

*Poetry and Re-imagining in the quest for
Sovereignty and Self-determination*

Mary Adams June 7, 2025

My paper is a tribute to Palestinian poets and to resistance poetry everywhere. Likewise, it is a tribute to the imagination: the imagination is key to creating a different future.

For Palestinians, poetry *is* their resistance---it is the only ammunition they have, once described by an Israeli general as 'like facing twenty enemy fighters'.

My paper is also a tribute to Martin Kemp, who has for years tried to educate the psychoanalytic world about the unthinkable Israeli occupation and ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians. I have listened, feeling shattered, to Martin and his soulmate Eliana, after all their brave visits to Palestine over the years.

It is good to have this chance to be with JJ and hear his poetry as a living example of the power of poetry, especially as a symbol of resistance. One of the first quotes of his that I read leads right into my focus on imagination. He said:

I think the sad thing about this world is not even the state of it, but the lack of imagination. The world is our doing, and it is totally within our grasp to live another way - but we cannot imagine, we cannot dream.

This goes to the heart of the matter. 'We cannot imagine, we cannot dream'. This will sound familiar to psychotherapists with the fears that many patients have about both their dreams and their imagination and what truths might be revealed. It is a cliché that the imagination is a wonderful thing, but it is complicated. There are valid reasons why we unconsciously block our imagination.

In psychoanalysis, a main focus with patients is to help free their capacity to imagine things differently. This is resisted because it challenges all our certainties, delusions and denial. But, as emphasized by Ogden, 'The imaginative capacity in the analytic setting is nothing less than sacred':

Imagination holds open multiple possibilities. To imagine, he says, is not to figure out a solution to an emotional problem; it is to change the very terms of the dilemma.

Following Bion, imagining requires a state of *not knowing* in both analyst and patient--a state of trusting the truth-telling intelligence of the unconscious.

To imagine a different reality is the whole essence of Resistance and Revolution. One has only to think of Martin Luther King's *Dream*, imagining that 'one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: that all men are created equal'.

Dreams and re-imagining are at the heart of any political movement. Feeding us false facts tries to distort our perception. But it is the slogans of the anti-war and civil rights movements that provide searing, poetic images that show the simple, unarguable truth. 'Black lives Matter'---a slogan that hits the heart; 'Never Again Means Never Again'.

For the analytic patient in the consulting room, it is the unstoppable force of the unconscious that opens our eyes and lifts us out of our fixed beliefs. The unconscious has its own intelligence, freedom, wit and poetry---poetry in the sense of capturing, in images, emotional truth.

A wonderful example of Ogden's 'changing the very terms of the dilemma' is described by the Irish journalist, Fintan O'Toole, with regard to the 1998 Belfast Agreement. In analysing the shift in thinking that brought about the Agreement, he credits Ireland's rich cultural heritage. He quotes Seamus Heaney who said: "We are not a credit rating...but a history and a culture, a *human* population." Gaza, too, has a rich cultural heritage. Palestinian art and poetry survives and flourishes and their poet, Toha, just won a Pulitzer prize. About Palestinians he said:

We are well educated people and we are humans before everything. We are proud of who we are. We are the indigenous people to this land. This is the only land we know and we demand freedom and justice.

Fintan O'Toole is highlighting the importance of sovereignty and self-determination — a fundamental issue for our times as we learn how, throughout the world, indigenous people's rights have been crushed.

In Northern Ireland, the Belfast Agreement affirmed the birthright of their people to identify themselves as either Irish or British, or both. This had its own 'grave beauty', said O'Toole. This finally was self-determination.

Seamus Heaney said that his Belfast poets group believed that 'the tolerances and subtleties of their art, writing with infinite care and utter honesty, was their antidote to the murderous rhetoric'.

It is wonderful that O'Toole gives prominence to their poets. Completely in awe, he said: 'We gasp in wonder that Irish culture, for all its follies and terrors, had such a person as Seamus Heaney in it!' He went on:

That power to transform things as they are into things as they might be conceived is the poet's true property. In a dark time, Heaney has held open a space for the imagination by showing that people are not necessarily prisoners of the physical reality that seems to doom them to conflict. He has turned borders and dividing lines into rich frontiers.

Then on the imagination of Samuel Beckett, O'Toole said:

It's like an imagination at the end of its tether. People find Beckett bleak, but at the moment he's incredibly consoling for his lack of self-pity. You carry on, you keep the imagination alive and you keep trying to make something beautiful.

