

## **‘Brokers of Grace’: Activating Literature in Palestine’s Tense Present**

### ***“Agentes de Gracia”: activando la literatura en el tenso presente palestino***

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#### **Abstract**

This paper probes new genres of literature that advocate for Palestinian rights and representation. Anna Bernard, writing of ways in which Palestinian and Israeli authors intervene in history, acknowledges that narrative fiction –while not the most widely disseminated of cultural forms– has been ‘a particularly productive medium for thinking through the problems, and the possibilities, of the idea of national narration’. Israel/Palestine is a context in which ‘the idea of the nation’ remains ‘so central a part of everyday experience that writers cannot not address it, and readers cannot help but read for it’.<sup>1</sup> This does not mean, however, that writers produce straightforward allegorical progressions from oppression toward liberation. Neither does it mean that ‘national belonging’ is formulated in naïve ways: either for those who live in the region; or for international audiences reading –sometimes nostalgically, romantically, even exotically– ‘for’ intense representations of belonging.<sup>2</sup>

**Key words:** Palestinian literature, nation, belonging, reading, pedagogies

#### **Resumen**

*Este artículo propone nuevos géneros literarios que claman por los derechos y la representación palestina. Anna Bernard, quien escribe acerca de los modos en que los autores palestinos e israelíes intervienen en la historia, reconoce que la ficción narrativa –mientras que no es la más ampliamente conocida de las formas culturales– ha sido “un medio particularmente productivo para pensar los problemas y las posibilidades de la idea de una narración nacional”. Israel/Palestina conforman un contexto en el que “la idea de nación” sigue siendo “una parte de lo cotidiano tan central que los escritores no pueden no mencionarla, y los lectores no pueden más que leerla”. Esto no significa, sin embargo, que los escritores produzcan directamente progresiones alegóricas que van de la opresión a la liberación. Tampoco significa que la “pertenencia nacional” se formule de modo ingenuo: ni para lo que viven en la región ni para las audiencias internacionales que leen –a veces nostálgicamente, otras con exotismo– buscando representaciones intensas del pertenecer.*

**Palabras clave:** literatura palestina, nación, pertenencia, lectura, pedagogías.

My paper introduces and contextualises, two recent books about Palestine, published in English by non-Palestinians. It considers aspirations to write, read, and teach ‘for liberty’ across cultural, linguistic, situational, and political differences. How, and for whom, might writing and reading constitute critical, emancipatory pedagogies? The paper will consider ways in which literature is dialogically ‘activated’ or put to work *now* –in Palestine’s ‘tense present’.

Let’s start with Tom Sperlinger’s *Romeo and Juliet in Palestine: Teaching Under Occupation*. Sperlinger is Professor of Literature & Engaged Pedagogy at Bristol University. His staff page states: ‘In all of my work, I am interested in who is involved in the conversation (or classroom), and how this changes the questions that are asked’. *Romeo & Juliet in Palestine* was published in 2015 by Zero books.<sup>3</sup> It narrates Sperlinger’s stint as a visiting lecturer, for one semester of 2013, at Al-Quds University in Abu Dis; this was his second visit to the West Bank. The book intersperses classroom episodes with accounts of daily life and conversations with students (given pseudonyms). Each chapter starts *in medias res*, mostly with either a reflection on, or the reported speech of, these students. The book is loosely chronological. This enables the students –who initially appear as emblematic ‘types’ (nihilistic, diligent, etc.)– to accrue complexity as unpredictable, self-contradicting, characters.

Just as importantly, flexible linearity enables the author to digress beyond the classroom – to relay the struggles of daily life in Palestine; aspects of prior experience that shape his responses to it; and what he, the teacher, learns. Sperlinger avoids easy conclusions. In the penultimate chapter, for example, he confesses to his student Haytham that he is thinking of staying on –making a home– in the West Bank. Haytham dismisses that anyone would want to live under such conditions – he himself is dying to get out – and gets the final unsettling line of the chapter: ‘You’re here because you pity us, aren’t you?’<sup>4</sup>

The book moves between anecdote (reproduced from a diary) and reflection, in a *picaresque*-type structure. The irony is that mobility is very differently apportioned between Palestinians, Israelis, and international visitors. The further irony is that this does not always take predictable forms. The book opens with an evacuation of campus, to the sound of gunfire, and Sperlinger is warned to keep his head

down because students have recently confronted a British diplomat. It is never clarified what *this* incident is about. He says: ‘Over the weeks that followed I picked up anecdotal scraps of information, sometimes contradictory’. Clashes between the IDF and the local population are common, but this could have been a family feud, or about a girl.<sup>5</sup>

