

## The Literariness of Political Texts

Sophie Evans

**In a Tortoiseshell:** *In this paper about the Palestinian Declaration of Independence of 1988, Sophie Evans' original use of **key terms** — “the literariness of political texts” — allows her to flip the current scholarly discourse — what Edward Said calls “the worldliness of literary texts” — on its head. In the first few paragraphs of her introduction, Sophie constructs **motive** by **orienting** readers as to how the literariness of the Declaration, written by a prominent Palestinian poet, has been overlooked. She then argues for why and how her **close reading** of the literariness of political texts can be brought to bear on Palestinian history and even its political situation today.*

### Excerpt

“I built my homeland, I even established a state, in my language.”

Mahmoud Darwish

If we are to take the division between politics and literature to be more than artifice, what are we to make of instances where they converge?

Salma Khadra Jayyusi, Palestinian poet and editor of the *Anthology of Modern Palestinian Literature*, describes the convergence of literature and politics as a defining aspect of Palestinian writing. As critic Salah Dean Assaf Hassan explains, for Jayyusi, the two are constantly at war with each other, with the external forces of politics negatively impinging on literature's internalized aesthetics.<sup>1</sup> Edward Said echoes this perspective in *Culture and Resistance*, writing: “In the Arab and specifically the Palestinian case, aesthetics and politics are intertwined, for a number of reasons. One is the ever-present repression and blockage of life, on every level, by the Israeli occupation, by the dispossession of an entire nation, and the sense that we are a nation of exiles. So that defines our situation, to which the writer responds.”<sup>2</sup> While Jayyusi argues that Palestinian literature distinguishes itself insofar as authors enable the aesthetic to conquer the constraints of the political,<sup>3</sup> Said maintains that there is always “an implicit relationship to the

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<sup>1</sup> Salah Dean Assaf Hassan. “Nation Validation: Modern Palestinian Literature and the Politics of Appeasement.” *Social Text* 21, no. 2 (2003): 19. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/43727> (accessed January 3, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> David Barsamian and Edward Said. *Culture and Resistance*. Cambridge: South End Press, 2003: 164.

<sup>3</sup> Salma Khadra Jayyusi, “Introduction.” In *Anthology of Modern Palestinian Literature*, edited by Salma Khadra Jayyusi. New York: Columbia University Press, 1992, 71.

political, even in the most nonpolitical of all forms” of writing,<sup>4</sup> which is best understood through his concept of the “worldliness of texts.” He defines the term in his seminal work, “The Text, the World, the Critic:”

I put this as carefully as I can ... worldliness, circumstantiality, the text's status as an event having sensuous particularity as well as historical contingency, are incorporated in the text, are an infrangible part of its capacity for producing and conveying meaning. This means that a text has a specific situation, a situation that places restraints upon the interpreter and his interpretation not because the situation is hidden within the text as a mystery, but rather because the situation exists at the same level of more or less surface particularity as the textual object itself.<sup>5</sup>

Keeping Said’s “worldliness of texts” in mind, this paper seeks to explore its counterpart, the literariness of the world, as it manifests in political texts. The Palestinian Declaration of Independence, written and translated by Mahmoud Darwish and Edward Said, “deserves greater attention than it has received,” according to Rashid Khalidi, who credits the form, content, and vision in large part to Darwish.<sup>6</sup> Rather than take this authorship as epitomizing Jayyusi’s theory about the supremacy of aesthetics over politics, as posited in what Hassan refers to as the “offspring” of the Declaration of Independence,<sup>7</sup> the Declaration can be seen as a textual microcosm of the convergence of literature and politics at play in the lives of Darwish and Said. Darwish and Said were both members of the Palestine National Council and advisors to Arafat in the ’80s.<sup>8</sup> They met in 1974 and remained friends for the rest of their lives.<sup>9</sup> The former, “Palestine’s unofficial national poet,”<sup>10</sup> was “a brilliant poet – certainly the most gifted of his generation in the Arab world”<sup>11</sup> and “one of the earliest of the so-called resistance poets”<sup>12</sup> in the eyes of the latter. Said, once professor of literature at Columbia University and “star of the

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<sup>4</sup> Barsamian, *Culture and Resistance*, 163-164.

<sup>5</sup> Edward Said. "The Text, the World, the Critic." *The Bulletin of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 8, no. 2 (1975): 8-9. [www.jstor.org/stable/1314778](http://www.jstor.org/stable/1314778) (accessed January 7, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> Rashid Khalidi. “Remembering Mahmud Darwish.” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 38, no. 1 (2007-2008): 75. <https://www.palestine-studies.org/jps/fulltext/42080> (accessed December 1, 2018).

<sup>7</sup> Hassan, “Nation Validation: Modern Palestinian Literature and the Politics of Appeasement,” 17.

<sup>8</sup> Edward Said. "On Mahmoud Darwish." *Grand Street*, no. 48 (1994): 112. [www.jstor.org/stable/25007730](http://www.jstor.org/stable/25007730) (accessed January 3, 2019).

