The Return of the Marginalised: Palestine and Humanism

Patrick Williams*

*Foreword by Pervine Elrefaei*****

Living through the ongoing genocidal moments in Palestinian history post October 7th, 2023, I find Patrick William's 2010 keynote speech, "The Return of the Marginalised: Palestine and Humanism," comprised in this volume, very timely. In his study of "the margins that matter" for the historical "urgency" they represent, Williams examines the question of Palestine, highlighting Palestine's political, economic, cultural and theoretical marginalisation. As he puts it, "At the political level ... Palestine constitutes one of the greatest scandals of the last hundred years, the continuation — and worsening — of its oppression and marginalisation, representing one of the very worst failures of the international community, especially in the shape of the United Nations." Williams explores the cultural production and living experiences of three representative Palestinian "humanist intellectuals" who, in speaking truth to power, constitute acts of political intervention that interrogate and deconstruct humanism as an imperial, Eurocentric, "exclusivist," "mono-cultural" concept; namely, Edward Said as "the intellectual-in-exile," the poet Mahmoud Darwish as the "present-absentee," and the cartoonist Naji Al-Ali. Foregrounding the "Right of Return" as explicitly denoted in the title, Williams examines the mobilising role of such a "rich legacy" bequeathed by the intellectuals in generating hope for the marginalised to "'return' with explosive or subversive power."

The article explores the marginalisation to which the selected intellectuals were exposed in the West, in Israel, and in the Arab world due to their cultural positionality, besides the marginality of the concept of humanism itself. Encompassing the collective in the individual, Williams, thus, raises the issue of the existential crisis of Palestinians, their displacement, exile, statelessness, memoricide and epistemicide, besides the resistance to all this through the lives and works of the intellectuals under study. As a space of intervention that is deliberately chosen by Said and Darwish, the margin foregrounds a transcultural, transnational, inclusive humanism, or as Darwish puts it, "a window on the world," or "a cell with no wall" that grants him the privilege of critical observation, an issue that is agreed upon by Said. Hence, the real meaning of humanism, Williams argues, is embodied by Said's emphasis on the oppositional role of the intellectual, his call for universalising the

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question of Palestine, the need for co-existence, and the importance of deliberate remembering of silenced, oppressed voices, and, hence, of counter storytelling. For Darwish, humanism means "shared humanity," and hence, the intrinsic feelings of empathy for "transhistorical" "human suffering," besides the need for transcultural hopes and dreams despite darkness. Williams rightly points out Darwish's exemplary "humanist poem of the Other," "a State of Siege," written following the 2002 Israeli attack on the West Bank. Acquiring an inclusive "transhistorical" dimension, the poem stretches to encompass the suffering of the people of Gaza, he adds. As for Naji Al-Ali, humanism is embodied in his works and words on Palestine and Handala as transnational symbols of a "just cause."

The article thus drives the reader to revisit the concepts of humanism and marginality in light of the ongoing historical transformations. The negation and cultural erasure to which Palestine has been historically and internationally exposed, whether in the fields of translation, music and film festivals, as highlighted by Williams in his 2010 article/keynote speech, are now being subverted through prolific translations of the cultural productions of Palestinians under siege and abroad. Williams likewise mentions Elia Suleiman's Divine Intervention as the first Palestinian film to be nominated in 2002 for an Oscar, yet rejected on the grounds of statelessness. Contrastingly, in 2025, No Other Land, the Palestinian-Israeli documentary on expulsion, demolitions and the violence of settler colonialism, wins the Academy Awards and the Oscar for best documentary, driving the reader to revisit Williams' "three modes of otherness" introduced in his article: "the proximate Other, the universal Other, and the radical Other."

Hence, as much as the ongoing moments are witnessing brutal, abusive humanism practiced by major Western policy makers, the hegemonic far right and pro- Zionists, negating and dehumanising Palestinians, the world is contrastingly witnessing the "resurgence and insurgence" (Mignolo and Walsh 6-7) of decolonial humanism, crystalised by the "return of the marginalised". The marginalised, I hereby contend, are not only the Palestinians inside Palestine and the diaspora, but peoples across the globe whose minds have been historically colonised by sustainable discourses on the dehumanised, brutal Palestinian Other propagated by hegemonic colonial/neocolonial/imperial powers. Acknowledging the reality of the ongoing genocide, global grassroots mobilisation and demonstrations centralise the question of Palestine, culminating lately in the global march to Gaza/Palestine, hoping for breaking the siege. I, therefore, find Darwish's lines from his poem "Identity Card," quoted by Williams in his article, pertinently resonating with the ongoing genocidal starvation in Gaza, and corresponding to James J. Zogby's words "History Didn't Begin or End on October 7th", and hence offer a decolonial closure:

I do not hate people.
I steal from no one.
However,
If I am hungry
I will eat the flesh of my usurper.
Beware, beware of my hunger
And of my anger.

References

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The Return of the Marginalised: Palestine and Humanism
Patrick Williams (2011)

"What good is our thought, if not for humanity?"
(Mahmoud Darwish, "The Hoopoe," 2003)

Introduction

This paper is an attempt to examine two forms of marginalisation, as well as the responses to that by three Palestinian intellectuals. There is, however, in my case at least, a certain anxiety or unease attached to being asked to speak on the topic of marginalisation, since this is - one of those notions which, while undoubtedly grounded in material processes, constantly runs the risk of conceptual over-inflation: like the ever-ramifying capillaries of Foucauldian micro-politics of power, people manage to find marginalisation anywhere and everywhere, potentially rendering it simultaneously too large and too small for useful analysis. Within this proliferation of so many forms of marginalisation or ways to be marginal, it is important, I feel, to focus on the question of what we might call 'margins that matter': those forms, processes or histories which have a certain substance or urgency. Having noted that need, however, the task of identifying those which do indeed matter, and analysing them appropriately, remains to be elaborated — and argued over.

