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Commitment and Beyond: Reflections on/of the Political in Arabic Literature since the 1940s


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You, The Sacrificial Reader:  
Poetics and Pronouns in Mahmoud Darwish’s “al-Qurbān”

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On January 29, 2001, the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish (Mahmūd Darwīsh) stood before an admiring audience at the Cairo International Book Fair in Egypt. He recited on this occasion a few of his poems, including what was then one of his most recent, “al-Qurbān” (Darwīsh 7–9).² Two days later, on the first of February, he repeated this poem to a crowd that erupted with thunderous applause, as though themselves moved by the poem’s immediate address. In the days following this reading, Nur Elmessiri reported on the remarkable event: “The spectators clap approvingly of the double bind,” he tells us, “They understand the imperious demand ‘Do not break. Do not be victorious. Be in-between, suspended’” (Elmessiri). His account highlights an important detail linking the poem with those in the room: “There is a complicity between the ‘we’ of the poem and the we who are the clapping audience in the 6 October Hall at CIBF [Cairo International Book Fair].” It is this “complicity”—the bond linking the poem and its audience—that underscores both the power of poetic address and the ethical potentials staged ever so effectively in “al-Qurbān.” Almost more than the “we” from whom the poem is spoken, Darwish delivers powerfully through a direct appeal to “you,” who is called forth singularly in the opening lines and welcomed to the intersection of politics, theology and ethics. Caught in the play of pronouns, the poem is temporally torn between the address within the scriptural story it describes, the audience present at Darwish’s recitation and its reception with each subsequent reader.

The question of literary engagement tends to focus centrally on the commitment of the writer and the situation linking a literary work to its audience (Allan). In “al-Qurbān,” however, this connection is complicated. Here, the complicity between the “we” of the poem and the audience in Cairo turns on a fundamental ambiguity, one that conflates the audience in the room with the address staged in the poem itself. If the poem is committed, if there is a resonance for those applauding, then it is seemingly contingent upon how the poem comes to be heard. This particular occasion marks one instance in which the poem takes place, but it also frames an ambivalence between the place in the poem (a scriptural scene) and the place of the poem (at the Cairo International Book Fair). Shifting the optic of analysis from committed writing to the poetics of reading, we might ask: in what way must we read, or hear, the poem to understand commitment? The play of pronouns underscores the bifurcated address to the “you” in the poem and the “you” reading the poem. This formal play with lyric address—as well as the various registers of political and religious intelligibility—suggest that the historicist logic (central to those who understand Darwish in terms of commitment) is merely one way to derive meaning from the poem.

In what follows, I both draw from and contrast my analysis to those many scholars and critics who read Darwish as committed by situating his poetry in a specific time and place (Harlow; Asfour).² Part of my goal is to consider the stakes of reading as it plays out in the poem, on the one hand, and as it plays out in the poem’s reception, on the other. In what terms is a poem politically intelligible, and what other logics are integral to reading and fe
ling with the text? Must a political poem presume a certain reader or a certain reading practice to be understood as engaged? Ultimately, must a poem communicate in a particular way to be committed? By shifting between poetic writing and registers of poetic reading, I hope to suggest that the poem offers not so much a message or a slogan, but the poetic conditions for imagining situations otherwise—a framework at the intersection of politics and theology, aesthetics and ethics.

Whether the recitations to audiences in Cairo, Beirut or numerous iterations online, “al-Qurbān” resonates strongly with audiences beyond a particular time and place, across languages, territories and traditions. On its own, the poem takes place in a complicated temporality that highlights the mythological moment of a scriptural past, the committed political present and its future readings. The complex connection has to do, in part, with the particular mode of address Darwish employs—one that implicates you, the reader, directly in what is described, mixing the poetic structure with the recitation of the poem. In the first line, the poem calls out to you to step forward: [هَوْا تَقَمُّ آنِتْ وَهُدْكَ]. The lines that follow construct a specific scene: you, surrounded by the diviners [حوَاكِ الْكَهَانِ], are asked to come forth to the stone altar [اَحنَاءُ الْحِجْرِيِّ المُذَئَبِ], to rise firmly [أَفْعِاصَدْ أَيَا]. In this first stanza, the poem presents a crucial distinction between “we,” plural, and “you,” singular. It adds the diviners [الْكَهَانِ] who surround you and are imaginably distinct from the us who speaks the poem. In this emergent triangulation of the “we” (who speak), the “you” (who is addressed) and the “them” (the diviners), the terrain is set for an ethical relation that turns not on the classic Levinasian invocation of “I” and “you,” but upon the “us” and the “you” (Benveniste).3 This subtle shift sets the grounds for this most intriguing poem that engages a known religious narrative and does so within the context of a specific political situation, shortly following the start of the second Intifada in Palestine.4

If we take the “you” in the poem’s opening lines to refer to the reader of the poem, then to whom does the “we” refer throughout the poem? Not simply the poet’s voice speaking to the reader, this “we” complicates the problem of poetic address—and the entire relationship between the poem, scripture and reader. Within the opening scene, with you stepping forth to the stone altar [اَحنَاءُ الْحِجْرِيِّ المُذَئَبِ], we might wonder if you, the reader, are indeed what has been sacrificed. Gone is the sense of a lone poet ic voice addressing the crowds, and instead, we find ourselves implicated in the realm of the collective poet and the individual reader. Already in the poem’s first few lines, poetry has been turned on its head with its collective utterance. In this sense, the poem echoes the dynamics of lyric criticism, which as Michael Warner notes, proliferate interpretative possibilities:

Lyric conventions, which are automatically in place when we read a text as lyric poetry, allow for very special interpretations of things like mode of address and circulation; our misrecognition of the text seems to be necessary for producing some of the lyric’s most valued attributes of deep subjectivity. (80)

What Warner here glosses as misrecognition is at the heart of my interest in pronouns. In what ways does a poem call to the reader, and what reading practice is ultimately privileged? What constitutes the “mis” in the various recognitions at stake? When, if ever, is a poem such as “al-Qurbān” in time and place?

