

**Michael Davitt's Gaelic Poem
O My Two Palestinians
Between Nationalism and Humanism**

by

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ملخص البحث

في هذا البحث قراءة لقصيدة "آه يا ولدي الفلسطينيين"، التي كتبها الشاعر الإيرلندي المعاصر مايكل دافيت باللغة الغيلية وهي لغة إيرلندا الأصلية، بعد أن شاهد عام 1982 م تقريراً وثائقياً متلفزاً عن مذبحه صبرا وشاتيلا التي ارتكبت ضد فلسطينيين في بيروت، فعاش الشاعر لحظة تحول عاطفي عند رؤيته مناظر الدماء، فاعتقد بأن الطفلين المغدورين هما ابناه، وكان تأثير التقرير مؤلماً لأن الطفلين الفلسطينيين بريئان. بالإضافة إلى هذا يؤمن الشاعر بحتمية تحرير الشعوب من الهيمنة الاستعمارية، وبحقها في محافظتها على تراثها وثقافتها. لهذا تطرقت الدراسة إلى عرض بعض ملامح النضال الإيرلندي المعاصر، خاصة وإنني اكتشفت أن ثمة نقاط التقاء بينه وبين النضال الفلسطيني. وقد انتهت إلى أن مضمون القصيدة هو أن المشاعر الإنسانية أسمى من العرقية والإقليمية. ولهذه الأسباب فإنني أعد هذه القصيدة إضافة متميزة إلى مجموع الأعمال المتوافرة في القائمة الطويلة من الأدب الإيرلندي القومي والإنساني الداعي إلى تحرير الوطن والإنسان.

ABSTRACT

I devoted this paper to read the humanistic and nationalistic meanings in Michael Davitt's Gaelic poem "O My Two Palestinians". He composed the poem after watching a television report on the massacre committed against innocent Palestinians in Beirut. Davitt was greatly influenced by the film and passed through a metamorphosis believing - at a certain moment - that those two innocent Palestinian children were his. He went upstairs to check on his own children; he found them sleeping in their beds. At the nationalistic level, Davitt fights for his identity, culture, and freedom. The paper demonstrates an attempt to find identical factors of the Palestinian and Irish national struggles and their related literatures. In the end, it remains that the humanistic feelings are more honest and authentic than ethnicity and regionalism; man's fight for freedom is appreciated. The poem is a new remarkable qualitative addition to the long list of the Irish literature calling for freedom and independence.

The poetic calling develops out of a pact made between people and poet; hence the power of such invocations to an actual poem as those provided by the figures both men [Yeast the national, and Neruda, the anti-fascist] seem to require⁽¹⁾.

Michael Davitt is a contemporary Irish stage producer and poet. He was born in Cork City, Ireland in 1950. In addition to his work as a stage director, he published three collections of poetry, *Gleann ar Ghleann* (Valley by Valley) in 1982, *Bligeard Sráide* (Blagard Street) in 1983, and *Rogha Dánta* (Selected Poems, 1968-1985) in 1991. The last collection was published by Raven Arts Press - Dublin, in 1987. Davitt's poem "O My Two Palestinians" appeared in his second and third collections of poems. Davitt said that he composed this poem after "having watched a television report on the Palestinian massacre in Beirut, 18/9/82"⁽²⁾.

There has been a great deal of writing and media coverage in the Arab countries and other parts of the world about the massacre. However, Davitt's poem has occupied a special place in the literary arena. He wrote it in Gaelic then Philip Casey translated it into English. The Irish poets and writers who devoted their pens for liberty and independence are great in number; and the list of their literary and political anti-colonialist and anti-imperialistic writings is a long one.

This paper is limited to offer a thematic reading of the poem without going deep into the postcolonial literature, and without comparing the poem with any other poem on the same political situation. I would like to explore some of the humanistic and nationalistic meanings inherent in the poem.

