



MAHMUD DARWISH'S ALLEGORICAL CRITIQUE OF OSLO

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The Palestinian poet Mahmud Darwish occupies a unique space in Arab culture and in the collective memory of Arabs as "the national poet of Palestine." This article provides a reading of one of Darwish's poems, "A Non-Linguistic Dispute with Imru' al-Qays," which was written after the signing of the 1993 Oslo Accord. The poem is read as an allegorical critique of Oslo and, at the same time, a retrospective contemplation of Darwish's own role in Palestinian politics, written in a style that displays Darwish's exceptional poetical skill and his masterly use of Arabo-Islamic history and mythology.

IT IS DIFFICULT TO OVERESTIMATE the importance of poetry in Arab culture, past and present: as a well-known adage has it, poetry is the archive (*diwan*) of the Arabs. While other forms and media of cultural expression have made serious incursions into the Arab world in the last century, poetry continues to be its most powerful and popular literary medium.

The Palestinian poet Mahmud Darwish (b. 1942) has already secured his place in that archive and in the collective memory of Arabs. His readings attract thousands and literally fill sports stadiums, his books sell millions, his poems are widely memorized, and a number of them have been set to music and have become popular songs. The appearance of a single Darwish poem is a cultural, and at times a political, event, not just in the Arab world, but in Israel as well. One need only remember the controversy over his famous poem "Abiruna fi Kalamin 'Abir" (Transients in transient words). Written in April 1988, the poem was (mis)translated into Hebrew by the Israeli daily *Ma'ariv*. Its fierce and defiant tone and historical references¹ generated a heated debate in Israeli newspapers and in the Knesset, where it was condemned by Yitzhak Shamir, among others, as damning evidence of the Palestinians' unwillingness to live in peace with Israelis. More recently, in February 2000, Israeli hard-liners tried to exploit the attempt by then-education minister Yossi Sarid to include some of Darwish's poetry in the new multicultural Israeli curriculum in order to topple the Barak government, forcing the prime minister himself to intervene to declare that "Israel was not yet ready for Mr. Darwish's poetry to be taught in the schools."²

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A cultural and political icon in the full sense of the term, the voice of the Palestinians, Darwish is also the author of their 1988 Declaration of Independence.³ The Syrian critic Subhi Hadidi likens his cultural and political influence, especially in the last two decades, to that of the great poets of ancient times,

when the poet was the nation's prophet and a spokesperson for its being, a fortuneteller who read its past and future fortunes . . . both in times of victory as well as in defeat. In the cultures of nations, there was always that exceptional moment when a major visionary task was placed upon the shoulders of one poet to capture the collective feelings of a nation and transform poetry into national and cultural power.⁴

What further distinguishes Darwish's oeuvre, however, is that he has been able to fulfill this arduous role without being a populist.⁵ He is perhaps unique in enjoying equal popularity and acclaim among the critics, the intellectuals, and the masses. Moreover, instead of being a hostage to the demands and dictates of his persona as the Palestinian national poet par excellence, he has continuously taken his audience by surprise as he continues to rebel against his own style and reinvent his poetic discourse. In Edward Said's words, "[I]n Darwish, the personal and the political are always in an uneasy relationship . . . [and there is] a harassing amalgam of poetry and collective memory, each pressing on the other."⁶

Darwish's work reads like a poetic panorama of Palestine and of the plight of Palestinians since 1948. One of his early and very famous poems, *Bitaqat Huwiyya* (Identity card), with its famous refrain, "Sajjil ana 'arabi" (Register! I am an Arab), was written in 1964, when Darwish was still living in Israel. It crystallized Palestinian resistance against Israeli erasure of their identity and history. Some of his other poems include *Abmad al-Za'tar* (1977), on the 1976 siege and massacre of Tal al-Za'tar in Lebanon, and *Madib al-Zill al-'Ali* (Praise of the lofty shadow) and *Qasidat Beirut* (The Beirut poem), both written in 1983, during and after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, the siege of Beirut, and the exodus of the Palestinian resistance from Lebanon. In the Beirut stage, Darwish moved toward long and epic poems. His *Abada 'Ashara Kawkaban* (Eleven planets), published in 1992, was poignantly prophetic of Oslo. In it, Darwish uses the Arabs' defeat and exodus from Spain in 1492 as a prism through which to accentuate the Palestinian predicament in 1992 and the fate they were about to face.