While the pronouns frame the poem as a question of reading, they also invoke a certain temporal ambiguity about the moment of the poem’s address. The “you” to whom the poem calls forth is not simply the reader of the poem, but is worked through and incorporated into the scriptural story from which the poem’s narration derives. Within the question of pro-
nouns, then, is embedded a fundamental ambiguity regarding the time in which the poem is read. Are you, the lone reader who picks up the poem to be read? Or are you, rather, the scriptural sacrifice thrown to the stone altar? A response to this question would necessarily turn on a particular temporality, linked to whether the poem addresses the here and now of the reader or the then and there of the scriptural narrative. This seemingly trivial distinction actually underscores the larger question of engagement in the work: that is, whether it is read as a commentary on the immediate historical reality in Palestine or the scriptural narrative of the sacrifice. In what way, ultimately, does the poem call out to you, and in what way is the calling made intelligible to the reader? The pronouns, as such, not only raise the ethical stakes of the poetic text, but set the conditions for poetic free play, i.e. for the relation of reading to scriptures and ultimately to engagement.

What is especially striking is how Darwish, once known as the poet of the resistance, invokes an explicitly theological register in this poem, incorporating the story of Mary from the Qur’an. The relationship between poetics and the theological, on the one hand, and aesthetics and the political, on the other, comes to the fore most prominently when we consider the role of the pronouns in the poetic narrative. If we entertain the theological and political registers of Darwish’s poem, then how might we understand the poem, not simply within the binary logic of politics and religion, but as it raises a fundamental aesthetic question? What is it to read the poem, individually, and what structures render it aesthetically, politically or religiously meaningful? What are the relationships between these three registers? By posing these questions, I am not looking to extract from the poem, as many may be inclined, a reading of scripture or a political allegory. Instead, the poem’s provocation seems to lie in what it offers by way of the very problem of reading, i.e. how the poem calls out to the reader. Flirting with the most sacred of narratives, the story of the sacrifice, Darwish’s “al-Qurbān” drives us to the heart of the political theology of reading, the ambivalence of sacred writing and its symbols. To read the poem, to be addressed in its opening lines, is to be called into the poetic logic of scriptural intelligibility, a manner of knowing otherwise.

I would suggest that even though the timing of the poem’s publication is indeed crucial to its political reading, the poem itself remains obscure and curiously forecloses any particular allegorical legibility. It thus stands in an intriguing position, not simply as a political poem, but a poem that urges a consideration of what constitutes political engagement. Politics here is not given, nor invoked in any direct manner. What Darwish offers instead drives to the heart of poetic language and its oblique relation to ethics, aesthetics and politics. Language, seen either as the referential historical tongue or as the expressive Romantic voice, is thrown into question, and the poem folds together numerous voices, echoes and resonance, all of which challenge the analytical frame of critique. Resisting legibility as a political message and as theological commentary, the poem demands that we question our mode of reading itself. Let us endeavor, then, to conduct a reading of a different sort: not a turn to the historical nor to the genealogical, but to the importance of the detail and to the capacity of a single poem to militate against a general theory of politics.

What follows traces the particularities in Darwish’s poem, focusing both on the various registers of the poetic language and the challenge of political reading. My essay is divided into three sections, each of which points to a nuance or problem raised in the text. The first section addresses the role of linguistic abstraction and political intelligibility; the second focuses on the problem of intertextuality and formal integrity; and the third explores the role of guilt and accountability at stake in the poem’s affective interpellation of the reader. While each section roughly corresponds to a portion of the poem’s own formal structuring,
Abstraction and the Mirage of Meaning

From the opening stanza, setting the stage of the poetic pronouns, Darwish’s poem turns towards an affective register, making recourse not to legible symbols, but to a level of abstraction. If the first stanza grants a visual scene of a stone altar, the sacrifice and the diviners, then the second stanza effectively empties the visual, with you being asked to fetch water from the blurriness of the mirage \[اﻟﴪاب ﻏﺒﺶ ﻣﻦ اﳌﺎء ﻫﺎت\]. The second stanza invokes the love between us and you, and drives further into a realm of abstraction, invoking deserts \[الصحراء\], voices \[غناونا المبحوح\] and blood rites \[اﳉﻮاب دﻣﺞ ﱅ ك\]. The past reemerges in tense and tone, for, as the poem tells us, we did not kill you \[لم ﻳقتل ﻣ ك\], we did not kill the prophet \[نﻘﺘ ﻳ ﺷ ﻪ ﻥ ﺑ ﻳ ﺟ\]. The immediacy of the sacrificial scene gradually recedes into an invocation of a history and the possibility of a profound and amorous relation between you and us. The pronouns, situated initially in the present tense, are simultaneously filled out with echoes of the past and emptied with poetic allusions of fleeting appearances. Already by the third stanza, the seemingly concrete scenario collapses amidst the intricate valences of a poetic language that is itself resistant to an immediate comprehensible vision or allegory.