Since the time Man felt the urge to end his solitude and the need to extend human solidarity, he has been writing poetry. From that still undetermined moment of time until the present day, we have been faced with the same question, what does it mean to

write poetry? What does it mean to write a poem about the Palestinians? The question compels us to historical conditions in order to explain the gestation of the poetic text and delimit its specificity, which may or may not be proper to it. Thus, the question deviates from the norm of poetic creativity and requires a different formulation: What does it mean to be humanistic? In this context, sensitive human feelings precede national identity and aesthetic identity, by all standards. Faced with such questions, the Irish poet is encouraged to defend himself as well as the others whom he feels to be under inhumane circumstances and conditions identical to his own; the armless Palestinians massacred in Beirut in 1982. Exactly like the Irish people, the Palestinian people had fallen a victim of the British occupation and its oppressive and discriminatory policy. Decades back, Palestine was under the British Mandate, while centuries back, Ireland became under the British government. In the case of Palestine, the country was given to the Jews by the favor of Balfour Declaration of 1917. In a comment on this declaration, Christopher Skyes writes

Balfour could regard the native inhabitants of Palestine as having priority on the land, but nowhere near the subsequent authority to keep it; the mere wishes of 700,000 Arabs, he said, were of no moment compared to the destiny of an essentially European colonial movement⁽³⁾.

For a long time, Ireland was in the mind of the English governments. On this question Brandon Kennelly writes

From the eleventh century on, the English broke an amazingly persistent cultural attitude existed toward Ireland as a place whose inhabitants were a barbarian and degenerate race⁽⁴⁾.

What added to the complexity of the situation was "the Treaty of Limerick in 1691 and Catholic Ireland became enslaved"⁽⁵⁾. The

enslavement of Ireland occurred earlier than that. Angus Calder writes

Ireland was ceded by the Pope to Henry II of England in the 1150s; he himself came to Ireland in 1171. From that time on an amazingly persistent cultural attitude existed toward Ireland as a place whose inhabitants were barbarians and degenerate⁽⁶⁾.

“O My Two Palestinians” falls in an interesting area in the history of modern colonialism. It was written by an unknown young Irish poet about Palestinians. It translates a combination of humanistic feelings and nationalistic ideas at the same time. When writing the poem, Davitt could safely assume that his readers understood what he meant by the title of the poem, so he does not define it. The poem is on the carefully planned massacre that was performed on innocent Palestinian refugees living in Sabra and Shatila in the suburbs of Beirut; the massacre shocked the feelings of the high spirited people, no matter what was their nationality or ethnic group or religious belief or skin color; on the other side, it is still that the massacre will remain a stain in the history of humanity. In an attempt to clarify and explain the humane aspect of his poem, and in a letter dated 10th May 1996 Davitt wrote to me

It was a very graphic news report of the aftermath of the killings. The subsequent equally graphic images of death in my poem were based on my recollection of the news report that night in September 1982⁽⁷⁾.

Then, on seeing the “blood”, Davitt passes a moment of metamorphosis. That metamorphosis represents the climax of Davitt’s humanist feeling and sensitivity. He demonstrates that deep moment in the following words

I went up stairs having watched the report to check on my own two children - I suppose you could call it paternal instinct. The poem is in the realm of reality for the first five lines i.e. the girl and boy are asleep in the bedroom. But in

the second line of the third verse the scene undergoes a metamorphosis with the word "blood". Now the poem is in the realm of metaphor i.e. the children are not asleep now, they are two Palestinians from the TV newsreel and here they are in bedroom in Dublin, their bodies rotting in the central heating. I suppose it my own way of saying, 'you slaughtered Palestinians in Beirut, you are my children, and you my children up stairs in bed you could be those dead Palestinians'⁽⁸⁾.

It was not the first time for the Palestinians to be massacred, and the examples are numerous. From the beginning, in 1948, under cover of the British mandate, the Palestinian entity was shattered by a military ruthlessness - quite identical to natural calamities; the exodus of an uprooted people. Then, throughout their history, and after the invasion of Bierut, and the withdrawal of PLO from Lebanon the Sabra and Shatila massacre was committed. Edward Said takes a different angle to see what happened, and comments: "One of the complexities of the 1982 invasion was that it showed the West a side of Israel hitherto well hidden"⁽⁹⁾.