Subtly and implicitly, we are introduced to the non-sequential time of Palestinian life: ‘the almost metaphysical impossibility of representing the present’ in a context of radical political uncertainty; the resulting tendency, as Edward Said put it three decades ago, for ‘wayward and meandering’ narratives: ‘For where no straight line leads from home to birthplace to school to maturity, all events are accidents, all progress is a digression, all residence is exile’.<sup>6</sup>

As Palestinian human rights organisations highlight, the internationally-enshrined, fundamental right to education is systematically undermined by the Israeli occupation of the West Bank –in partnership with the Palestinian Authority– and the isolation of Gaza.<sup>7</sup> ‘The geographic fragmentation of the OPT [Occupied Palestinian Territories] is mirrored in societal fragmentation which starts at Palestinian universities’, says Sam Bahour, former Board member of Birzeit University and founder of the ‘Right to Enter’ campaign. The situation has worsened in the past year with the expulsion of, and denial of visas to, international academics.<sup>8</sup>

After Sperlinger’s initial account of a University evacuation (and there are many others during his tenure), we read about a class in which students reimagine *Romeo & Juliet* as a film, set in Palestine. The class discusses potential historical and geographical settings; the identity of the protagonists; the ending –one suggests that if it were an Israeli/Palestinian conflict, this would have to change ‘because the Montagues and Capulets would never join hands’<sup>9</sup> – and what students would add to or cut from the play. They carry on the assignment as homework. One student, Qais –who follows a rapper from Liverpool– mixes Shakespearean English, Arabic, and ‘Scouse’ in the encounter where Romeo (Rami) hears of Juliet’s (Judy’s) death:

*Ameen:* Allo, my kidda.

*Rami:* *Marhaba* Ameen, what hath made you such a beanie this morning? Is my Judy well?

*Ameen:* She is well, better than thee and I!

Let it bother you not, she may have been a sloobag...

*Rami: Ya kalb!* Mark your words, for you be speaking of my beloved!

*Ameen:* I would ne'er spoken ill of someone I've not seen doing ill. Your Ju was a with a smile next to a soft lad with a Merc...

The author glosses the Liverpool colloquialisms in this passage ('sloobag' as 'promiscuous person', for example),<sup>10</sup> but not the Arabic –insisting upon the immersion of the non-Palestinian in this classroom context. For Sperlinger – and his audience– the assignment is a learning experience linguistically, historically, culturally – illuminating, for example, an entrenched rift between West Bankers and so-called 'Arab Israelis'.

But it also sheds on the source text. When the class agree there is a lack of overarching authority in the play, Sperlinger recalls Hannah Arendt's insight: that 'Violence appears where power is in jeopardy'. This allows him to reflect upon life in Abu Dis, a small town under Palestinian civil and joint security control, proposed –ludicrously– by Israel as the future capital of a Palestinian state.<sup>11</sup> The town is 'effectively lawless' –a power vacuum, as journalist Amira Hass has suggested, effectively encouraged by Israeli forces.<sup>12</sup> Sperlinger comments that the meaning of *Romeo and Juliet* is irrevocably changed for him by this teaching experience. The political violence that defeats these famous young lovers emerges not as the backdrop to the story; it is, rather, its main content.

However, if there is an overarching conclusion to this book, it is that an ideal source text –here *Romeo & Juliet*– contains productive interpretative 'gaps'.<sup>13</sup> 'I said to a student during the semester' – says Sperlinger – 'that the worst kind of class is one in which the teacher knows how the discussion will end. I suspect the same is true for a book, and I hope that the reader can interpret these anecdotes in his or her own way'.<sup>14</sup> This does not suggest neutrality or infinite possibilities for interpretation: there are always particular 'experiences and perspectives that inform [an] account'. Sperlinger's own encompass Zionist grandparents and a Jewish father born in 1948 in London.<sup>15</sup>

This last –respect for experience– is the book's keynote. Sperlinger recalls teaching an Access course in Liverpool, when student attention is caught by US activist Jeff Halper's account of a Palestinian house demolition, and an Israeli woman's dismissal of Palestinian rights. The story disabuses

the class of media clichés –from which they'd gleaned that this was a 'civil war'. But its content also speaks to the experience of British adults excluded from standard educational routes. Sperlinger has just co-authored a manifesto that reconceives university access and lifelong learning.<sup>16</sup> There, he draws upon a 1968 essay by British historian E. P. Thompson, 'to remind readers that while education ideally allows us to transcend our own experience, 'educational institutions contrive their own distinctive forms of prejudice too'.<sup>17</sup> The benefits of teaching *Romeo and Juliet* in Palestine are multifaceted: naïve delight in story; humour about incongruities of context; the empowering experience of distancing oneself from life under occupation. But crucially also: opportunities to apply 'practical knowledge of ideas [...] such as injustice and how it feels to be denied one's humanity'.<sup>18</sup>