Along with the conceptual inversions (the blurriness of the mirage \[اﻟﴪاب ﻏﺒﺶ\]), Darwish invokes a certain amorous relation between you, who reads, and the us, who speaks. This love extends boldly into the next stanza, when the poem elaborates and thickens the interaction, pointing to the judgment day \[اﻟﻘﻴﺎﻣﺔ\]. There is a cry to be tested in the metallic dust \[اﳌﻌﺪائن اﳌﻬﺎء\], which is followed by an assertion of you who died to know how much we loved you \[وﻣ ست ﻳتعرف ﻓ ك ﺑ ﻳ ﺷ ﻪ ﻣ ﻳ ﺷ\]. With the collapsing of your brimming heart \[اﳌﻠﻼٓن ﻓﻠﺒﻚ\], the verse ends with an invocation of ripe dates \[ﺟﻨﺎ ﻣ ﺮﻃ ﺑ ﺑ\], a motif drawn directly from the story of Mary in the Qur'an.\(^8\) The you and the us fold together in dialogue, oscillating in the direct address and the scattering of poetic allusions to the scriptures. The seemingly simple story, plotted for us in the first stanza, explodes in the third with visions and structures of guilt, innocence and pleas coming into play. What Darwish offers is neither a reading of scripture as doctrine (grounded in the authority of the diviners) nor its emergence entirely as symbol and myth.\(^9\) Instead, drawing directly from its language, references and emotional force, the poem folds the reader into its narrative, shifting between a preexisting story and direct address and complicating the temporality of the scene in which it comes to be read.

It is worth noting that the poem derives its force not solely from its invocation of the sacrifice, nor from the flirtation with the scriptural register, but in large part from its capacity to engage the dialogue between the you and the us. The direct address draws the poem out of its status as a sacred textual object, known in written form, and animates it as an interpellation, calling out to the reader. And yet, this poetic calling invites a crucial question: how might we come to terms with the fact that, on the one hand, the poem speaks to you, the reader, and, on the other, refers to you, the sacrifice, the Christ figure? Is the poem folding along political, theological and ultimately ethical lines in order to demonstrate how you, the reader, poetically become the sacrifice? In what way is the poem to be read, either as speaking directly to you, in the world, or speaking to you, through the figure of the sacrifice? What emerges in this conundrum highlights a split between the discursive and deictic status of poetic language—between the direct address to a reader, situated here and now,
and the scriptures of a sacred past. The poem calls out to you to step forth, while leaving open the very question as to whom this calling is addressed.

This question is underscored further not only in the interplay of the discursive and narrative levels of language, but also, as the second and third stanzas show, with the poetic abstractions. With this in mind, we might see the poem itself at the crossroads of various possible ways of reading, leaving in abeyance the resolution of how to know, feel and understand its words, rhythms and sounds. Rather than postulate an ideal reader capable of understanding the scriptural references in full, the poem negotiates a path between you, intelligible scripturally as Christ, and you, intelligible politically as a historically-situated reader. Not simply mythological, nor explicitly religious, then, “al-Qurbān” comes to fold reading upon itself, calling the reader forth, as a sacrifice, and exploding the sacred language of scripture into the poetic practice of reading. What subsides in the process is any particular meaning, any set allegory, and instead, the poem gives itself over to be read amidst a scattering of poetic and scriptural allusions, none of which finds referential stability in the carefully orchestrated lines.

The first few stanzas introduce not only the possibility of a religious scene, a mythological register in which to comprehend the poem, but also its linguistic dissolution into various poetic figures, driven to the limits of sense. And so too does the poem take the reader, ambiguously in the time of reading, in order to throw into question how the ethical crisis staged could be understood. Gone is the sense in which the scriptures exist mythologically as an allegory to be discerned, and instead, the poem brings the scriptures to life, taking narration into discourse, taking the abstraction of a story into the direct interpellation of the you who reads. Intelligibility here is not simply a matter of ascertaining what the poem says, but a matter of being moved by the poem, its rhythms, its figures and its references. Ensnared in the age-old poetic conundrum, Darwish’s poem adheres to what Roman Jakobson (alluding to Paul Valéry) describes as the “hesitation between sound and sense,” or what Giorgio Agamben glosses as the tension between “the semiotic sphere and the semantic sphere” (109).10

Aesthetics, Repetition and the Purposeless Poem

As the poem continues in the fourth stanza, this appearance of meaning effectively inverts the initial stanzas, taking essence into the realm of appearance and shifting the very grounds of comprehension. The seemingly vivid descriptions with which the poem begins are gradually disarticulated in a series of abstractions, poetically intelligible and only seemingly grounded in scripture. You did not return to your bodily limbs, the poem tells us. Leave your name in the echo of something, the smiling face with which the fourth stanza ends. It would seem that the immediately recognizable religious register within which the poem begins has, by the third stanza, scattered into Darwish’s poetic language.