The massacres and pogroms which the Palestinians have been subjected to, are part of daily experience of the Palestinian writers. S. Kh. Jayyusi draws our attention to such an experience. She says

Personal account literature by Palestinian writers is perhaps the greatest witness to the age of catastrophe. ... Memoirs, reminiscences, diaries, and autobiographies alike reveal a burning wish to establish the identity of the protagonist and delineate their personal experience⁽¹⁰⁾.

The long history of the Palestinian struggle was interrupted by different kinds of mass murder, destruction, pogroms, and calamities practiced on them. On such situations Edward Said writes:

The principle of 'armed struggle' derives from the right of resistance accorded universally to all peoples suffering national oppression. Yet like all peoples (including, of course, the Jews) the Palestinians resorted on occasions to spectacular outrages, in order to dramatize their struggle and to inflict pain on an unremitting enemy ... Certainly Israeli violence against Palestinians has *always* been *incomparably* greater in scale and damage⁽¹¹⁾.

One modern Palestinian poet, F. H. Mikdadi, could not forget many saddening and gloomy situations in the modern Palestinian history, where human blood was split cheaply; the Palestinian blood was shed easily. Consider the following lines from "**The Dying**", a poem by Mikdadi

They are so hard;

Those names.

Deir Yassine.

Tal Zaatar.

Karameh.

They are so hard.

Hard as the hearts that made them⁽¹²⁾.

The offspring of the exodus, the children of this long march of struggle, and the witness have been massacred in front of all the people of the world, to add to the never ending reserve army of Palestinians killed for political reasons; their dream of freedom and a homeland cost them dearly. The Palestinian, witness and martyr, is permanently engaged in the reconstruction of this crumbled world of collective childhood, the childhood that was deprived of the right to flourish under normal conditions. Then, those children who became grown-ups are savagely butchered in Sabra and Shatila by a regiment of the Israeli army in cooperation and planning with the Lebanese Phalangist Party militia members.

For forty years, the Palestinians have been driven from exodus to exile, thrown into the sea and desert and stacked in

concentration camps and collective graveyards, and their enemies have worked out all the means possible to banish them even from their own dream!

The problem of freedom and independence are further aggravated by a multitude of problems concerning the Palestinian's survival among men: Where to go? Where to breed? Sleep? Work? Learn? Where to write poetry? Where to be buried? He has been hunted by the forces of aggression everywhere, and has become a target, and sometimes he is in the zero point. He searches for a grave as desperately as he searches for a home, and does he forget his homeland, there! Waleed al-Halees (b. 1952), a contemporary Palestinian poet from Gaza but lived in a compulsory exile, in Beirut, and now in Sweden, composed a poem entitled "*A Poem on a Closed Summer*" in which - among other things - he saw his native city Gaza in the form of a woman in a dream. He said

Gaza ... You come to me
I feed the bread of desolation
And watch the entrance of Gaza
(Gaza's entrance is a graveyard
Your grave is my rib
And I know no grave for me
All things deny me now)...⁽¹³⁾

Davitt could not endure seeing a television report of the pogrom. He was deeply moved by the innocence of those Palestinian children; their innocence was completely ignored and their humanness was absolutely disregarded by the criminals. The two Palestinians of the documentary film were a boy and a girl living in miserable conditions far away from their homeland. The question is, were they murdered because of their Palestinianism? Was it because of their calls for their right to live with honor and dignity in an independent state? It may be because of the two reasons together. After all, they are human beings who, by all

standards, deserve to live armless, innocent, and free. But, who cares about them? A humanist poet like Davitt does care. On a larger scale, Davitt sees a kind of similarity between the condition of the Palestinians and that of the Irish. Like any humanist poet, he hates seeing bloodshed and murder for political reasons.