'The poet's true property, in a dark time'. We can think about why this could happen in Northern Ireland. But it could not happen between Israel and Palestine. Palestinian poetry does not reach the consciousness of Israeli oppressors who are caught in a 'proleptic imagination' of certainty and paranoia.

Today we are seeing a systematic attempt by Israel to erase all things cultural and human – universities are bombed, bookshops raided. Furthermore, emotion is forced to be hidden: funerals must be held at night; the return of prisoners must not be celebrated. If Palestinians express rage at the occupation they are shot.

Their beloved poet, Darwish, was arrested each time he published new poems. (Imagine) But, he filled football stadiums, with thousands coming to hear him recite. Famously, twenty-five thousand people – doctors, labourers, housewives, academics, cab drivers – came to a reading in a Beirut football stadium! (Something else we cannot imagine.)

In Gaza today, little children's playgroups listen to poems.

Most Palestinians knew by heart Darwish's poem, *The Prison Cell*:

The Prison Cell

It is possible . . .

It is possible at least sometimes . . .

It is possible especially now

To ride a horse

Inside a prison cell

And run away . . .

It is possible for prison walls

To disappear,

For the cell to become a distant land

Without frontiers:

Where did all this water come from?

I brought it from the Nile.

And the trees?

From the orchards of Damascus.

And the music?

From my heartbeat.

The prison guard got mad.

He put an end to my dialogue.

He said he didn't like my poetry,

And bolted the door of my cell.

But he returned in the evening:

Where did this moon come from?

From the nights of Baghdad.

And the wine?

From the vineyards of Algiers.

And this freedom?

From the chain you tied me with last night.

The prison guard grew so sad . . .

He begged me to give him back

His freedom.

Like Seamus Heaney, poets of the Resistance everywhere have been drawn to identify with Palestine. June Jordan, a black American activist involved in the civil rights movement, said the fate of Black people in the States was linked eternally to the fate of Palestinians: two peoples facing the same empire. She described the Palestinian struggle as 'the moral litmus test' of her life. 'I am born a Black woman', she wrote, 'and now. / I am become a Palestinian.'

Her fellow activist, Angela Davis, wrote:

When, long ago, she stood up in support of the Palestinians, June was banished from many circles. But she continued with her remarkable courage and her capacity to choose the words that summon people to produce profound insights about their own responsibility to make a better world.

These are a few lines from a poem Jordan wrote in 2005, but which could be written today:

... those who dare
"to purify" a people
those who dare
"to exterminate" a people
those who dare
to describe human beings as "beasts with two legs"
those who dare
"to mop up"
"to tighten the noose"
"to step up the military pressure"
"to ring around" civilian streets with tanks
those who dare
those who dare
to close the universities
to abolish the press
to kill the elected representatives
of the people who refuse to be purified
those are the ones from whom we must redeem
the words of our beginning... *[Moving Towards Home]*

Then there was the South African poet, Breyten Breytenbach, (who published over sixteen hundred poems!). He said to his hero, Darwish: 'I propose to my fellow poets that we all declare ourselves 'honorary Palestinians.'

About the beauty of Darwish's poetry he wrote:

Was it about Palestine? Was it about his people dying, the darkening sky, the intimate relationships with those on the other side of the wall..., the return to what is no longer there, the memory of orchards, the dreams of freedom...?

Yes - like a deep stream all of these themes were there, of course they so constantly informed his verses; but it was also about olives and figs and a horse against the skyline, the feel of cloth..., the imagination of a child...the hands of a grandfather.

Interestingly, Breytenbach spoke of a 'moral imagination', presumably an imagination that identifies with and humanises the other.

It has been shocking to witness the blatant attempts, in our supposedly democratic institutions, to silence imaginative thinking—even in the psychoanalytic world---institutions which claim to facilitate free speech. Our Resistance poets, however, have no truck with 'neutrality' or 'even-handedness', these terms, used to silence us. Instead they look to the imagination to lift us out of this genocidal quagmire.

It was the Israeli general, Moshe Dayan, who said the poems of Fadwa Tuqan were "like facing twenty enemy fighters." She didn't throw stones, she didn't shoot at the invading Israeli jeeps. She wrote poetry.