Ankhi Mukherjee reminds us that postcolonial studies comprises 'a historically situated method of epistemological attention'.<sup>19</sup> It attends to 'unpredictable contact zones between canonical texts and readers that crystallize in out-of-context and anachronistic performances of reading'.<sup>20</sup> The canon is not an archive; it is, rather, 'a mode of circulation [or] transmission', 'open to interventions that dislodge familiar reading formations' and can form 'new imaginary unities'.<sup>21</sup> As Said always insisted, the literary critic is a historical *actor*, compelled to take a critical distance from objects of enquiry and to 'call [...] into question his or her own emplacement and affiliations'.<sup>22</sup>

Sperlinger is also influenced by Paolo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970/1993) –which this audience will know– and which argues powerfully for critical consciousness (*conscientização*). Freire prefigures Said's 'secular criticism'.<sup>23</sup> Dialogical (as opposed to 'banking') pedagogy requires embedded teacherly practice, the encouragement of doubt, and efforts to learn *beside* –a 'problem-posing education [...] forged *with*, not *for*, the oppressed'.<sup>24</sup> Fanonian echoes are audible in the claim that 'the great humanistic and historical task of the oppressed' is 'to liberate themselves *and their oppressors*'.<sup>25</sup> Freedom requires an overcoming of the alienation of inauthentic experience, in which the consciousness of the oppressor is internalised.<sup>26</sup> Fanon, Freire, and Said insist upon the historicity of psychology but champion a new humanist generosity. As Freire puts it: 'subjectivity and objectivity

[should] join in a dialectical unit producing knowledge in solidarity with action, and vice versa'.<sup>27</sup>

Each of these thinkers emphasises 'a pedagogy of all people in the process of permanent liberation'.<sup>28</sup> This is liberty as open-ended *project* without a predetermined future. If there is a horizon of expectation, however, the purpose of 'libertarian education' —Freire again— 'lies in its drive towards reconciliation'.<sup>29</sup> Edward Said, late in his life, said:

There can be no reconciliation unless both peoples, both communities of suffering, resolve that their existence is a secular fact, and that it has to be dealt with as such [...] The essence of that vision is *coexistence and sharing* in ways that require an innovative, daring and theoretical willingness to get beyond the arid stalemate of assertion and rejection. Once the initial *acknowledgement of the other as an equal* is made, I believe the way forward becomes not only possible but attractive.<sup>30</sup>

These writers do not advocate a vapid 'bridge-building' — reconciliation must be founded on *justice*. Ali Abuminah —co-founder of Electronic Intifada and advocate of BDS (Boycott Divestment Sanctions)— calls for a fully '*democratic and decolonized* state that offers citizenship and equal rights to all who live between the Jordan river and the Mediterranean'.<sup>31</sup> Such a projected future is only possible if multiple traumas are acknowledged: including Israel's settler colonialist and even genocidal acts.<sup>32</sup> As Palestinian memoirist, Raja Shehadeh, has commented: 'The failure to acknowledge past atrocities is key to what is happening today [...] Memory is political in Israel and Palestine'.<sup>33</sup> Perhaps the best response to the scale and intractability of such a long conflict is the sort of detail in which creative writing excels: the minutiae of the quotidian; the nuances of language; the complexities of the interpersonal. Shehadeh, reflecting upon friendship with an Israeli-resident Jew — a friendship that nearly founders, after decades — decides that this is where he draws the line. Despite a life committed to revealing the lived experience of occupation, he thinks: 'If I care for my friend, I have to accept his decision and what he has made of his life'.<sup>34</sup>

Marilynne Robinson, speaking of human complexity, says:

Open a book and a voice speaks. A world, more or less alien or welcoming, emerges to enrich a reader's store of

hypotheses about how life is to be understood. As with scientific hypotheses, even failure is meaningful, a test of the boundaries of credibility. So many voices, so many worlds, we can weary of them.<sup>35</sup>

And yet what better way to approach the irreducibility of life?

Canadian journalist Marcello di Cintio also believes in books. In *Pay No Heed to the Rockets: Palestine in the Present Tense* (2018), he says:

In the summer of 2014, Israel launched Operation Protective Edge against militants in the Gaza Strip. During a brief lull [...], a series of four photos emerged of a young Gazan girl sifting through the wreckage of a destroyed building [...] she pulls books from beneath shattered concrete and cinderblocks and stacks them in her arms [...] Her broken books reminded me [...] that nothing possesses more beauty — or more humanity — than a story. To weave the snarled strands of a life, real or imagined, into literature is a form of blessed alchemy [...] We are nothing more or less than the stories we tell. And so:

Inspired by the girl and the books she rescued from the detritus of war, I decided to seek out the brokers of grace itself: the poets and writers of Palestine. They gather the detritus of their existence onto their pages [...] and bare the beauty of a place known mostly for its opposite [...] Surely they could reveal what made Palestine special, other than the fact that it had been lost'.