Yet, at the very moment the poem seems to fold itself into the hoarse voices in the desert, a question emerges in the fifth stanza, shifting from the realm of abstraction back into a direct address, calling unto you to respond. Which is it, of the favors, that we deny? Who will purify us other than you? Who will free us other than you? The poem fills out the line of questions, incorporating references to carpenters talented in the construction of wooden crosses, and shifts into the future anterior in the sixth stanza: we will say to you, we did not cry. Temporality folds further upon it-
self as the apparent present tense of the address draws back to a body born and risen again, to a “you” who has lived a past. If the rain does not come, the poem tells us, we will wait for it, and we will sacrifice your body again. The verse ends with an exclamation, the first of the six stanzas: how many times you return alive! The journey from the opening scene to the resonant echoes of the sacred past returns again to the interaction between the you and the us, and now, between the registers of life and death.

From the waves of abstraction to the intertextual dispersal, the poem grants temporary sense upon itself, repeating its opening structure, the direct address to the you, the sacrifice, in the seventh stanza: come forth alone. With this repetition in mind, we might say that the poem reads within itself as a text formally unified, and yet intertextually dispersed. On the one hand, to read the poem solely in terms of its scriptural references, as it draws from and reworks the story of Mary, would be to necessarily skirt the poem’s own formal structures. And yet, on the other, to assume that the scriptures are read mythologically would be to overlook some of the ways in which the poem enacts a certain aesthetic discourse, replete with rhythms, motifs and stanzas. What we encounter, then, in this seventh stanza’s repetition of the opening lines is nothing short of a calling out to the reader, whose position, now more than ever in the poem, is that of a participant in its aesthetic integrity. The you, once the reader of the poem, is folded into the logic of the scenario and carried through the various conceptual inversions in the poetic logic of scriptural intelligibility.

If I emphasize the seventh stanza, I do so because this repetition inaugurates the emergence of a poetic parallelism, in which the poem comes to exist as a text with its own formal logic. Far from the realm of statement, which might appear an implication of the discursive register, the poetic repetition folds the text upon itself, back within its own construction. This repetition grants immediate insight into the singularity of the poem, and poses a crucial challenge to intertextuality. If we are prone to read the text intertextually, as it draws from and sites other works, we arrive at an understanding of the poem in its dispersal, as it is integrally linked to other texts. And yet, what a formal concern for the reading offers is the text’s implicit engagement as an aesthetic work. It is, after all, at this moment that the poem asserts its singularity, and in this singularity there lies the fundamental literary dimension of the poem’s purposeless purpose. If the first few stanzas lay out the terrain of the narrative logic, alluding directly to the scriptures and invoking linguistic abstraction, then the seventh stanza folds the text back unto itself, a repetition from within.

With these dimensions of the poem in mind, intertextuality arrives at its limit: reading, as such, becomes the open question of the poem, and hermeneutics collapses into what emerges as the appearance of meaning. My goal here is not to argue that Darwish resists intertextuality, for he clearly draws references to other texts, but rather to insist that reading, as such, be found from within the particularity of how the poem works with these references. It is, after all, through citation that the story of the sacrifice is brought to life differently, shattered in the polyvalence of poetic free play. In as much as poetry negotiates a relationship with the language it invokes, so too does it complicate the mythological references of which it is comprised.

An alternate reading could easily look to how Darwish’s poem, consciously or not, re-formulates the scriptures, adapting them to the poem’s formal particularity. In fact, this line of reading has been fundamental to the political readings of Darwish, in which his references to the Qur’an are analyzed in terms of the faithfulness of their motivation. Is it, such readers ask, blasphemy to invoke the Qur’an in an allegorical manner? Other readers, pointing to the importance of the poetic register, could easily claim that the Qur’an is a text like
any other, to be read and understood within the context of the poem as a text. While here I point to the importance of the poem’s aesthetic dimensions, and notably the repetition of certain structures throughout, I am ultimately interested in driving towards a relationship between pronouns and the emergence of a formalist ethics—not simply through the analysis of how a text is understood, but more particularly through conflicting registers at play within the text. Rather than insist upon religious blasphemy, on the one hand, or political engagement, on the other, we might wonder how the poem itself ambiguates the registers, leaving us to question the very basis of politics and religion.

Accusation and Accountability

While the poetic address and the aesthetic integrity of the poem underscore the competing registers of intelligibility in the first few stanzas, near the end of the poem, the emphasis changes. As this second half of the poem unfolds, there is a notable shift from the discussion of the you, which begins the poem, to a description of the faithful we. In the seventh stanza, you, alone above the lyricists’ abyss [هاوية الغنائيين], contrasts with we, the hollow men asleep in the saddle [الفراغياء الخلد].12 If the first half of the poem establishes the various scenes, then the second half, flirting with abstraction, raises ethical concerns regarding the sacrifice itself. The interplay between questions and accusations, between observations and denials, leads to a direct celebration. We depend upon your blood, the poem tells us in the eighth stanza, guide us, light the way for us with your pure blood. From body to blood to messages, the poetic discourse shifts, teetering between the various registers of divine language: the body, the flesh and the sacrifice itself. The words of the poem allude at once to the divine story, known to all, and to the various shifting pronouns, when the we speaks to the you.