THE POET-KING

Given Darwish's status as the undisputed national poet, the "poet of the resistance," it is perhaps not surprising that he would choose to express

whatever reservations he may have had about the PLO's new directions allegorically through drawing on elements from the Arabo-Islamic past. Perhaps the most privileged vehicle of these reservations was his use of the sixth-century poet-king Imru' al-Qays, a figure that, more than any other in the collective Arab memory, encapsulates the tension between the political and the poetic that has haunted Darwish's person and persona.

Imru' al-Qays appears in several poems in Darwish's 1995 collection, entitled *Limadba Tarakta al-Hisana Wabidan* (Why have you left the horse alone),⁷ as well as in his last published poem. It is worth noting that *Limadba Tarakta al-Hisana Wabidan* marks a turning point in Darwish's trajectory. While Darwish had broached the personal in earlier poems, this was the first collection totally concerned with biographical themes and in which the personal takes precedence over the collective.⁸ It is here that the

Here, Darwish's work is marked by decades of exile and devastating political defeats on the one hand, and the demands of being the spirit of a nation and the voice of its people on the other.

perennial struggle between the personal and the political, implicit in earlier works, comes to the fore, marked by decades of exile and devastating political defeats on the one hand, and the demands of being the spirit of a nation and the voice of its people on the other.

What follows is an analysis of the longest and most telling of Darwish's poems involving Imru' al-Qays, "Khilaf Ghayr Lughawi ma' Imru' al-Qays" (A non-linguistic dispute with Imru' al-Qays). The poem is important not only for illustrating Darwish's mastery of his craft but especially, I suggest, because it can be read as an enactment of Darwish's resignation from the PLO following his refusal to support the Oslo Declaration of Principles signed by Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin and PLO Chairman Yasir Arafat and to join the Palestinian Authority (PA).⁹ The poem is aptly placed in the sixth and last section of the *Limadba Tarakta al-Hisana Wabidan* collection. This section is entitled "Aghlaqu al-Mashhad" (They folded the scene); the very same sentence is the opening line of the poem and three of its four sections.

With Imru' al-Qays, we are, at once, taken back to the pre-Islamic past of sixth-century Arabia.¹⁰ In the collective memory of Arabs, Imru' al-Qays is the poet par excellence, author of one of the inimitable *Mu'allaqat* (Odes), whose opening line is memorized by every literate Arab.¹¹ He is "the ancestral voice of the Arabic poetic tradition, his verses, so to speak, are the 'touchstones' of that poetry: he was a prestigious and formidable rival for later poets, a source of inspiration and of influence."¹² In the Arabic poetic tradition, narratives are woven around and about famous poems and poets (*akhbar*), and all the extant narratives about Imru' al-Qays speak of a tragic figure. Imru' al-Qays's father, the last king of the tribe of Kinda, was killed by the Banu Asad tribe, and Imru' al-Qays vowed to avenge his father's death and repossess his kingdom. He is said to have roamed the Arabian peninsula seeking refuge and assistance from various tribal lords and brigands, but

never attained his goal—hence one of his sobriquets *al-Malik al-Dillil* (the vagabond, or wandering, king). In the end, he was compelled to seek the aid of the Byzantine emperor Justinian (called Qaysar [Caesar] in the Arabic sources) in Constantinople. Accompanied by another poet, 'Amr b. Qami'a¹³ [d. 538], he traveled to the court, where he was received like royalty and was given an army and a position of rank. On his way back from Constantinople, Imru' al-Qays received a letter from Caesar along with an embroidered robe permeated with gold and poison. After donning the robe, the poison sloughed off his skin—hence his other sobriquet, *Dhu al-Qurub* (The one with the wounds/ulcers)¹⁴—and he died.