<sup>9</sup> Edward Said: Bright Star of English Lit and PLO.” *New York Times*, February 22, 1980. <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/99/10/03/specials/said-star.html> (accessed January 11, 2019).

<sup>9</sup> Said. “On Mahmoud Darwish,” 113.

<sup>10</sup> Said, “On Mahmoud Darwish,” 112.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Barsamian, *Culture and Resistance*, 161.

Academic World,”<sup>13</sup> “defend[s] the poet’s need for memories and tomorrow, ... country and exile[, and] ... a country hijacked by myths,” according Darwish’s poem, “Edward Said: A Contrapuntal Reading.”<sup>14</sup>

While there exist theories for analyzing the poetry and prose of national literary figures, the same cannot be said for their political writing. The literariness of political texts would provide a framework for analyzing the Declaration as a text existing outside of its immediate political occasion. It would be used to explore, in the words of Tahrir Hamdi, “how a poet can embody the nation and how poetry can indeed make something happen.”<sup>15</sup> It would aid in the examination of what Said calls “writing as a construction of realities, [worlds which] came into being as a series of decisions made by writers, politicians, philosophers to suggest or adumbrate one reality and at the same time efface others.”<sup>16</sup> Ultimately, it would be used to deconstruct how Darwish “built [his] homeland ...[and] even established a state, in [his] language”<sup>17</sup> and the nature of this “written Palestine.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> “Edward Said: Bright Star of English Lit and PLO.”

<sup>14</sup> Mahmoud Darwish. “Edward Said: A Contrapuntal Reading: Translated by Mona Anis.” *Cultural Critique*, no. 67 (2007): 175-182. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4539825> (accessed January 7, 2019).

<sup>15</sup> Tahrir Hamdi. “Yeats’s Ireland, Darwish’s Palestine: The National in the Personal, Mystical, and Mythological.” *Arab Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (2014): 92. [www.jstor.org/stable/10.13169/arabstudquar.36.2.0092](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.13169/arabstudquar.36.2.0092) (accessed January 5, 2019).

<sup>16</sup> Edward Said. *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000, 563.

<sup>17</sup> Helit Yushurun. “Exile Is So Strong within Me, I May Bring It to the Land: A Landmark 1996 Interview with Mahmoud Darwish.” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 42, no. 1 (2012): 52.

<sup>18</sup> Yushurun, “Exile Is So Strong within Me, I May Bring It to the Land: A Landmark 1996 Interview with Mahmoud Darwish,” 57.

*Author Commentary*

Sophie Evans

I wrote this paper on the literariness of political texts for a graduate seminar on the Palestine Liberation Organization, taught by my wonderful thesis advisor, Professor Jonathan Gribetz. Throughout the course, I had been entertaining various ideas for the final, cumulative paper: perhaps something to do with the French language, as many Palestinian diplomats used it in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, or something to do with the Organization's response to the roadmap for a two-state solution, proposed by President Bush in 2002. The latter option directly corresponded to my thesis at the time. Throughout the summer and fall terms, I had been devising an analysis of the American policy, conducting interviews with the EU, US, UN, and UK diplomats involved. I wanted to identify the narrative of the roadmap – how it came about, how it was adopted, implemented, and eventually deprioritized. I was particularly interested in determining the turning point at which the US abandoned the policy. All the while, I was writing weekly response papers for the seminar in which I often turned to the modes of analysis instilled by the Humanities Sequence. I pursued notions of authorial intention, linguistic control, and narrative crafting through the medium of PLO documents.

It was through this process that I came to the conclusion that the professed division between literature and politics was fairly untenable. Particularly for the PLO context, the Palestine National Council included the renowned national poet Mahmoud Darwish and comparative literature professor Edward Said, both of whom brought a certain “literariness” to the political process. I was familiar with Said's theory of the “worldliness of texts” – the ways in which history, politics, and personal circumstance come to bear on a literary text – thanks to the NES research seminar I was taking concurrently with the PLO seminar. The theory proved a useful counterpart to the conceptual work I was doing. If worldliness influenced literature, why shouldn't literariness influence the world? These questions quickly eclipsed my previous work on the roadmap, which led me to change my thesis topic entirely. I suspect I will return to the other project once “literariness” is out of my system, if it ever is.

The Palestinian Declaration of Independence of 1988 emerged as the perfect case to explore my theories. Drafted by Darwish in Arabic and later translated by Said into English before being edited by traditional politicians, the document served as a textual manifestation of the convergence of literature and politics. Knowing my paper would be interdisciplinary, I began to read a wide variety of sources: Darwish's poems, Said's journals, diplomatic histories, UN records, media reports, etc. I wanted to contextualize the declaration historically, legally, and literarily, all

the while maintaining a certain integrity to the “written Palestine.” In its final form, the paper would include a historical chronology of events, a description of the impetus for writing the Declaration, an analysis of competing versions of the text, and a final exploration of its literariness.