The importance of this rhetorical shift is crucial, seeing as it takes the story, set in the third person, and implicates it directly in the logic of the accusation, contingent upon the us and the you. The verse that follows in the ninth stanza claims that no one apologized for your word, and that when asked by Rome, we replied that we were not of you, and ultimately delivered you to the executioner [وأسلمناك للجلاد]. At this point in the poem, we have a cry for forgiveness, staged somewhat ironically, with a reference to a minor betrayal [الصغيرة خياناتنا]. The interactive dimension of the poem, its attentiveness to the us and you, enables a prolonged emphasis on our disposition in light of you, that is, the description of an encounter with the divine and the sacrifice which ensued. This section also underscores accountability, staged here in terms of guilt and innocence, and the role of apology.

The poem then moves to the future tense in the tenth stanza, as though to emphasize a pact to come, claiming that we will believe the vision, the marriage between the Holy Spirit and the sacred body [زواج الفذ بين الروح والجسد المقدس]. The praise continues, and you are addressed for being higher and higher, having descended only to have been sacrificed on the wooden cross [المقدس وعليه الخفيف]. You, the stultifying riddle [عصر الغزا عصبة], are the light connection [الصلب]. You, the stultifying riddle [خشب الصليب], are the light connection [الصلب]. You, the stultifying riddle [خشب الصليب], are the light connection [الصلب]. You, the stultifying riddle [خشب الصليب], are the light connection [الصلب]. You, the stultifying riddle [خشب الصليب], are the light connection [الصلب]. The proclamation serves as an apparent confession of faith, a notable shift from the previous reflections on the guilt of the sacrifice. The celebratory tone, its call for guidance, signals a utopian and seemingly hopeful shift towards what is to come. By this ninth stanza, then, we have moved from the small treason to a plea for forgiveness to the ultimate proclamation of faith.

The last stanzas of the poem abandon discussions of guilt and accusations and lead towards a bold conclusion, drawn directly from the story of Mary in the Qur’an. To reach this closing point, with all of its linguistic eloquence, the poem calls forth a celebration of you. Let
every verdant thing celebrate you [ليحتفل بك كل ما يحضر], the poem tells us in the thirteenth stanza, and the trail of a butterfly [وقدرك النَّعْر] serves as the poem, the very lightness of meaning. You are to be celebrated as well by everything not possessed by memory [لا تملك الذكري], the resplendent moon. Pointed and powerful as the invocations of butterflies, trees, stones and moons are for this stanza, they function poetically, ultimately transforming metaphor and myth, scripture and language, to a movement of the emotions, the elegiac conclusion of the poem.

Prior to concluding, the poem opens up the possible negation in the fourteenth stanza of all that has been said, urging you not to break, for your break would break us [فإذا اكسرت]. If you triumphed in our destruction, you would destroy our temple as well: life and death, death and life, the images fold back and forth upon themselves towards the conclusion of the phrase, with the invisible vision, the ghostly apparition [فَطَمَّنا خفايا]. What had been celebratory is thus also foreboding, warning of the implications of an abandonment, a destruction. And crucially, what had been celebratory also folds within the poetic motif of invisible vision, throwing into question the status of poetic seeing. The language through which the reader sees flutters back and forth in these last stanzas between scriptural reference and poetic free play.

In the end, then, the poem returns in the fifteenth and final stanza to its scriptural beginnings, taking the poetics of language towards the Qur’anic story of Mary. With a declaration of the height at which you remain, the poem invokes the following proclamation: that you are our most beautiful martyr [تصلى الله وجعلك من أجمل شهداء]. The brief phrase is straddled by parallel constructions on either end, and it echoes the fourth stanza with the invocation of the witness and the martyr, lexographically entwined as they are. We see in revelation your purple shadow a map [خلق أرجواني الخريطة]. Then, concluding boldly, the poem draws in the quote of the story of Mary, that peace be upon you the day you are born in the country of peace, the day you die, the day you rise from the darkness of death alive!

I have traced the various contours of the poem not to suggest that Darwish resists intelligibility, nor to derive from his poem any one particular message. In fact, if anything, we might say that the poem derives its effectiveness precisely from staging questions, emotions and scenes, without necessarily allowing them to unfurl as any one message. Unlike those readings that take myth as the basis of poetics, here the scriptures function obliquely in the poem: neither fixed, nor reverent, but reanimated in the ambiguity of the pronouns and the temporality within which the poem is read. As the poem nears its end, as the last few stanzas unfold across the page, you, the reader, are called into the accusation and celebration. And it is precisely by being called into the poem that the mythological register, dependent on the third person level of narration, gives way to the discursive: you, as it turns out, are addressed only ever through your relation to the scriptural sacrifice. You are sacrificed in all too many ways: both thrown to the altar and dissolved into the composite of readers.

**Pronominal Ethics: Toward the Question of Engagement**

I have walked through the poem in order to underscore some of the complexities at play in its language and the challenge of extracting any one particular reading, either as a commentary on politics or on religion. Indeed, one could easily point to the term martyr [شهيد], which recurs twice in the poem, as evidence that it should be read in relation to contemporary politics in Palestine. One could also point to the quotations of the Qur’an to suggest that the poem is itself a reading of scripture. My point, however, is not to delineate ways of reading and argue on behalf of one being more convincing than the other. Instead, as I have tried to
show, reading itself is at stake in the poem, in a way that allows us to consider in greater
detail the location of politics and the problem of engagement. The questions raised in Dar-
wish’s poem are thus not to be framed in terms of an opposition between politics and reli-
gion, but rather as the ambivalent imbrication of reading practices staged in this poetic text.