The trip to Constantinople is alluded to in sections of one of his famous poems, a *ra'iyya* (poem rhyming in *ra*). It is important to return to this poem as many parallels with Darwish's poem as well as its context will emerge.¹⁵ In line 33, the narrator of the poem boasts that he could have defeated his enemies but that he intentionally sought the Byzantines' help in order to slander the Arabs who did not come to his aid. In the more famous and often-quoted lines 34 and 35, the narrator of the poem addresses his companion, 'Amr b. Qami'a, who is said to have wept when he realized that the two were on their way to Caesar:

34. *Baka sabibi lamma ra'a 'd-darba dunabu*
Wa-ayqana anna labiqani bi-Qaysara

My companion wept when he saw the path before him
And realized we were seeking Caesar

35. *Fa-qultu labu la tabki 'aynuka innama*
Nubawilu mulkan aw namuta fa-nu'dhara

I said: weep not, for we are trying to regain a kingdom
Or else, we die and are forgiven

36. *Wa-inni za'imun in raja'tu mumallakan*
Bi-sayrin tara minbu 'l-furaniqa azwara

And I shall surely return a king
From a trip so arduous that my guide will stagger

Lines 42 to 49 are about the vicissitudes of life and friends and how the narrator was betrayed time and again by those he deemed trustworthy (note the specific place-names):

43. *Laqad ankaratni Ba'labakku wa-abluha*
Wa-labnu Jurayja fi qura Himsa ankara

Baalbek and its people have forsaken me
And so has Ibn Jurayj in the village of Hims

48. *Idba qultu badba sabibun qad raditubu*
Wa-qarrat bibi 'l-aynani buddiltu akbara

If I say this is a companion with whom I am pleased
Time proves me wrong and I am forced to look for
another

49. *Kadhalika jaddi ma usabibu sahiban
min an-nasi illa kbanani wa-tagbayyara*
Such has been my lot, whomever I befriend
Amongst people, betrays me and changes

What we have in the intertext is an ancient Arab king/poet in search of his lost kingdom, who, after being let down by his own people and allies in a time of utter fragmentation, resorts to a superpower in its metropolis in the hopes of attaining political support. The royal rituals, respect, and rewards he is accorded are no more than preparations for his imminent death. Suzanne Stetkevych comments on the symbolism of donning the robe as follows:

The abandonment of ancestral Kindite coats of arms for Caesar's royal robe interwoven with gold and poison succinctly symbolizes Imru' al-Qays's loss of patrimony. . . . [A]bandoning the Arab homeland for the land of the Byzantines, Imru' al-Qays is in symbolic as well as political terms naked and defenseless. Not only is he without the armor itself, he is stripped of all that the ancestral armor represents: his royal lineage and his inherited identity, the tribal allegiances that attend his inherited position, "Arabness" itself.¹⁶

THE DISPUTE

Having acquainted ourselves with Imru' al-Qays, we are now better prepared to understand what potential function he could fulfill in Darwish's text:

A Non-Linguistic Dispute with Imru' al-Qays

They folded the scene
Allowing us space to go back to the others
Diminished.

Smiling, we entered the movie screen,
As we are supposed to be on a movie screen.
We improvised a speech prepared for us beforehand,
Regretting the martyr's last option.
We took a bow, surrendered our names
To pedestrians walking on either side

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And returned to our tomorrow
Diminished.

They folded the scene.
They triumphed.
They summed up our yesterday from beginning to end.
They forgave the victim her mistakes
When she apologized
For words that were about to cross her mind.
They changed time's bell
And triumphed.

When they took us to the penultimate scene
We looked back.
White smoke billowed from time
Looking out over the gardens that came after us.
Peacocks were spreading the spectrum's fan
Across Caesar's letters to those who repent
Words shredded to tatters
Such as descriptions of freedom that can't
Find its bread,
Descriptions of bread without freedom's salt
Or praise for dove flocks fleeing the marketplace.
Caesar's letter was champagne for white smoke
Billowing from the balcony of time.

They folded the scene.
They triumphed.
They photographed what they wanted in our skies
Star by star.
They photographed what they wanted from our days
Cloud by cloud.
They changed time's bell
And triumphed.

We looked back at our part in the technicolor movie.
We couldn't find a star for the north.
We couldn't find a tent for the south.
We couldn't recognize our voice at all.
It was not our blood that spoke on the microphone
That day.
When we depended on a language
That dispersed its heart as it veered from its path
No one said to Imru' al-Qays:
"What have you done to us and to yourself?
Take Caesar's Path
Through the black smoke that billows from time.