Di Cintio interviews, chats with, and reads Palestinians in the West Bank, Gaza, and '48 Palestine', or Israel; in cafes, bookshops, taxis, the street, cities, villages, and refugee camps. And in so doing, he discovers that: 'The Palestinians live complete lives in their disputed space, regardless of all they've lost and continue to lose'. Indeed, in a context that is frequently brutal and frustrating — that attempts to thwart life — 'humanity gets amplified'. 'I found a story in every crack of this place', he concludes. Many voices, many worlds.

Stories emerge as irrepressible conduits for diversity, dissidence, steadfastness, and the general business of living. In both of the books discussed here, literature is activated, between actants and languages, as creative resistance to the physical, psychological, and representational containment

of Palestinian experience. One can over-romanticise this: creativity may be the last resort, in the face of growing Israeli ambition and exhausted Palestinian nationalism. Just this week, Nora Parr published a piece arguing that ‘symbols that once made sense of politics and action no longer fit’. They are ‘the wrong skin for a new generation’ of Palestinians, who need ‘to craft words for a lived reality that is no longer best described by lingering systems. To make the world, and its pasts, afresh; to find new words and symbols that recognise history but give different space to its expression in the present’. But she also argues—and Di Cintio shows—we can ‘stop waiting: the “next” Palestinian writers are already here’.<sup>36</sup>

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Bernard, *Rhetorics of Belonging*, 2013, 7, 9.
- <sup>2</sup> See also Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic*; Brouillette, *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace*.
- <sup>3</sup> <http://www.zero-books.net/about-us.html>— USP ‘to publish books that make our readers uncomfortable, books that require authors go beyond hot takes and received opinions’.
- <sup>4</sup> Sperlinger, 2015, 129–130.
- <sup>5</sup> Sperlinger, 2015, 6.
- <sup>6</sup> Said, *After the Last Sky*, 1986, 20, 38, ?.
- <sup>7</sup> Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: ‘Everyone has the right to education’ and ‘higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit’.
- <sup>8</sup> See <http://www.righttoenter.ps>, and Sophia Brown, ‘Israel’s assault on Palestinian universities is a threat to human rights and a tragedy for this generation of students’, *The Independent*, 21 October 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/israel-palestine-conflict-universities-education-students-gaza-middle-east-a8594446.html>
- <sup>9</sup> Sperlinger, 2015, 3.
- <sup>10</sup> Sperlinger, 2015, 4.
- <sup>11</sup> Image: Jerusalem seen from Abu Dis: Tom Suarez, *Mondoweiss*, 5 August 2010, <https://mondoweiss.net/2010/08/visit-abu-dis-site-of-the-palestinian-capital/>
- <sup>12</sup> Sperlinger, 2015, 6.
- <sup>13</sup> Sperlinger, 2015, 5. Sperlinger also extrapolates from the teaching of other books during the semester, including *Julius Caesar* and non-Shakespearean fiction.
- <sup>14</sup> Sperlinger, 2015, 8.

- <sup>15</sup> Sperlinger, 2015, 8–9.
- <sup>16</sup> See <https://bristoluniversitypress.co.uk/who-are-universities-for> and Sperlinger’s 2019 TedX talk at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U1DjYsDS4>
- <sup>17</sup> Sperlinger, 2015, 136.
- <sup>18</sup> Sperlinger, 2015, 138.
- <sup>19</sup> Mukherjee, 2014, 17.
- <sup>20</sup> Mukherjee, 2014, 16.
- <sup>21</sup> Mukherjee, 2014, 13, 8, 9; citing Patricia Waugh, *Literary Theory & Criticism*, 71.
- <sup>22</sup> Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, 15.
- <sup>23</sup> Freire, 1993, 10–11; Said op cit
- <sup>24</sup> Freire, 1993, 13, 14, 22.
- <sup>25</sup> Freire, 1993, 18, my emphasis.
- <sup>26</sup> Freire, 1993, 22; see also Ngugi, 1981.
- <sup>27</sup> Freire, 1993, 12.
- <sup>28</sup> Freire, 1993, 28.
- <sup>29</sup> Freire, 1993, 45.
- <sup>30</sup> Said, 1999: n. pag., my emphasis.
- <sup>31</sup> Abuminah, 2014, 46.
- <sup>32</sup> See Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (2006).
- <sup>33</sup> Shehadeh, 2017.
- <sup>34</sup> Shehadeh (2017).
- <sup>35</sup> Marilynne Robinson, *The Givenness of Things: Essays* (2015)
- <sup>36</sup> Parr, ‘Stop Waiting: “Next” Palestinian Writers Are Already Here’, *Middle East in London*, April/May 2019.