Though the poet speaks English, he composed his poem in the language of his fathers in an attempt to reportray historical and cultural contours for the upcoming Irish generations. In a confirmatory statement about the importance and vitality of the Irish Gaelic, Davitt wrote to me: "Are you aware that Irish Gaelic is the oldest vernacular Literature in Europe? There has been a great revival here of poetry and music since 1960's"⁽¹⁴⁾.

The Irish and the Palestinian peoples suffered from the British Occupation and the British Mandate. Part of the Irish people are still fighting for their freedom from the British hegemony, and they still dream of their independent state exactly like the Palestinians whose dream of a homeland and an independent state has never abandoned their memory and imagination. The Irish and the Palestinian history of struggle for a life from tyranny are extremely hard, and their circumstances are harsh; comparing their struggle with those of the others, one realizes that theirs continued longer; the two peoples still suffer from the oppressive forces, colonial powers, and that "our two historic nations are poised on the precipice between war and peace ..."⁽¹⁵⁾.

The whole situation should explain - in a way - why a modern Irish poet, as well as modern Palestinian poets, became hymns of men trying to demolish the walls of their solitude in order to build their national and cultural unity. "O My Two Palestinians" introduces a humanistic protest in Gaelic; it protests the murder of two children on the threshold of the globe in front of the whole world.

The complains of victims forced to prove that they are not bands of out-laws and criminals; for the Palestinian's only guilt is that she/he refuses to suffer voluntary amnesia attached to their right and their humanity - the two components of any homeland. In the eyes of the West, the Palestinian is almost always in the negative. Edward Said writes "In his resistance to foreign colonialists the Palestinian was either a stupid savage or negligible quantity, morally and even existentially"⁽¹⁶⁾. Therefore, the Palestinian has to pay the price all the time; the massacre in Beirut proved that the enemy has not changed his inner self, and that the Israeli occupation terror shares with the Phalangists in this ironic paradox - to banish the Palestinian from his own dream by murder!

The problems of freedom and independence are further aggravated by multitude of more elementary ones concerning the Palestinian's survival among men. The industrial complex that manufactures human conscience instead of looking with some understanding and compassion on the tragedy which lead to a great number of tragedies including the massacre in Beirut, they unfortunately partake - on brightly colored screens - in embellishing and justifying the destruction of a people, a history, a homeland and a culture. At the same time, they justify terrorist deeds committed by Israelis!

Davitt has felt all the situation at Sabra and Shatila, and it has become difficult for him to strike a balance between the beauty of poetry and its efficacy; to reconstruct what is crumbling inside him, with mere words. The situation is more difficult than poetry to regain, or to recreate through its creativity. The report was so hard on the poet's feelings; his feelings were described by his words which tried to reportray the horrible scene of the human blood spelt for a crime that has never been committed by those victim children. One sees innocents butchered like sheep; sheep are butchered for food, but what the Palestinians are butchered

for? Was it because they demand their freedom, cultural identity, historical movement, homeland and independent state, and may be other things which have been robbed by robbers? They did not search for a homeland in a legendary dream, or in a far away imagination, or in a smooth page of a beautifully bound ancient book. Also, they did not buy their homeland in a real estate or an agency. They did not create this homeland as if setting up an establishment or constructing a building, but their homeland has created its people. It is the homeland of their fathers and mothers, and they did not object that choice, the choice of the homeland. They did not adopt their homeland, and no one has convinced them toward loving it, rather, they found themselves 'pulsing' in his blood and flesh, and 'marrowing' in his bone, so that he is theirs, and they are his. Accordingly, this sad historical moment of mass murder will not eliminate the Palestinian dream.

“O My Two Palestinians” is a brave outcry against savagery and bloodshed; it presents a passion of the poet. Davitt starts his poem by a simple and innocent daily practice when he "pushed open the door" but what for? It was to "let light ... on them [his children]". But they look in a miserable and very inhumane condition as they were shot dead, and fallen carelessly on the ground. The girl looked partly stripped off "her nightgown tossed above her buttocks", and that "her blood smears her knickers"; the blood comes from a hole in the back of her head where she was shot and murdered with cold blood. Besides her is dead a boy with "intestines slithered from his belly". This ugly and disgusting scene of the murder is carefully portrayed by Davitt so as to keep alive, in the memory of the world, the savagery and brutality of the colonial forces against humanity. This ugly picture brings to mind a modern Palestinian poet, M. F. Mikdadi, who composed the following lines

Now I am dead think only this of me:

That I died friendless, homeless, nationless.