Beyond this initial anxiety, however, there is an important sense in which marginalisation is indeed everywhere, where we inhabit something like an 'Age of Marginality.' As Edward Said points out:

> [...] it is surely one of the unhappiest characteristics of the age to have produced more refugees, migrants, displaced persons and exiles than ever before in history, most of them as an accompaniment to and ironically enough, as afterthoughts of great post-colonial and imperial conflicts. (Said 1993, 402)

It is also the case, as Marx noted a century and a half ago, that as an inherent part of the way in which it operates, capitalism fragments social formations, and thus, for our purposes, could be said to multiply the margins. As the capitalist mode of production globalises itself, so it globalises forms and processes of marginalisation.

The title of my paper also contains the idea of return, more specifically the return of the marginalised. There are two powerful echoes here. The first, and most immediate, since the subtitle points to Palestine, is the return of Palestinians after more than sixty years of diaspora and exile. Unfortunately, the issue of *'al awda'* is both too large and too complex to be dealt with here. The second echo, rather easier to cope with in the space of this paper, is the well-known Freudian concept of the 'return of the repressed,' the process by which problematic thoughts or desires are routinely repressed into the unconscious, but can 'return' into conscious life in unexpected or unsettling ways. The hope here is that in a similar way the socially repressed and marginalised can 'return' with explosive or subversive power. Three powerful Palestinian examples exist in the lives and works of Edward Said, Mahmoud Darwish, and Naji Al-Ali, and this paper will examine some elements of their rich legacy.

Marginalisation of Palestine

This is a process which is both historical and contemporary. It is political and economic, theoretical and cultural. At the political level (it hardly needs to be said, but also urgently requires repeating), Palestine constitutes one of the greatest scandals of the last hundred years, the continuation — and worsening — of its oppression and marginalisation representing one of the very worst failures of the international community, especially in the shape of the United Nations. At theoretical level, Palestine remains the great unexplained absence from postcolonial theory, despite, on the one hand, postcolonial theory's much-vaunted commitment to address itself to political and social reality, rather than mere textuality, and on the other, the unsurpassed opportunity for analysis which Palestine offers of a contemporary community under brutal colonial occupation. Again, this is a phenomenon which we can identify without having the time to examine in detail here.

In the area of cultural production, Palestine is marginalised in a variety of ways, some of them relatively predictable, others quite surprising. According to Rashid Khalidi, for example, thirty years after its publication *The Question of Palestine* (1992) has, remarkably, still not been translated into Arabic, virtually the only important book of Said's for which that is the case[1]. In 2002, Elia Suleiman's *Divine Intervention* became the first Palestinian film to be nominated for an Oscar. It also became the first Palestinian film to be

rejected, on the interesting grounds that a film has to come from a country, and there is no country called Palestine. Palestine is also marginalised on the World Music scene, as the British-born Palestinian singer Reem Kelani comments:

> They [people involved in world music] will join Amnesty International, go to WOMAD [World of Music, Arts and Dance festival], buy second-hand clothes from Oxfam and fight every cause from gay rights to the Saharawis, but when they come to Palestinians, they freeze.... The reason is that Israel is very big on the world music scene. Some of the biggest world music stars are Israeli — some are very talented, some aren't, like any other artist. (Kelani 2010)

Kelani also recounts being invited to provide music for a BBC documentary on the 10th anniversary of the Sabra and Shatila massacres — but with strict instructions not to include the words Sabra, Shatila, Israel or Palestine […]. In an internal audit a few years ago on its reporting on Israel/Palestine, the BBC discovered that it gave substantially more coverage to the Israeli point of view than to the Palestinian. This was obviously a shock to the BBC's sense of its ability to maintain its professed position of balance and neutrality in reporting matters such as this, but may have been less of a surprise to anyone familiar with the BBC's standard output in this area.

In this broad context of the marginalisation of Palestine, what can we say about the particular forms of marginality embodied by Said and Darwish? In the case of the former, we can see Said as inhabiting - with a degree of enthusiasm, but above all with clear-sightedness - the category of 'intellectual-in-exile,' something he wrote and spoke about on numerous occasions, most extensively in his 1994 book *Representations of the Intellectual.* Said also had a particular (marginal) location within American public life, as someone frequently called upon to represent the completely marginalised Palestinian position on US television – Darwish's specific form of marginality could be construed as a lifetime as "present-absentee." This grotesque category was invented by the Israelis in 1948, and used as a means of robbing Palestinians who had fled in advance of the Israeli assault of both their property and their rights as citizens of the new state when they returned 'home.' The displacement he endured at the age of six remained a central fact of Darwish's life, even after his notional 'return' in 2002, when he was allowed to settle in Ramallah, and it is no coincidence that Darwish's poetic prose memoir published in English in late 2010 should be entitled *Absent Presence.* In this, Darwish offers a typically allusive and suggestive perspective on margins:

> You had to choose the margin in order to know where you were. The margin is a window on the world; you are neither in it nor out of it. The margin is a cell without walls. The margin is a private camera which chooses what pictures it wants from what is to be seen; so that the king is not king [...]. They called you "the dreamer" when you chose the margin to see your dream and it seems you struggle to remember that old name of yours which follows you like your shadow but does not speak. "Had the shadow spoken, it would have guided me," you said to me [...]. We met in the evening as was our custom, and you embraced me and patted my shoulder, and said to me, "Tomorrow I will go with you, because the margin, contemplates but does not act." (Darwish 2010, 46)

The first sentence is at least recognisably close to Said's own view on the choice (enforced, perhaps) of marginality or exile as the necessary position from which to observe, criticise and understand; the remainder, however, requires an exegesis far longer than we have space for here.