She wrote of young stone-throwers:

They died standing, blazing on the road
Shining like stars, their lips pressed to the lips of life
They stood up in the face of death
Then disappeared like the sun. [Martyrs of The Intifada]

Attempts to crush the imagination are also happening in the legal world. The eminent Palestinian lawyer, Eghbariah, seeks a new law that allows the reality in Palestine to be *re-imagined*. He actually uses this term, explaining that while the law does now include the concepts of genocide and apartheid, it does not include the Palestinian *Nakba*, the name for the ongoing 77 years of forced displacement. 'Legal concepts are not fixed', he says, 'and do not exist in a void: they need a constant re-imagining':

Recognizing Nakba bestows a belated recognition upon its primary victims. It allows us to imagine egalitarian, and just futures. It also reinforces the lessons of the Holocaust by recognizing where victimhood is used to victimize others.

Just as his paper was about to be published, both Harvard and Columbia University blocked its publication. There was an outcry and they backed down, but what was exposed was the fear of opening people's eyes to the horrendous reality of mass displacement. In fact, we still have to fight to use the terms genocide and apartheid. When will we be able to include Nakba as a legally recognised crime against humanity?

Seamus Heaney was a long-time supporter of the Palestinians and saw them as a metaphor for *all* human loss, dispossession and exile. He saw poetry as 'a mode of resistance', and quoted Yeats on the poem's purpose: 'To hold, in a single thought, reality and justice'---reality being how things are; justice how they should be.

He spoke about Palestine in his Nobel lecture, and he protested publicly against the bombing of Gaza in 2009, 16 years ago. How would he have coped with the killing today? As he said in one poem:

That old sense of tragedy going on
Uncomprehended, at the very edge
Of the usual, it never left me once...

Heaney speaks of the poet conjuring up work that might be 'hung in the scale as a counterweight to the actuality of the world.' Today the gentle images, for example, of a white kite floating to the sky in Alareer's poem, *If I Must Die*, may help to 'tip the scale' toward a new reality for the Palestinians. It echoes a poem, *If We Must Die*, from a hundred years ago, by the black resistance poet, Claud McKay, in response to the lynchings of black Americans.

The poetry that has emerged during the genocide in Gaza has a directness and a fury, but it also profoundly humanises its people, as do video scenes of children dancing their traditional dance, their Dabke. It shames those of us unfamiliar with Palestine's history and culture. The poems confront us with their unbearable reality and this combination of reality, dreams and imagination gives a message like no other. Taking us into their world, the unimaginable becomes real. The poets themselves become real. We are forced to check ourselves and our thinking.

I will end by reading from a poem by Palestinian, Mira Mattar, written in November 2023.

I'll do to language what they did to my people
I'll blow it apart & make it run
I'll sear its rough & tender forms to burning
I'll take each singing hollow
 inside the As & Os that stretch the words
 out daily in elastic pleasure

 bread
 heat

& make it hungry
I'll make it starve
I'll take the common waters of its lyric
 & parch them to arhythmic cries
 not even fleeing birds can mimic
I'll bury it
I'll coat it in the dust of its own life
I'll take the pinky wands of its girlhood & douse
 & electrify & plunder it to stupefaction
I'll take its own name & push it so deep underground the whole earth
rots...
I'll pull its eyes from sleep & from every daily comfort
 from the turn of the key in the lock at the end of the day
 from the easy glance at the man you love knowing soon you will eat &
sleep
I'll take each quiet dawn
 & fill it with torrents of empty words
 & white faces
 & dollar bills
I'll find every moment of pause at the end of each sentence
 & I'll hold its head in the gentle scoop of my forearms
 & I'll say, *even though every single person you know on earth has just been murdered before your eyes you have to live on somehow in the same world that killed them*
I'll take every groaning elder fretting at the beads

& the backgammon table

& I'll fill the cells of their senses one by one with the orange blossoms of orgies of

heavens on earth

I will scent every breath with sea salt

& honey

& the best cigarettes you've ever tasted

I will breathe with you while you are forced to dig your mother out from under tons of sheets of concrete until your nails are shorn off your fingertips & your fingertips are clawed off your fingers & with your own bones you yourself are digging for the bones of your lover under the house you built with your own hands over & over & over your pointless crawling cockroach insomniac murdering heartless lifeless life that lives on death

that breathes death

that makes death

that sells death

that mines death

 that calculates death

 that ejaculates death

 that orgasms death

 that tastes death

 that smells death

 that is death ...

& we animals

& we sunbeams

& we fine pointed bullets

& we surgeons cleansing wounds with corner shop vinegar

& we babies born to no one born to nothing

will take our revenge on language

& I will take your only question

& I will fill its twisted spinal cord with a century of litanies so precise that the forced confession bursts to millions of poisonous pieces each with millions of wavering fingers

 pointing at a sunless sky