That I died hated, forgotten, prejudiced.
That I died without prayer for Palestine.
That I died in bitterness and in blood⁽¹⁷⁾.

Davitt's writing in Gaelic, the language of his great grand-fathers, conveys a kind of pride in his native language, culture and country, and expresses a nostalgia to his past. It also reveals a conspicuous desire to bring back to life the Gaelic culture which was subjected to attempt of destruction. Kennelly writes

English rule in Ireland went a long way towards destroying the Irish language, and, therefore, writing in Irish; but the language never died completely, and in fact is still alive. It is fair to say that the Battle of Kinsale in 1601 brought to an end the glorious native tradition in the literature of Ireland⁽¹⁸⁾.

These historical facts and Davitt's determination to write in Gaelic reflects the poet's love of the history of his homeland. The Irish attempts to keep their culture and identity alive had been very old. This appears in their endeavor to reorganize themselves in national movements like the **United Irishman**, founded in 1791 in Belfast by Wolfe Tone, and the **Irish Home Rule League**, established in 1874 in Dublin⁽¹⁹⁾, and the **Gaelic Movement**. One of the major supporters of the **Gaelic Movement** was W. B. Yeats who strongly believed that the movement was to represent the Irish national character, and to maintain Ireland away from becoming "an imitation England"⁽²⁰⁾. Out of his enthusiasm to the objectives of the **Gaelic Movement**, and out of his strong belief that the Irish language is to be revived and taught at schools and wherever possible, Yeats in cooperation with Douglas Hyde and other enthusiast friends in March 1902, organized a march in support of Gaelic language teaching calling it "a language procession"; they marched around Dublin and the major Irish cities and towns to collect money for the purpose of teaching Irish language and literature⁽²¹⁾. There were also other Irish groups and movements founded in search of identity and for the sake of

independence. These movements include Ulster Defense Union, founded in 1893, Sinn Fein, founded in 1902, Irish Republican Army (IRA), founded in 1919. Furthermore, other nationalistic organizations were founded to search - in different ways - for a culture and identity; they reflect the Irish dream of a free homeland and an independent state⁽²²⁾.

The Palestinian and the Irish peoples have to remain ready on the line, ready to fight in a battlefield, and ready to fight different battles on all fronts by all means possible, or else, they will remain easy victims for the forces of aggression. Once more comes the identical situations encounter the Irish and the Palestinian alike. While the Palestinians are accused of being all the time savage and terrorists, the situation of the Irish is not any better. On the Irish question, Agnes Calder says: "The idea of murdering Gaels was from the start 'as part of a royal army or with royal approval, [considered] patriotic, heroic, and just'"⁽²³⁾. And Edward Said writes: "[S]ince Spencer's 1596 tract on Ireland, a whole tradition of British and European thought has considered the Irish to be a separate and inferior race, usually unregenerately barbarian, often delinquent and primitive..."⁽²⁴⁾.

The Palestinians and the Irish have to transform the terms of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* quest into a definitive answer. Not to ask, "To be or not to be, that is the question" but to affirm, "To be or not to be, this is the decision!"

"O My Two Palestinians" is a new addition to the long list of the Irish literature on the freedom of man; it is supportive to the literary nationalism of another people living under unjust conditions. After all, it is an interesting contribution to the humanistic Irish poetry, and the literature of anti-imperialist resistance. By writing this poem, Davitt secured himself a name in the long list of the Irish writers who used the verbal expression to fight for humanity and man's freedom.