Take Caesar's path
 Alone, alone, alone
 And leave your language here for us!"¹⁷

Knowing the politico-cultural position Darwish occupies in the Palestinian context, the reader is instantly tempted to read the text as an allegory of the White House signing of the Oslo Declaration of Principles. The scene is being shut and folded by the unnamed triumphant others ("they triumphed" [repeated four times]) who seem to be in control of how the past, as well as the present, are to be represented ("They summed up our yesterday . . . They changed time's bell" [twice]; "They photographed what they wanted" [twice]). They prepare beforehand the improvised speech of the victim and forgive her for the thoughts that have yet to cross her mind. They are also in total control of the rhythm of the ceremony. Beside the victors and the victims, the third party in the equation is none other than Caesar (the omnipotent honest broker?) who is blessing the ceremony with his presence and his letter to those who have repented (mentioned twice in the third section—remember Caesar's letter and the robe he sent to Imru' al-Qays).

What potential meanings are produced by Darwish's reopening the scene of Imru' al-Qays's trip to Constantinople? The first possible reading is of the scene as allegorical of the White House signing of the Oslo agreement in 1993. If it is a nonlinguistic dispute with Imru' al-Qays, then it is not Imru' al-Qays the poet, but rather Imru' al-Qays the wandering king who is faulted. Here, he could be read as the failed politician who chooses a tragic path that spells his own death and that of his people.¹⁸ The narrator of the poem asks rhetorically why no one protested the decision to take this particular path ("What have you done to us and to yourself?"). The question itself, however, and the poem, are already performing that protest. It is important to note that the last few lines of the poem signal a shift from the past tense to the imperative ("Take" [twice] and "and leave"; "Take Caesar's path / Alone, alone, alone / And leave your language here for us"). The "dispute" with Imru' al-Qays comes directly after the line where veering from the "path" is mentioned:

It was not our blood that spoke on the microphone
 That day.
 When we depended on a language
 That dispersed its heart as it veered from its path

Unlike Imru' al-Qays' companion, 'Amr b. Qami'a, who agreed to accompany Imru' al-Qays on his journey to Caesar's court, Darwish refused to join Arafat on his path to the White House and resigned from the PLO's Executive Committee in protest.¹⁹ In the text itself, instead of weeping at the sight of the path leading to Caesar as 'Amr b. Qami'a did, the narrator parts company with Imru' al-Qays and demands that he go alone (repeated thrice) after

leaving his language behind. The demand to leave language is a demand to end the claim of legitimate political representation and for speaking in the name of the people.

A second possible reading, which does not necessarily negate the first, but which can be seen as complementary and interrelated, is to take Imru' al-Qays, the poet-king, as the locus where the poetic and the political are joined. Thus, Darwish, himself a figure in whom the two are manifested, could be performing his resignation and bidding farewell to his own *institutional* past involvement. It is worth mentioning that Darwish himself used to write many of Arafat's speeches and was very close to him.²⁰ In another poem in the same collection, the narrator says, "I see myself / Splitting into two: / I / And my name."²¹

This split caused by taking Caesar's path leads us to a third possible reading which, in itself, encompasses and complements the previous two. It is the potential split or gap opened by representation, which is what the text is ultimately about (representing the past, one's people, and oneself). Let us return to the text with this in mind.

In the first section, the scene is being shut by the others and the only space left for "us" is to return "diminished." The group speaking in the first-person plural is smiling not out of joy, but because this is dictated by the role ("As we are supposed to be"). The improvised speech (spontaneity and free representation of one's thoughts and feelings) is already prepared by the "others." The usurpation of the ability to self-represent and the usurpation of agency culminates in surrendering the names (the signifier chosen to represent one's identity). In the second section, the idea of self-representation (the words that were about to cross the victim's mind) is a sin that will be forgiven. Changing time's bell, as well, indicates how the relationship to time and history is to be represented and punctuated by the victors. In the third section, "they," again, are guiding (or rather goading) "us" through the various chapters of the movie. The issue of representation is also at the heart of the third section: "they" are photographing and choosing which particular stars and clouds are to represent "our" skies and days. In the final section, the confiscation and/or loss of the ability to self-represent is complete ("We couldn't recognize our voice at all. / It was not our blood that spoke on the microphone that day"). In the next two lines, we reach the crux of the tragic situation when the narrator gives the reason behind the loss ("When we depended on a language / That dispersed its heart as it veered from its path"). Thus, the demand of Imru' al-Qays to leave his language behind for "us" is an act of resistance and an attempt at salvaging the ability to represent oneself in one's own language and not be represented according to the enemy's desires.