Marginalisation of Humanism

While the marginalisation of Palestine remains a scandal and an outrage, might there be grounds for regarding the marginalisation of humanism as in some ways justified? For the last generation or two of academics, humanism has, above all, simply seemed old-fashioned, As British feminist Michele Barrett comments, "humanism had come to be seen as "a derogatory term" "a code word for the impotent' and reactionary values of the bourgeois literary canon builders of the eighteenth to twentieth centuries" (Barrett 1991, 93). As such, what could it expect but marginalisation?

In addition to simply becoming out of date, humanism has been marginalised as a result of coming under attack from two related-but-different quarters, post-structuralism and post-colonialism. What we might argue is the marginalisation of humanism in the realm of theory, others would see as its wholesale intellectual demolition at the hands of structuralist and post-structuralist linkers from Althusser to Foucault and Derrida. For Althusser, for example, humanism was simply bourgeois ideology, something which had even formed part of the thinking of the younger Marx, but with which, according to Althusser, he had necessarily and decisively broken, most importantly formulating "A radical critique of the *theoretical* pretensions of every philosophical humanism." As he goes on to say: "This rupture with every philosophical anthropology or humanism is no secondary detail; it is Marx's scientific discovery" (Althusser 1977, 227). Although Said had been

one of the first academics in the US to engage extensively with structuralist and poststructuralist theory, especially in *Beginnings*, he became increasingly unhappy with what he saw as the increasingly anti-humanist, and in his terms "un-worldly," positions adopted by theory. He thus began his gradual move away from any identification with mainstream theory — which so disconcerted his followers who were just getting to grips with it — at least in part in the name of humanist values.

A different form of marginalisation of humanism occurs in the field of post-colonial studies as a result of the trenchant critiques offered by Fanon and Sartre. If post-structuralism notionally highlights the theoretical failure of humanism, post-colonialism marks its failure at the human level:

> First, we must face that unexpected revelation, the striptease of our humanism. There you can see it, quite naked, and it's not a pretty sight. It was nothing but an ideology of lies, a perfect justification for pillage; its honeyed words, its affectation of sensibility were only alibis for our aggressions [...]. With us there is nothing more consistent than a racist humanism since the European has only been able to become man through creating slaves and monsters. (Sartre 1967, 21-2)
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> When I search for Man in the technique and the style of Europe, I see only a succession of negations of man, and an avalanche of murders. (Fanon 1967, 252)

In the wake of this, many have been happy to consider humanism as comprehensively discredited, its marginalisation the very least that it deserves. That is, however, a profound misunderstanding of what Fanon and Sartre are arguing — a point to which we shall return shortly.

In *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (2004), Said identifies a range of problems with humanism in the 20th century, and particularly humanism in the United States. The first of these is its elitism and exclusivism, whether in the 1950s 'New Humanism' (which, as its name suggests, thought it was offering an improved version of what preceded it), or in the more recent, appalling neo-conservative varieties. The second is an inappropriate traditionalism and hatred of the new. Needless to say, the tradition that is being (falsely) venerated is 'our' tradition — again, exclusive and elitist — leading to a mono-cultural view of what is culturally valuable. The fact that this is grounded in an out-dated concept of national and. cultural identity is only one of the problems with it. The third and final area of difficulty concerns the struggle to be humanism's hegemonic model of history: on the one hand, a version of history as essentially known, complete, stable, versus, on the other, history as unresolved, open to others or open to challenge. The fact that it is

the former which has typically held sway is another of the reasons why humanism could appear unappealing in the contemporary context, and why it represents a problem to be addressed.

We could see humanism (though that is not how it sees itself) as traditionally the search for some very particular feature which sets humans apart - a process of narrowing down, or focusing in, which is necessarily exclusive of much else. A different approach to humanism would be the desire to show regard for everything that is human — however remotely so — a process of opening out, which aims to be fully inclusive. This might look more modern, even multicultural, but is not necessarily so: the well-known Latin maxim, from the writer Terence, "nihil humani a me alienurn puto" (nothing human is foreign to me), which Marx was fond of quoting, and Said also refers to, is perhaps as inclusive as we can get. Of the two options, it is certainly the latter form of humanism that Said and Darwish embody. The difference between the two approaches might also be understood in terms of abstract versus concrete: commenting on the attempt to define the human in terms of the ability to think, Gramsci remarks, "It is not 'thought' but what people really think that unites or differentiates mankind" (Gramsci 1971, 355).