Appendix 1

O My Two Palestinians

-- having watched a television report
on the Palestinian massacre in Beirut,
18/9/82

Poet: Michael Davitt

Translator into English: Philip Casey

I pushed open the door
enough to let light from the landing
on them:

blankets kicked off
they lay askew
as they had fallen:

her nightgown tossed above her buttocks
blood on her lace knickers,
from a gap in the back of her head

her chicken brain retched on the pillow,
intestines slithered from his belly
like seaweed of a rock,

liver-soiled sheets,
one raised blood smeared hand.
O my two Palestinians rotting in the central heat.

Appendix 2

32 Albony Road, Roneagh, Dublin 6. Republic of Ireland.

Fax: 01-491 0252

10 th. May 1996

Said I Abdelwahed,
PO BOX 1110,
Gaza - via Israel.

Dear Said I Abdelwahed,

Firstly may I offer you my sincere apologies for the long delay in replying to your correspondence. Unfortunately I mislaid the paper you sent me last year but found again yesterday in another file. However I am now giving the matter my full attention. I am indeed very pleased that you read my poem in translation and am honoured that you liked it enough to write your paper on it.

Allow me first to say a little about my country, and the Gaelic language which I use as a literary medium and speak on an everyday basis at home and at work (I earn my living not by writing poems but as a producer of television programmes in Gaelic, or Irish, as it is commonly known here). The Rep. of Ireland is an independent state which broke free from British rule in 1921 after hundreds of years of struggle. But the north western part of the island has remained in British hands. This province in the north is called Northern Ireland. It has a population of about 1,000,000 the majority of which are Protestant and see themselves as British. The minority are Catholic and nationalist and it is from this community that the IRA emerged to carry out an armed struggle since 1968. As you know, there has been more constitutional activity of late which will, hopefully, arrive at some agreement between the two allegiances which will enable them to live in peace and reconciliation. Personally, I am not a believer in war as a means of resolving political or cultural conflict, although as a realist I can understand why the minority nationalist community in north were pushed by forty years of religious and social repression to take up arms...

The poem, 'O My Two Palestinians', as you rightly say in your paper is a humanist response to the horrific slaughter of innocents at the Sabra and Shatila camps in Beirut. It was a very graphic news report of the aftermath of the killings. The subsequent equally graphic images of death in my poem were based on my recollection of the news report that night in September 1982. I went up stairs having watched the report to check on my own two children - I suppose you could call it paternal instinct. The poem is in the realm of reality for the first five lines ie. the girl and boy are asleep in the bedroom. But in the second line of the third verse the scene undergoes a metamorphosis with the word 'blood'. Now the poem is in the realm of metaphor ie. the children are not asleep now, they are two Palestinians from the TV newsreel and here they are in my own bedroom in Dublin, their bodies rotting in the central heating. I suppose it was my own way of saying, 'you slaughtered Palestinians in Beirut, you are my children, and you my children up stairs asleep in bed you could be those dead Palestinians'.

Although I sympathize with the Palestinian cause, I may well have written the same poem about Israeli children or even British. I think it is a poem about the futility of war. Well this is the background to my poem which has reached you in far away Gaza and confirms to me once

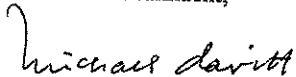
more the great spiritual power of poetry and how it can reach through all the political and linguistic divides of the world.

As our two historic nations are poised on the precipice between war and peace this is an intriguing correspondence for me and I hope it is only the beginning of a more thorough exchange between us. I will send you some more material in the near future which will explain further to you the present position of Gaelic literature, music, and culture. Are you aware that Irish Gaelic is the oldest vernacular literature in Europe? There has been a great revival here of poetry and music since the 1960's. You have probably heard of Seamas Heaney who has recently been awarded The NOBEL Prize for literature. He is a great poet and lives not far from me here in Dublin.

So please look forward to receiving more literature from me soon. Maybe you can write and tell me more about yourself and modern Palestinian poetry and music.

In the meantime I wish you and your countrymen freedom and peace.

Beir bua is beannacht,



MICHAEL DAVITT

NOTES

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7. A letter from Michael Davitt to Said I. Abdelwahed on 10th May 1996.
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24. Said. *Culture and Imperialism*, 285.

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