The scene in the text depicts history (and the signing of the Oslo Accord) being staged as a Hollywood production. The "victims" are being forced to surrender and assume a role written for them by their enemies, who are also dictating the terms of the future, as well as the past. A decisive chapter of

their history is coming to an abrupt end. The poem itself, however, is an attempt at altering history (trying to have it “unfold” as it is being “folded” by the others) or at least problematizing it by reopening previous scenes and recreating a myth that makes it possible to tolerate the present nightmarish reality. Darwish himself, in an interview, stresses this function of poetry as a prism through which reality can be processed: “in the end . . . poetry has one meaning, it creates a reality, a linguistic reality which human beings need in order to survive their own reality and dilemmas.”²²

Darwish problematizes the way dominant history will narrate this chapter of the conflict. To resist the closing of the scene, or at least to make it livable, he uses a double prism of sorts, one to view the nightmarish present through the mythic past and the other simultaneously to reinscribe the past through the present. In another poem in this same collection, Darwish mentions Imru’ al-Qays and speaks of the “contemporary past” that passes under the poem: “Imru’ al-Qays, sad over a tomorrow thrown at Caesar’s gates. . . the

contemporary past passes.”²³ This, after all, is part and parcel of Darwish’s project. For, in his own words, “The strong can write official history, but on the literary level, the weak, too, can write their own history.”²⁴

The poem discussed in this paper is, to my mind, the most eloquent crystallization of the “Oslo moment” and its implications for Palestine’s future. It is also one of the last poems in which Darwish speaks

(explicitly, at least) in the plural. In Darwish’s last collection *Sarir al-Ghariba*²⁵ (The stranger’s bed), published in 1999, his tone is far more individualistic and private, and he is haunted by the fragmentation of subjectivity and otherness. The fact that all of the poems in this later collection were “love poems” compelled a fellow Palestinian writer and a close friend of Darwish’s to accuse him of “abandoning his people and retreating to selfish concerns.”²⁶ This is yet another testament to Darwish’s significance. While the new collection represents a definite break with his literary past, Darwish has never failed to seduce his readers and take them to new territory.

THE PATH (NOT) TAKEN

While the poem discussed here is clearly critical of Oslo and of its implications and prospects, Darwish’s position vis-à-vis the PA has been rather ambivalent. In 1995 Darwish left Paris for Amman and in 1996 he settled in Ramallah, where he runs the Karmil Cultural Organization and edits the literary quarterly, *al-Karmil*. He continues to issue political statements on the anniversary of the Nakba, reiterating the rights of all Palestinians to self-determination, resistance to occupation, and return to their homes,²⁷ and he, of course, supports the intifada, but he has not criticized the PA publicly for any of its policies and actions, and he cannot be considered an oppositional fig-

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ure. A more eloquent answer to questions about Darwish's stance appears in his latest poem, written while he was recovering from a second heart surgery in 1999. The half-conscious narrator addresses his name as he grapples with his identity and legacy:

O, my name . . .
 You will carry me and I will carry you
 The stranger is a brother to the stranger

 My language tires me
 As it says and *does not say*
 What the past is doing on the backs of horses
 To *Imru' al-Qays'* days
 Who is *torn* between Caesar and a rhyme?²⁸

Once again, the poignant figure of Imru' al-Qays, the wandering poet-king, returns and, with it, the aforementioned parallels and the tension between the political and the poetic that haunts Darwish. The narrator is drained by his language, which is wavering between saying and not saying. Imru' al-Qays is torn between the political (Caesar) and the poetic (rhyme). The second line in the excerpt above—"The stranger is a brother to the stranger"—is reminiscent of one of Imru' al-Qays' last lines before he died in exile without regaining his lost kingdom: "*kullu gharibin lil-gharibi nasibu*" (every stranger is a kin to the stranger).