Said and Humanism

In his *Prison Notebooks,* Gramsci notes the importance of "renovating and making 'critical' an already-existing activity" (Gramsci 1971, 331), and this two-pronged approach — making new and making radical — is at the heart of Said's approach to humanism:

> I believed then, and still believe, that it is possible to be critical of humanism in the name of humanism and that, schooled in its abuses by the experience of Eurocentrism and Empire, one could fashion a different kind of humanism [...]. (Said 2004, 10-11)

In Said's hands, humanism is refashioned into a mixture of scholarly technique, worldly stance and mode of transcultural connectivity. The transformation of humanism is also precisely what Sartre and Fanon had in mind. The bizarre idea that Sartre was setting out to discredit humanism — when, for Althusser, the main problem with Sartre was precisely that his Marxism was much too humanist — suits those critics eager to dismiss humanism as simply part of the apparatus of Western oppression, rather than examine what Sartre's intention actually was. In a similar, but ultimately more ambitious, way, Fanon's aim is for more than just a reconstituted humanism. He hopes for nothing less than remaking humanity:

> It is a question of the Third World starting a new history of Man... For Europe, for ourselves and for humanity, comrades, we must turn over a new leaf, we must work out new concepts, and try to set afoot a new man. (Fanon 1967, 254-5)

Some activities may be beyond apparent renovation or reclamation, however, and one of these is Orientalism. It is worth remembering that although *Orientalism* was, and in many ways still is, seen as above all a theoretical text. Was there too much Gramsci, or too little Foucault? Was it possible to include a Marxist and a poststructuralist and still produce a coherent argument? — Said insisted that it was a humanist work, (though no one much took any notice). Part of the problem Said analyses is that Orientalism was, in its origins at least, a humanist discipline, but the particular form of its worldly involvement, its structures and practices, had destroyed all its humanistic values. His final comment is "I consider Orientalism's failure to have been a human as much as an intellectual one." (Said. 1978, 328)

Humanism is necessarily at the heart of the role of the intellectual as Said understands it. Fittingly, in view of what we have seen so far, the intellectual occupies a position on the margins — if not one which is subject to active marginalisation. The more extreme, and also the better-known, version of this in Said's work is the notion of the intellectual as exile, where, despite the numbers who are in fact exiled in different ways, for those who are not, a perspective of 'exilic' distanciation from the centres of power and privilege is both possible and desirable. That distance results in the intellectual task construed as critical or oppositional, most famously embodied, perhaps, in the phrase Said takes from Chomsky, 'speaking truth to power'; and arguably one of Said's most radical Gramscian 'reworkings' is to conceive of humanism *as* necessarily a form of critique. Finally:

> For the intellectual the task, I believe, is explicitly to universalise the crisis, to give greater human scope to what a particular race or nation suffered, to associate that experience with the suffering of others. (Said 1994a, 33)

Humanism, whatever its historical vagaries and failings, is, of course, properly, universalising, as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights reminds us: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights."

In *Humanism and Democratic Criticism,* Said outlines three new tasks, or more precisely areas of struggle, for humanist intellectuals. The first of these is "to protect against and forestall the disappearance of the past," in part by

offering "alternative narratives and other perspectives and history than those provided by combatants on behalf of official memory and national identity and mission." (Said 2004, 141). Although in general the loss of the past may be a cause for concern, there are obviously certain histories, or certain kinds of history, which are more at risk, or whose disappearance would be more disastrous. That the histories of the marginalised occupy a prominent place here should come as no surprise.

The second struggle is "to construct fields of coexistence rather than the fields of battle as the outcome of intellectual labour" (Said 2004, 141). This is, of course, quintessentially Saidian, embodied, for example, in the "Overlapping territories, Intertwined histories" analysed at length in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), but it is also properly humanist: if nothing human is foreign to me, then constructing coexistence rather than conflict is simply good sense (as Gramsci would call it). Forging connections is also — of course — a way to combat marginalisation, but as both Said and Gramsci would argue, it is not the case that any old connections will do: their precise nature, political valency and worldly impact are what count.

The third area of struggle is the one which lies behind so much of Said's intellectual endeavour — Palestine. This, perhaps more than the others, really is a struggle, as the situation appears to become daily more intractable. In relation to the competing claims of Israelis and Palestinians over occupation of the land, Said says, "No matter how I have searched for a resolution to this impasse, I cannot find me, for this is not a facile case of right versus right […]. Overlapping yet irreconcilable experiences demand from the intellectual the courage to say that is what is before us […]. (Said 2004, 143). Admitting to an impasse with no visible resolution, rather than identifying a problem to be solved, is unusual — to say the least — in Said. Whatever the difficulties to be faced, however, "Humanism [...] must excavate the silences, the world of memory, of itinerant, barely surviving groups, the places of exclusion and invisibility, the kind of testimony that doesn't make it onto the reports [...]" (Said 2004, 81). All of these humanist interventions on behalf of variously marginalised groups and cultures are to be found in the work of Said, Darwish and Al Ali.

Darwish and Humanism

Mahmoud Darwish is usually discussed as a resistance poet, or the poet of Palestinian national identity; his humanism is rarely if ever mentioned. Like Said, however, humanism is present throughout his work — often precisely in tension with questions of resistance and national identity. As he is very aware, the humanist aspect of his writing is marginalised by those who demand precise political commitment and bold statements, and at various moments in his career Darwish has been accused of "abandoning the

struggle" or "betraying the revolution," above all, perhaps, when, in 1999, he published *A Bed for the Stranger,* a collection of love poems. More recently, after the publication of *Comme des fleurs d'amandier, ou plus loin,* (2007) he was accused by other Palestinian poets of no longer writing resistance poetry, or national poetry, and felt forced to defend himself in print.