I continue to develop these ideas in my senior thesis, of which this paper is to become a chapter. Recently, I have been crafting a definition for the genre of declarations of independence – a definition my survey of scholarship suggests does not yet exist. I believe that the “literariness” of the 1988 text is common to all declarations, even those not written by poets. I continue to work with the Palestinian case, exploring the ways in which its literariness came to bear on the text’s reception. This project, too, is interdisciplinary in nature and requires a manifold approach in order to bring together the different threads at work. I suppose I think in increasingly interdisciplinary terms as a result of my research, which is yet another reason I am at home in the Near Eastern Studies department.

*Editor Commentary*

Nicolette D'Angelo

“The Literariness of Political Texts” by Sophie Evans is what we at the *Tortoise* call a “universal donor.” If I wanted to, I could excerpt it for a wide array of writing lexicon terms. Consider Sophie’s source use: her paper covers a wide variety of material, from Middle Eastern literary theory to Palestinian history and political documents, all of which is often neglected by scholarship. Can you believe that a poet (Mahmoud Darwish) wrote the Palestinian Declaration of Independence in 1988, and that it was later translated into English by a prominent literary theorist (Edward Said)? Sophie’s paper is full of nuggets of literary history like these, which I couldn’t make up if I tried. Further, beyond uniting several strands of interesting, overlooked subject matter, Sophie also coins a key term — “the literariness of political texts” — by taking a central tenet of Said’s literary theory — “the worldliness of political texts” — and flipping it on its head. Although the Writing Seminars require first-year students to engage with the key terms of prominent scholars (for example, the Marxist idea of historical materialism), in my work as a Writing Center Fellow, I have never conferenced with a student who experimented with what would happen if they were to engage with the exact reversal or negation of those terms (for example, material historicism). Transforming another scholar’s term into your own is not foolproof, but it is yet another valid way of refining or critiquing scholarly arguments at the same time that you develop your own.

The reason that Sophie’s paper is being featured, however, is not her source or key term usage, but rather her motive. When working with students, motive is a common complaint, both because it is difficult for students to grasp and because it can feel impossible to notice something puzzling, interesting, or inconsistent in a primary or secondary source or the scholarly conversation that no one has noticed before. What students often do not realize is the close relationship that motive can have with something else, like key term usage. Sophie’s paper is an excellent example of how the successful use of sources and key terms can directly relate to addressing higher-order concerns of argumentative writing. Unlike papers that include key terms for clarity’s sake alone or merely for adding authority to their arguments, Sophie’s use of “the literariness of political texts” is essential to her paper’s protest against the way Palestinian political texts like the Declaration of Independence are usually read, if they are read at all. “While there exist theories for analyzing the poetry and prose of national literary figures, the same cannot be said for their political writing,” Sophie points out. “The literariness of political texts would provide a framework for analyzing the Declaration as a text existing outside of its

immediate political occasion,” exploring, as Tahrir Hamdi puts it, “how a poet can embody the nation and how poetry can indeed make something happen.”<sup>19</sup> This framework is what Sophie develops and executes over the course of the paper.

Before concluding, two special features of Sophie’s writing process deserve mention. First, this excerpt is from a paper for a Near Eastern Studies graduate seminar, which Sophie took as an undergraduate during the fall semester of her senior year. In case you are considering taking a graduate course, don’t be discouraged: graduate writing operates on the same pedagogical basis as undergraduate writing. Second, Sophie’s paper went on to change the way she was thinking about her senior thesis and even became a chapter of her senior thesis. If you are a junior or senior completing independent work, it can feel daunting to meet the expectations of your coursework at the same time that you plan a JP or do research for your thesis. Yet there is no reason for these tasks to be mutually exclusive: you may be surprised what you discover with an open mind.

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<sup>19</sup> Tahrir Hamdi. "Yeats's Ireland, Darwish's Palestine: The National in the Personal, Mystical, and Mythological." *Arab Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (2014): 92. [www.jstor.org/stable/10.13169/arabstudquar.36.2.0092](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.13169/arabstudquar.36.2.0092) (accessed January 5, 2019).

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**Bios**

**Sophie Evans '19** was born in Washington, DC. A member of the Near Eastern Studies Department, her research focuses on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, diplomatic history, and the convergence of politics and the humanities. She has greatly enjoyed exploring the Western, Middle Eastern, and Russian literary canons in her years at Princeton and looks forward to continuing what she hopes will be a lifelong endeavor. She wrote this essay as a senior.

**Nicolette D'Angelo '19** is a Classics major who studies gender and ancient medicine. She is an RCA in Mathey College and previously served as Editor-in-Chief of *The Nassau Literary Review*. As a Writing Center Fellow and Managing Editor of *Tortoise*, she is happy to explain the Greek roots of the word “pedagogy” on request. She wrote this as a senior.