We have seen how the various twists and turns in poetic intelligibility drive the reader
from scripture to abstraction, from accusation to confession, but what intervention does Dar-
wish make and in what terms is the poem to be understood? The questions his poem raises,
more than answers, ultimately drive us towards the ambiguous and often tense relation be-
tween aesthetics and politics, which is, as I have argued, at play here ethically. It is the ethical
invocation of the poem, its capacity to call out to the reader, which strikes me as its strongest
provocation. This ethical invocation, integral to the poetic address, helps to draw the reader
into the text and ultimately animates an alternate form of engagement—not by means of the
immediate here and now of history, but by the resonance of the structures of guilt, innocence
and accountability. We thus move between the role of the figure, staged in the opening stanza,
and the role of the accusation, within which you, the reader, are implicated.

What is most striking, then, is not that the ethical is a retreat from politics, but rather
that the poem throws into question the grounds upon which ethics and politics would align.
Rather than answering questions, the poem poses them to you, the reader, as part of the
scripture. What the poem does not address is how these questions should be answered, and
as such, the political grounds of the poem resist intelligibility. The space that is opened up,
which I frame here as aesthetics, allows us to consider how it is that politics is, at base, ever
made thinkable. The legibility of action, the relation of cause and effect, is itself thrown to
the altar, most poetically in the wavering between figure and abstraction.

At a time when Darwish’s poetry itself has been put on trial, we realize the gravity of
the questions posed here. I allude to the three occasions in which Marcel Khalife was ac-
cused of insulting religious values for his musical adaptation of Darwish’s poem, “Anā Yūsuf, yā abi,” which includes lines drawn from the Qur’an. There are those for whom this
poem calls to mind the importance of a Palestinian national literature and for whom en-
gagement entails the capacity of a text to comment and affect its immediate surroundings.
There are those other readers, however, for whom the theological references resonate dif-
differently: not as mythology and allegory, but as a blasphemous recontextualization of sacred
scripture (Chalala). In the court of law, where freedom of speech confronts accusations of
blasphemy, which reading practice triumphs? What reading does the law espouse, and in
what way does the law govern how such poetic texts are read? While the scope of these
questions far exceeds the argument of this essay, it points us in possible directions for con-
sidering the implications of how the reader, framed here within the open question of ad-
dress, might be understood to matter in the context and delimitation of the literary field.

I end not with any grandiose conclusion, still less with any synthesis of the poem as an
overarching theory. What I offer instead is a series of questions for how we might further
develop the relation between literature and politics, and how, as readers, we might come to
terms with the position of specific reading practices. What must literature do to be under-
stood politically? To what senses does literature appeal to move its reader politically? As I
have tried to argue here, not only does poetry make available a certain category of the
reader, interpellated through address, but it also constitutes the possibility of a political
imagination, integrally related to the actions, responses and social education of its readers-
ship. In this way, if history is an analysis of lived events, then literature and poetry urge us
to consider how it is that these events are not only lived, but imagined.
With this in mind, we are led to consider not only what Darwish’s poem offers by way of politics, aesthetics and ethics, but more fundamentally still, the role of engagement. Lest it seems that the unintelligibility of the poetic register renders all actions meaningless, it is important to recognize the stakes of poetic engagement. What is intelligible may not be any statement or message to graft onto the lived world; instead, “al-Qurbān,” calling you to the altar, leaves you implicated in a series of questions and ultimately susceptible to the play between forgiveness and accountability. And moving from statement to question, you, the reader, the sacrifice and the scapegoat, remain the site, if not the source, of the answer.

Notes

I owe a heartfelt thank you to Muhammad Siddiq and Ann Smock for providing the inspiration from which this essay stems. Thank you as well to Yvonne Albers, Sunayani Bhattacharya, and Zachary Hicks for their readings and comments.

1 The poem appeared in print as Mahmūd Darwish, “al-Qurbān,” and in a translation by Nur Elmessiri as “The Offering” in Al-Ahram Weekly 8 Feb. 2001. The translation follows the same stanzas as Darwish’s poem, and I have adopted my own rendering of the poem in the essay, but include the poem at the conclusion of these notes for the reader to follow.

2 I am referring, in part, to the work of Barbara Harlow, for whom Darwish is one of a series of engaged Third World writers. Her book, Resistance Literature, points to Arabic literary figures such as Darwish, Sonallah Ibrahim (Ṣu’nallāh Ibrāhīm), Ghassan Kanafani (Ghassān Kanafānī) and Etel Adnan (Īṭlā Ḩādān), and to a range of Sub-Saharan African and Latin American writers: Bessie Head, Omar Cabezas, Ngūgǐ wa Thiong’o and Nadine Gordimer, to name just a few. In addition to Harlow, however, I am also thinking of a trend in modern Arab poetics to position Darwish within a constellation of resistance poets, notably in the work of John Asfour, When Words Burn.