"Language is where we start from as humanists," says Said (Said 2004, 28), and Darwish agrees strongly. Indeed, his stance on language creates problems for those who would seek to recruit him as Palestinian national poet: "I have constructed my own country. I have even founded my own State — in my language" (Darwish 1997, 119). As Darwish is aware, however, poetry does not emerge from language alone, but, as he says, "from history, culture and the real [...] from the non-poetic." (Darwish 2006, 28, 31), and this is another tension to be negotiated.

From among the various forms which humanism takes in Darwish's poetry, I would like to focus here on the question of the attitude to the Other, which is at the heart of any proper humanism, and especially the reformulated humanism of Fanon or Said. In particular, I will look at three modes of otherness which we can call the 'proximate' Other, the 'universal' Other, and the 'radical' Other.

The 'Proximate' Other

This is the nearby Other, the Other that is, or is almost, the self — and in Darwish's later poetry in particular, the line separating self and other can be very difficult indeed to discern. In general, however, the proximate other is the subject of almost all of his poetry, in the shape of his people: their history, their lives, their sufferings, their hopes — hence his (non-chosen) status as Palestinian national poet. (As such, it is yet another topic which is far too large for the scope of a paper such as this.) Darwish has no difficulty in charting the humanity of Palestinians, especially in the face of their oppression, and it remains one of his most important tasks, given the dehumanised and dehumanising representations of Palestinians created by Israelis. In a cultural war waged through representations, establishing the deep humanity of Palestinians is essential.

The poem "Identity Card" is perhaps Darwish's most famous statement of ordinary Palestinian humanity: simple, honest, unafraid:

> Write down at the top of the first page:
> I do not hate people.
> I steal from no one.
> However,
> If I am hungry
> I will eat the flesh of my usurper.

> Beware, beware of my hunger
> And of my anger. (Darwish 1973, 25)

The great Senegalese filmmaker and novelist Ousmane Sembene often remarked that one of the principal concerns in his work was "the heroism of everyday life." In the case of Darwish, we could perhaps see this as "the humanism of everyday life." As Darwish himself said, "I am, first and foremost, the poet of the familiar human details" (Darwish 1997, 27)[2].

The 'Universal' Other

For Darwish, one of the main aims, perhaps *the* main aim, of poetry is the move from the particular to the general, from the national to the universal, and an important dimension of the universal is its human component:

> The essential thing is that I have found a greater lyrical capacity, and a passage from the relative to the absolute. An opening, which allows me to write the national into the universal, so that Palestine is not limited to Palestine, but pounds its aesthetic legitimacy in a vaster human space. (Darwish 1997, 25-6)

As he goes on to say: "poetry opens the homeland on to the infinitely human/ the infinity of humankind" (1997, 26).

An important aspect of the infinitely human is the history of human suffering. Said, for example, talks about "communities of suffering," which would include both the Jews and the Palestinians, with their very different (but certainly not separate) histories of pain, but which would also form part of another version al the Saidian universal. This is partly inevitably, for Darwish as for Said —articulated in the immediate context of Palestine and, here, Palestinian poetry. Unfortunately, Darwish feels, the latter has, to its detriment, typically been over-concerned with the "cause," or with the sheer numbers of those killed, rather than their thoughts, feelings or humanity: "But this obsession with always wanting to help the cause by means of poetry is pointless. It helps neither poetry nor the Palestinian cause." (1997, 77)

The issue of suffering also opens out onto what Darwish calls 'the question of the victim.' In "Exile (4): Contrepoint," his elegy for Edward Said in *Comme des fleurs d'amandier, ou plus loin,* he has Said say, "I belong to the question of the victim," and from *The Question of Palestine* onwards, Said often commented on the historical irony of the Palestinians becoming "the victims of the victims" — the original (Jewish) victims seemingly having learned nothing from their history of suffering. Belonging to the question of the victim seems equally true of Darwish himself, given his frequent characterisation of himself during the 1980s and 90s as a 'Trojan' poet, taking

the side of history's victims: the marginalised, the oppressed, the defeated, the voiceless. As he says, "A people without poetry is a defeated people," (Darwish 1997, 154), and the hope is obviously that a people with poetry might fare rather better. 'The question of the victim' is tackled by Darwish in transhistorical and transcultural epics such as "The Speech of the Red Indian," and "11 Stars in the last Andalusian sky." (Darwish 2000) In the case of the latter, Darwish specifically says that he wants to offer "a humanist reading" of the fall of the kingdom of Granada in 1492. In general, the lyrical epics, in their concern to represent neglected histories, silenced voices and marginalised cultures, offer us what we might call a humanist poetry of the Other, and constitute some of Darwish's greatest work[3]. They also represent an important intervention in the struggle indicated by Said, which was mentioned earlier: "to protect against and forestall the disappearance of the past" by offering "alternative narratives and other perspectives and history" (Said 2004, 141).