Elsewhere in the same poem, we can perhaps read a poeticization of Darwish's present stance:

I am myself . . . and nothing else
I am not one of Rome's partisans
 Who guard the salt routes
 But I *grudgingly* pay a percentage
 Of my bread's salt
 And I say to History:
 Adorn your trucks with slaves and *servile kings*
 And pass through
Now, no one says:
*No!*²⁹

The narrator is not an active defender of the reigning power and its structures (Rome and its routes). However, he is neither outside its scope nor in explicit opposition to it. He grudgingly pays a price in order to survive within it. While he does not hop on history's trucks like the slaves and servile kings, he does not have the power to stand in its way or to change its course. He can only stand by and represent it. The ceremonies and rituals depicted in "A Non-Linguistic Dispute with Imru' al-Qays" have resulted in an all-en-

compassing power structure operated by servile kings and slaves for Rome's benefit and glory. Unlike the narrator in "A Non-Linguistic Dispute," who demanded that Imru' al-Qays leave his language and go alone on Caesar's path, the narrator of this poem has resigned himself to the status quo.

NOTES

1. Some of the poem's most memorable lines are "Die wherever you wish / But do not die among us / It is time for you to leave / . . . / Leave our land / Leave our land and sea / Leave our wheat, salt, and wounds / Leave everything and be gone." Darwish stressed later that he was referring to the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza and not to all of historic Palestine and that he was not calling for a mass eviction of all Israelis as some suggested. For the full text of the poem in English, see salam.org/culture/poem4.html.

2. See "Poetry of Arab Pain: Are Israeli Students Ready?" *New York Times*, 7 March 2000 and "Shu'ara' Filastiniyyun fi al-Kitab al-Madrasi al-'Isra'ili" (Palestinian poets in Israeli school books), *al-Hayat*, 29 March 2000.

3. See "The Rise of Mahmud Darwish" in Salma Khadra Jayyusi, ed., *Anthology of Modern Palestinian Literature*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), pp. 60–63. See also, Edward Said, "On Mahmud Darwish," *Grand Street* 48 (1993), pp. 112–15. For a chronology of Darwish's life and a list of his publications, see Mahmud Darwish, *The Adam of Two Edens: Poems*, ed. Munir Akash and Daniel Moore (Syracuse: Jusoor and Syracuse University Press, 2000), pp. 11–17.

4. Subhi Hadidi, "Madha Yafal al-'Ashiq Min Dun Manfa?" (What will the lover do without an exile?), in *Mahmud Darwish: al-Mukhtalif al-Haqiqi, Dirasat wa-Shahadat* (Mahmud Darwish: The truly different, studies and testimonies) (Amman: Dar al-Shuruq, 1999), pp. 47–73.

5. Said, "On Mahmud Darwish," p. 113. See also Hadidi, "Madha Yafal al-'Ashiq," pp. 49–50.

6. Said, "On Mahmud Darwish," pp. 113–15.

7. Mahmud Darwish, *Limadha Tarakta al-Hisana Wabidan* (Why have you left the horse alone) (London: Riyad al-Rayyis Books, 1995), pp. 155–58.

8. For more on the biographical nature and the intricate structure of the collection, see Fakhri Salih, "Limadha Tarakta al-Hisana Wahidan: 'An al-Lahza al-Filastiniyya al-Multabisa'" (Why have you left the horse alone: On the uncertain Palestinian moment), *Fusul* 15, no. 2 (1996), pp. 239–43. For Darwish's own comments on this collection, see *al-Mukhtalif al-Haqiqi*, p. 25, and the three-part interview in *al-Wasat*, nos. 191–193 (September–October 1995).

9. In a 1997 interview, Darwish retrospectively described his resignation as follows: "I read the Oslo accord before it was announced, and I had knowledge, early on, of what was taking place, but I did not believe that those negotiations were going to result in an agreement. Therefore, when it was signed, I presented a detailed resignation that included a political and an intellectual critique of Oslo on the premise that it was not a just accord. . . . [It was] an accord which did not provide the minimum level for the Palestinian to feel that he owns his identity, nor the geography of this identity. . . . All I saw in the agreement was an Israeli solution to Israeli problems and that the PLO had to perform its role in solving Israel's security problems. . . . Nevertheless, and despite this critical reading of the accord, I said that I could not accept it, nor would I be able to reject it, for that would be a historic gamble. My conscience cannot tolerate depriving the Palestinian people of the possibility of a solution. There was a struggle between my heart and my mind. . . . After three years, reality and experimentation have shown something more tragic and ironic." *al-Mukhtalif al-Haqiqi*, p. 351.

10. There is much disagreement and confusion as to the exact date of Imru' al-Qays's death. Most accounts put it between 540 and 565. See note 11.