3 I refer here to Emmanuel Levinas, in particular, though the work of Martin Buber, among others, could be useful for considering the ethical stakes of I/you. Much of what follows draws from the distinction between the narrational and discursive registers of language in the work of Émile Benveniste, Problems in General Linguistics.

4 In an interview with Fakhri Saleh, Darwish notes that “al-Qurbān” was one of two poems he wrote at the outset of the second Intifada. He elaborates in his comments on the relationship between poetry and politics, noting that the scene invoked in the poem is general and not a specific incident, see: Darwīsh, Mahmūd. Interview by Fakhrī Sāliḥ. Mahmoud Darwish Foundation. Mahmoud Darwish Foundation, n.d. Web. 14 June 2014.

5 While it is not my goal here to point to the poem’s borrowings from the story of Mary [مريم], it is worth noting that there are, throughout the poem, particularly towards the end, verses that have been nearly transposed from the Qur’an. Ahmad Ashqar published an extended analysis on religious symbols in “al-Qurbān” specifically, but ignoring the ambiguities of address, he ultimately undermines the poetic complexity of Darwish’s work, see: Ashqar, Ahmad. Al-tawrātīyyāt fi shīr Maḥmūd Darwīsh min al-muqāwāma ilā al-taswīya. Damascus: Cadamus Books, 2005. Print.

6 The question of the poetic time echoes debates in lyric poetry regarding the question of poetic address. My argument here assumes to a certain extent an interplay between the reader of the lyric poem and the Christ-figure at stake in the lyric address. Part of the split between the theological and the political reading, I am suggesting, has to do with the capacity to collapse the time in the poem’s narrative, that is, to see how it resonates with a contemporary political context and how it relies on scripture. The poem, we might say, is itself a reading of the scripture. For an especially insightful reading of Darwish’s poetry with attention to temporality, see: Sacks, Jeffrey. “For Decolonization.” Arab Studies Journal 17.1 (2009): 110–28. Print.

You, The Sacrificial Reader

8 See the story of Mary verse 25 for the reference to ripe dates [طَرِيق‌نا].

9 I allude here to the work of Talal Asad for whom the interpretation of the scriptures mythologically marks a particular moment in the history of reading practices. In his recently published *Formations of the Secular*, Asad dedicates much of his first chapter, “What Would an Anthropology of the Secular Look Like?”, to the role of mythology, citing in particular its role in modern Arab poetics. From a number of poets addressed, Asad focuses quite extensively on Adonis, founder of the *Shīr* group and “a self-described atheist and modernist” (54). When Asad takes up Adonis, he pays special attention to myth, claiming that “Adonis alludes to mythic figures in a self-conscious effort to disrupt the Islamic aesthetic and moral sensibilities, to attack what is taken to be sacred tradition in favor of the new—that is, of the Western.” Asad goes on to generalize further and suggests that this “use of myth in modern Arabic poetry is part of a response to the perceived failure of Muslim societies to secularize” (ibid.). Warning that “an atheism that deifies Man is, ironically, close to the doctrine of incarnation,” Asad reads Adonis on his own terms, focusing on how myth is, for Adonis, plural, as against the “fundamentalist (asuli) form of Islamic thought,” which “has acquired the character of law—of commandment—and so is not apparent […] as myth” (56). In this way, Asad recapitulates a rather famous line of reading modern Arab poetry, based to a large extent around Badawi’s work, but traced out as well in the writings of Jaroslav Stetkevych, who Asad cites with apprehension, and Angelika Neuwirth. My purpose here is not to belabor any general theory of poetics so much as to investigate the ways within which reading is theorized in a particular poetic text, in this case, Darwish’s poem.


11 My reference to the mythological reading of the scriptures alludes to a shift in Biblical criticism during the early modern period. There are numerous studies that address this shift, the emergence of Higher Criticism, in great detail, notably Deborah Kuller Shuger’s, *The Renaissance Bible*, but also in more general terms, Talal Asad’s *Formations of the Secular*. Asad cites the work of scholars such as Michel de Certeau, for whom the shift involves the ‘deontologizing of language,’ which Asad glosses as “the split between a deictic language (it shows and/or organizes) and a referential experimentation (it escapes and/or guarantees) structures of modern science, including ‘mystical science’” (38). Asad suggests that this transformation in language leads to a fundamental transformation in reading practices, relating, in particular, to the reading of the scripture. The scripture, at once the divine word of God transmitted through prophets and religious scholars, comes to be understood mythically, as a hermeneutic question of symbols and meaning.


13 There is an important line of argument that could well be worked out about the relation of the sacrifice to the discursive register of language. In her book, *The Renaissance Bible*, Deborah Kuller Shuger points to the novelty of human sacrifice within the emergence of natural law during the Renaissance. She contrasts descriptions of human sacrifice by Grotius and Frazer, noting how the principle of substitution becomes a problem in Christian law: the accused cannot substitute another to be punished in his/her place; see especially chapter 2, “The Key to All Mythologies.” Darwish’s use of the discursive register of language is novel in so far as it turns on the shifter, infinitely substitutable, and relies on the ambivalence of various possible registers of reading.

14 I am referring here to the characterizations of Islam that prevail in the media coverage of the trial: on the one hand, we have discussions of rights, liberties and freedom of speech, and on the other hand, less analyzed, we have discussions of piety and respect for the sacred text. See, for example, Elie Chalala, “Marcel Khalife Faces Charge Over Darwish Poem.”