The 'Radical' Other

Of the various forms encountered, this is the one which is most difficult to deal with, because for Darwish and other Palestinians the radical Other is irredeemably Israeli, the potentially abstract category firmly grounded in the material facts of dispossession and what Said called "punishment by detail." In typical fashion, however, Darwish refuses to let this difficult and painful situation be oversimplified or dehumanised:

> Q: "What is your image of the 'enemy'?"
> A: "From the start, it has been a human one. Multiple and varied.
> I have no simple or definitive image of the Other."
>
> (Darwish 1997, 14)

As Darwish points out, the policeman who arrested him, the judge who sent him to prison, the jailer who guarded him — all of these were Israelis; at the same time, the best teacher in his secondary school, and his first lover, were also Israelis. That insistence on acknowledging the humanity of the 'enemy' finds controversial expression in the poem "A Soldier Dreams of White Lilies," which was criticised from all sides — Palestinian and Israeli — not so much for its depiction of a kind of friendship between a Palestinian and an Israeli soldier (unacceptable though the idea was to many), but more for its audacity in depicting an Israeli at all, and even more so in depicting him as a complex, thoughtful human being. Darwish says of him: "He was a humanist, and his education was based on pluralism and openness. Having come to Israel with idealistic notions, he found that the reality was very different. So he left" (Darwish 1997, 17) [4]:

> When I had filled his glass for the fourth time
> I said in joke: "You're going away — what of the homeland?"
> "Let me be," he said.
> "I'm dreaming of white lilies,
> Of a street that is singing, of a house that is lit.
> I want a good heart, not a loaded rifle.
> I want a sunlit day, not the mad
> Fascist moment of conquest.
> I want a smiling child meeting the day with laughter,
> not a piece of the war machine.
> I came to live sunrises,
> Not sunsets." (Darwish 1980, 21-2)

Even as perceptive and sensitive critic as Jacqueline Rose is apparently capable of finding that this image of an Israeli challenges the boundaries of acceptable representation — or even goes beyond them. "Not all readers will appreciate Darwish ascribing to the soldier such profound disillusionment with his nation's self-affirmation" (Rose 2007).

A different kind of boundary — in this case the limits of humanism itself—is constituted by the problem of fundamental non-reciprocity. Even if the Israeli/Palestinian relationship is construed as a form of the Hegelian Master-Slave dialectic, there is no movement of reciprocity. The Israeli Other demands to be acknowledged but refuses to reciprocate, and instead imposes identities, representations and definitions: "It is the Other who, ceaselessly, demands of me that I be an Arab — according, of course, to his own definition of Arabness" (Darwish 1997, 35). Even when Darwish is, counter-intuitively, prepared to accept the position of "stranger" in his own land, the real stranger refuses to reciprocate: "He demands that I be the only stranger, the only intruder. And he insists on being the only 'authentic' one" (1997, 35). Stranger; intruder; inauthentic; 'Arab': these are the marginal identities which the radical Other offers. As Darwish notes in *Entretiens sur la poesie*, even the identity of 'Arab,' which in some ways might seem relatively unproblematic, was one given by the Israelis, in order to separate Palestinians from Israelis, and also from their identity as Palestinians; (to the extent that that Palestinians could be considered merely 'Arabs,' they had no specific claim to Palestine, and could potentially be transferred to any Arab country).

The issue of non-reciprocity also returns us — slightly unexpectedly — to 'the question of the victim.' The Other, Darwish says in *La Palestine comme metaphore,* insists (despite every evidence to the contrary) that he

alone is the real victim, not the Palestinians. At one level, Darwish is completely uninterested in entering into a competition in victimhood (which disrupts the power relation which the would-be competition aims for); at the same time, however, this attempt to forget or deny his people's suffering, especially by means of such a fallacious claim, is not to be tolerated.

At the cultural level, Darwish and other Palestinians may be open to Jewish language and literature, but the reverse is not the case. In 2000, the suggestion was made by the ruling Labour Party that a few of Darwish's poems might be introduced on to the Israeli school curriculum (a 'positive' move from total absence to mere marginality, one could suggest). The reaction, however, was so violent that it almost brought down the government, and forced an immediate retraction of the suggestion. The comment from Benny Elon, Member of the Knesset, that "Only a society that wants to commit suicide would put [Darwish's poetry] on its curriculum" is typical. Even on those occasions when Israelis do read Darwish, the approaches, he notes, are unsatisfactory, confining him, as they do, to marginalising categories. One tactic is to read him anthropologically, as a 'specimen' of the Palestinians; another is to read him in a 'securitarian' mode, in terms of the potential threat he poses to the Israeli state; another, less frequent, is to read him from the standpoint of political solidarity; very rarely is he read simply as a producer of (good) literature.

"State of Siege" is a poem which encapsulates all these forms of the Other, and provides a particular humanist perspective on an inhuman situation. It is also a poem which constituted a particular aesthetic and political problem for Darwish. Although, as indicated, he had for a number of years been attempting to free himself from the obligation to react immediately to political events, the Israeli onslaught on the West Bank in 2002 left him, he felt, no choice but to respond, and the remarkable "State of Siege" was the result.