11. See "Imru' al-Qays," *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature*, ed. Julie Scott

Meisami and Paul Starkey (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 1: 394–95; “Imru’ al-Qays B. Hudjr,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1958), 3: 1177–78. See also Rita ‘Awad, *Bunyat al-Qasida al-Jabiliyya: al-Sura al-Sbi’riyya Lada Imri’ al-Qays* (The structure of the Jahili *qasida*: Imru’ al-Qays’ poetic imagery) (Beirut: Dar al-Adab, 1992), pp. 149–65, “*Imru’ al-Qays: al-Sha’ir wa-Shi’rub*” (Imru’ al-Qays: The poet and his poetry); Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych, *The Mute Immortals Speak: Pre-Islamic Poetry and the Poetics of Ritual* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993), ch. 7, “Regicide and Retribution: The Mu’allaqa of Imru’ al-Qays,” pp. 241–86.

12. Julie Scott Meisami, “Imru’ al-Qays Praises the Prophet,” in *Tradition and Modernity in Arabic Literature*, ed. Issa J. Boullata and Terri DeYoung (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1997), pp. 223–43.

13. ‘Amr b. Qami’a is said to have died before finishing the trip and hence is called ‘Umar al-Da’i (The Lost ‘Umar).

14. Most scholars maintain that much of what we know about Imru’ al-Qays, especially his last days, is the stuff of myth. This makes Imru’ al-Qays, as a topos, most appealing for Darwish, as he has been focusing much more on mythological elements in his recent works. As for the veracity of Imru’ al-Qays’s trip to Constantinople and meeting Caesar, what concerns us most is that it has, for all intents and purposes, taken place in the realm of collective memory. For an attempt to sift out the fiction from Imru’ al-Qays’s biography, see Irfan Shahid’s meticulous article, “The Last Days of Imru’ al-Qays: Anatolia,” in Boullata and De-Young, *Tradition and Modernity*, pp. 223–43. For a very different take that seeks to “rid the mythical of the realistic,” see Sa’id al-Ghanimi, *al-Kanz wa’l-Ta’wil: Qira’at fi al-Hikaya al-Arabiyya* (The treasure and interpretation: Readings in

Arabic tales) (Beirut: al-Markaz al-Thaqafi al-‘Arabi, 1994), pp. 14–33.

15. *Diwan Imri’ al-Qays* (Cairo: Dar al-Ma’arif, 1958), pp. 56–71. I will cite here only the lines that are relevant to our reading. The translation is my own.

16. Stetkevych, *The Mute Immortals Speak*, pp. 248–49.

17. Darwish, *The Adam of Two Edens*, pp. 123–25. The translation is my own.

18. Leaving poetry aside, it is not unreasonable to see the parallels between Imru’ al-Qays and Arafat. The latter is also both a heroic and a tragic figure. (Edward Said has referred to him many a time as a tragic figure.)

19. Said, “On Mahmud Darwish,” p. 113. As Said notes, Darwish’s extremely harsh remarks to Arafat and the others were leaked to the press and published throughout Israel and the Arab world: “You are dead,” he effectively told them.

20. For more on his relationship with Arafat, see *al-Mukhtalif al-Haqiqi*, pp. 318–19. On his refusal to be minister of culture in the Palestinian Authority, see *ibid.*, p. 287; and Darwish, *The Adam of Two Edens*, p. 24.

21. Darwish, *Limadha Tarakta al-Hisana Wabidan*, p. 159. The topos is repeated in Darwish’s latest poem, where he writes, “What is the past doing with the days of Imri’ al-Qays who is torn between Caesar and a rhyme?” See Mahmud Darwish, *Jidariyya* (Mural) (Beirut: Riyad al-Rayyis, 2000), p. 72.

22. *Al-Mukhtalif al-Haqiqi*, p. 25.

23. Darwish, *Limadha Tarakta al-Hisana Wabidan*, pp. 48–49.

24. *Al-Mukhtalif al-Haqiqi*, p. 352.

25. Mahmud Darwish, *Sarir al-Ghariba* (The stranger’s bed) (Beirut: Riyad al-Rayyis, 1999).

26. Darwish, *The Adam of Two Edens*, p. 19.

27. See, for example, www.ahram.org.eg/weekly/2001/533/op1.htm.

28. Darwish, *Jidariyya*, pp. 71–72.

29. *Ibid.*, 75–76, emphasis added.