Works Cited


Appendix

**أَلْقَرْبَان**

محمد درويش

هيّا... تقدّمّ أنتّ وحّدكّ، أنتّ وحّدكّ. حولكّ الكُبُرَاء ينتظرون أمرّ الله، فاصعدّ أبّيّا القربان نحو المذبح الحجريّ، يا كيّشّ الفداء - فدائنا... وأصعد قويّاً

لكّ خيّا، وغناونا المباحّ، في الصحراء؛ هاتّ الماء من كيّشّ السراب، وأقّظ الموتى! ففي ذمكّ الجواب، وغنّا لم نتّسّكّ... لم نقّلّ نيا،

عّلى أنّ لا نتّصّحنّ القيامة، فامتحتنا أنتّ

في هذا الهواء المدعيّ، وشّتّ لتعرفّ كمّ خيّا! كمّ خيّا! فشّ لتعرفّ كيف يسقط قلبكّ المدان، فوق دعائنا، رْطّبّ خيّاً.
لك صورة المعنى، فلا ترجع إلى أعضاء جسمك، واترك اتصمَك في الصدى صيغة شهيء ما، وكن آية لمحاربين، وزينة لمساهرين، وكن شهيداً شاهداً، طلَق المحيي

فبأيَ آلة نكدَب؟ من يطلِقُنا
سواءً؟ ومن يجرِها سواك؟ وقد
ولدت نياهة عنك هناك. ولدت من نور ومن نار. وكن تحياين ومؤهيَين في
صُنع الصليب، خذَ صلبيكَ وارتفع
 فوق الثريا

سنقول: لم تخطئ، ولم تخطئ، إذا لم يهطلُ المطر انظراه، وضحَيتا بجسمك
مرة أخرى، فلا قربان غيرك، يا حبيب
الله، يا ابن شفائق النعيم. كم من
مرة سنتعود حيًا!

هيا، نقدِتم أنت وحدك، يا استعارتنا
الوحيدة فوق هاوية الغنائيين. خن الفارِين
التائهين على ظهر الخيل... نسألوك الوفاء،
فكن وفياً للسلاطلة والرسالة. كن وفياً
للأساطير الجميلة، كن وفياً!

وبأيَ آلة نكدَب؟ والكواكب في
بديك. فكن إشارتنا الأخيرة. كن عمرنا
الأخيرة في حكام الأجدادية «لم تنزل
نحب، ولمَّو موتّ». على دُميَك أنكُنا.
ذئنا، وأضيعي لنا ذمَك الكبيرة!
لم يعتذر أحد لجراحك. كَلَّنا فِلَّنا لروما: "لم نكن معه". وأَسلمناك للحادِد. فاصفح عن حياتنا الصغيرة، يا آخانا في الوضاعة. لم نكن ندري بما يجري.
فَكُنْ سَمحاً رَضِيًا

ستصدَّقُ الروؤيا ونؤمن بالزواج الفذ
بين الروح والجسد المقدس. كَلَّ ورد الأرض لا يكفي لعرشك. خَقَت الأرض، استدانت. ثم طارت، كالجمالا في سمائك – يا ذبيحتنا الأمناء. فاحترقْ، لتضننا، ولتنينوُن بَجَماً قَصَبِياً

أَعُلَى وأَعَلى. لْبَسْتْ مِنَ الأَنْتَ زَى وَقْلْتُ: "لَي خَسَابُكَ يَعْدِبُكَ عَلَى حَشْب الصليب". فإن تطَلْقْت... أَفْقَتْ، وانكسفت حقيقتنا. فَكُنْ خَلَماً لبَحْلم. لا تَنْكُنْ بَشَراً ولا شجراً. وَكُنْ أَمَراً عَصِياً

كَنْ هُمْرا الوصل الخفيفة بين آلَه).
المسماء وبيتنا. قد تُبَرَّض النفسَ العقيمة.
من نواذ حَرْفَك العالي. وكَنْ نور البشارة، واكتب الروؤيا على باب المغارة، واهَدِنا درياً سويًا

ولِبِحْفِنَ يَكَ كَلْ مَا تَفْضَلْهُمْ، مِن
شَخْرٍ ومن خَبِرْهُ، ومن أشياء تمسها الفِراشةُ فوق قارعة الرومان قصيدة... ولِبِحْفِنَ يَكَ كَلْ مِنْ لم يمتلك ذكرى، ولا قمراً بِحَيَاً
لا تنكرسي لا تنتصر. كن بين -
KEN بين معلقا. فإذا انكسرت كسرنا، وإذا
انتصرت كسرتنا، وهدمت هيكنا. إذن،
كن ميتا – حيا، وحيا – ميتا، لبصيل
الكهنون مهنتهم، وكن طيفا تخييا

ولتق وحدي عاليا. لا يلمسن الزمن
النفقات مجالك الحيوي، فاصعد ما استطعت،
فانت أجملنا شهيدا. كن بعيدا ما استطعت
لكي نرى في الوحي خلق أرحوني الحريطة،
فالسلام عليك يوم ولدت في بلد السلام،
وينعم يوم، وينعم تبعث من ظلام الموت
حيا!!