As far as the proximate Other is concerned, the poem offers a fragmented narrative of the Palestinian people under siege — a siege which is both immediate historical conjuncture and transhistorical condition, stretching before and after (for instance into the ongoing plight of the population of Gaza). Unsurprisingly, neither is a happy state:

> Here, at the mercy of time,
> on these foothills at sunset
> near ripped-up orchards
> stripped of their shadows,
> we do what prisoners do,
> we do what the unemployed do:
> we cultivate hope. (Darwish 2004, 8)

The poem chronicles Palestinian attempts to live 'normal' lives — and ultimately simply to stay alive -- under constant bombardment, and some of the most poignant moments concern the attempts that failed:

> A woman said to a cloud: "Please shelter my beloved,
> for my clothes are drenched with his blood." (Darwish 2004, 17)

An important constituent element in the attempt to survive is the Palestinian quality of *sumuud* — the refusal to give up, give in or go away, no matter what —commented on by Said and others, which appears (even tinged with humour) at various moments:

> We stand here. We sit here. We are here. We're always here.
> With one aim in life: just to be!
> Apart from that, we disagree about everything […].
> (Darwish 2004, 19)

In relation to the universal Other, the poem offers a consideration of general human questions of life and death, love and suffering, and once again the condition of the Palestinian people stands as a universal point of reference. As Darwish commented in an article on the Israeli attacks which gave rise to the poem: "From this day on, he who does not become Palestinian in his heart will never understand his true moral identity" (Darwish 2002a). At the same time, the universal can seem a rather crowded place, even for an inclusive-minded humanist:

> I'm the last of those poets
> troubled by the troubles
> of their enemies
> Maybe the world is too small
> for all of the people
> and all of their gods. (Darwish 2004, 15)

The poem also addresses a range of radical Others, from the Israelis — soldiers, guards, 'a killer'- to a possibly-European 'quasi-Orientalist,' and, finally, Death itself. Given the absolutely non-dialogic nature of the state of siege, (indeed, one might say, of relations between Palestinians and Israelis more generally), the extent to which the poem repeatedly tries to speak to the Israelis, as well as speaking about them, is remarkable:

> Hey, you, on the doorstep — come in,
> and drink Arab coffee with us,

then maybe you will feel you are human, like us.
You on the doorstep —
please get out of our mornings,
then maybe we'll feel we are human, like you. (Darwish 2004, 11)

What is perhaps even more striking is the willingness — on one side at least — to assert shared humanity, which the continuing siege does so much to deny, though for the Palestinians, there is an understandable fragility about their status as fully human. 'To a Third Guard,' 'To a Quasi-Orientalist,' 'To Another Killer' — each of these addresses to a radical Other highlights the similarities, possibilities for friendship, even the potentially interchangeable nature of the adversaries:

If we swapped names you'd discover
a certain resemblance between us —
you may have a 'mom,'
but I have a mother,
we're soaked by identical rain,
we dream of only one moon,
and we're only a short distance
away from the same table. (Darwish 2004, 26)

What these discussions make very clear (as "A Soldier Dreams of White Lilies" also does in its own way) is that radical Otherness of this kind, far from being an existential given, is a social construct, kept in place by hierarchies of power, regimes of fear and ignorance, and practices of brutal oppression. The Other is not, in fact, radically other — though he can be made to be. In the present conjuncture, the confrontation between, on the one hand, cultural openness and humanist inclusiveness, and, on the other, paranoid rejection and armoured isolationism, as well as the marginalisation of the former by the latter, appears set to continue:

A truce! A truce! So we can see if it's really true
that fighter planes can be beaten into ploughshares!
We begged for a truce — just to test the waters,
just to see if peace could seep back into the bloodstream,
just so we could fight our battles with poetry, for once.
But they told us: Haven't you heard that peace begins at home?
What happens if your music brings our high walls tumbling down?
And we answered: So what's wrong with that? Why not?
(Darwish 2004, 31)

The idea that Palestinians might turn the Biblical story of Joshua and the siege of Jericho its head, and bring down the illegal Israeli Separation Wall, and others, by means of music has a distinctly utopian air; but *is* a wonderful vision nevertheless.

The remarkable Naji Al-Ali represents both a different type of marginalisation and a different form of humanist intervention. Naji was a brilliant cartoonist whose work was syndicated in newspapers across the Arab world in the years leading up to his assassination in London in 1987 — Darwish, for example, spoke of him as "our daily bread." One aspect of his marginalisation is that the non-Arab-speaking world hardly knows of him, with the first book about him in English being published by the radical UK press Verso in 2009. Another aspect is that he spoke for, and about, the marginalised, and was therefore shunned, censored and persecuted by the powerful in various Arab states, and it was — as far as we know — the powerful in his own people who were eventually responsible for his death. (At the time Mrs. Thatcher's government appeared to suspect that the Israeli secret service was responsible. More recent evidence, published in *Ha'aretz*, indicates that it was the work of an Israeli-infiltrated Palestinian hit-squad.) Naji, the outlaw, hero of the oppressed and marginalised, appears in a mock 'Wanted' poster, wearing a *keffiyeh,* and carrying a giant pen in place of the *fedayin*'s Kalashnikov.

Naji left a huge archive of images (which are currently being carefully collated by his son Khalid), so much so that it is almost impossible to represent him through a handful of cartoons. Nevertheless, the attempt must be made. … In the first of these (see Fig. I), Naji uses the figure of Jesus Christ — controversially, or, according to Darwish, perfectly naturally: "The Messiah is, for me, a natural symbol. He is a Palestinian from the perspective of time and place, and universal from a spiritual perspective" (Darwish 1997, 141). For Naji, Jesus is above all a figure for human suffering and victimhood in general, and that of the Palestinians in particular: in the image here, he stands with his crown of thorns, suffering, as the Bible tells us, for all humankind, but also with a necklace of Israeli barbed wire from which hangs the iconic Palestinian door key which so many of those dispossessed in 1948 took away with them. Jesus is also faced by Naji's most famous creation; Handala, child of the refugee camps, who acts as both conscience for his creator and witness to the events depicted. He too, works as a general and particular representation: The child is a symbolic representation of myself and the group who lives and endures the situation we are all in […]. In the beginning I offered him as a Palestinian child, and with the development of his awareness, he had a patriotic and a human outlook. (Naji Al-Ali, *Al-Qabas*, n.d)

