way, in your solitude, you feel the distance between where 'you' are and where 'they' are.

The multifaceted vision is essential to any representation of us. Stateless, dispossessed, de-centered, we are frequently unable either to speak the 'truth' of our experience or to make it heard. We do not usually control the images that represent us; we have been confined to spaces designed to reduce or stunt us; and we have often been distorted by pressures and powers that have been too much for us.

An additional problem is that our language, Arabic, is unfamiliar in the West and belongs to a tradition and civilization usually both misunderstood and maligned. Everything we write about ourselves, there, is an interpretive translation—of our language, our experience, our sense of self and others.

But it is only through a recognition of these complexities that we can approach the elusive nature of identity, or integrate public and private realities, or apprehend that extraordinary variety of individuals and activities called Palestinian. (Said 5-7)



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