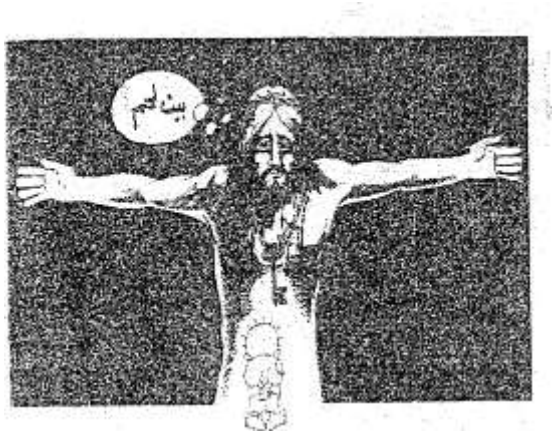

Figure 1

One of the many impressive aspects of Naji's art is his ability to work variations on important themes: Jesus, crosses, and forms of crucifixion, for example, appear in many guises and contexts in his work, as do the variously symbolic women, flowers, children, *fedayin*, bandaged wounds, and the like. In the second image (see Fig. 2 below), circumstances have forced two normally passive, or at least non-violent, figures into significant action as both Jesus (scandalously) and Handala (understandably?) join the first Intifada, throwing rocks at their oppressors. The inescapable pressure of certain events on individuals here echoes Darwish's comments mentioned earlier.

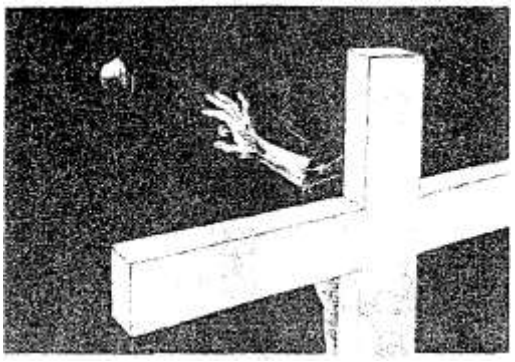

Figure 2

The third image (see Fig. 3 below) captures something of Naji's remark:

> He [Handala] was the arrow of the compass, pointing steadily towards Palestine. Not just Palestine in geographical terms, but Palestine in its humanitarian sense – the symbol of a just cause whether it is located in Egypt, Vietnam or South Africa (Naji Al-Ali. "Interview". *Al-muwajaha,* 1985)

Here, the pen (Naji's, as well as anyone else's: artists, writer, ordinary individual, becomes the fragile beacon of hope in a dark night. In the words of Peter Beneson, founder of one of the twentieth century's most humanitarian and humanist of organisations, Amnesty International, (slightly reworking a Chinese proverb), "It is better to light a candle than curse the darkness." Amnesty's symbol is a candle encircles by the kind of barbed wire Naji depicts. In turn, Naji's candle marks the ability of the Palestinian situation to stand for struggles by the marginalized across the world for better conditions, now and in the future. As Naji says: "My thinking is internationalist: my concerns are humanitarian" (Naji Al-Ali, *Al-Qabas*, n.d).

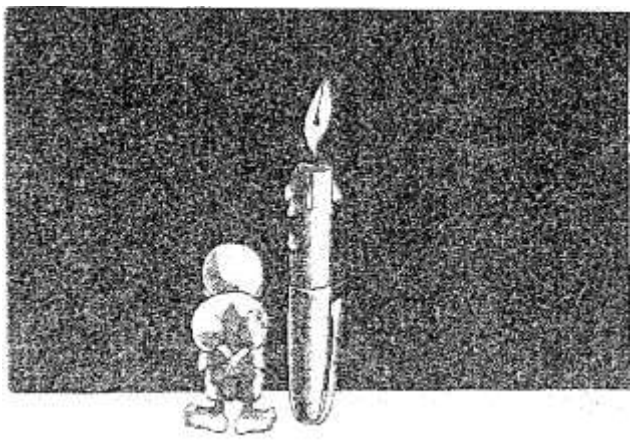

Figure 3

In the Preface to the 2003 edition of *Orientalism*, Said argues that humanism constitutes the "final resistance" to injustice and inhuman practices. On the evidence to date, there is much that this last bastion of the marginalised is still required to do, in Palestine and elsewhere.

Endnotes

[1] My commenting on that fact produced an interesting response from an Arab respondent: "It's perfectly understandable that it hasn't been translated — why would we want another book on Palestine?"

[2] Translations from works in French *(La Palestine comme metaphore* (1997); *Comme des fleurs d'amandier, ou plus loin* (2007); etc.) are my own.

[3] For a fuller discussion of this topic, see Patrick Williams, "'Writing the poetry of Troy': Mahmoud Darwish and the lyrical epic as postcolonial resistance genre." In *Relocating Postcolonial Narrative Genres.* Goebel, W. and S. Schabio S. (eds.). (Forthcoming).

[4] This individual, who remained anonymous for several decades, recently revealed himself as the Israeli historian Shlomo Sand, author of, among other works, the fascinating, and controversial, study, *The Invention of the Jewish People* (2010).

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