

## THE USE OF ANCIENT MYTHS IN MODERN POETRY: THE MYTH OF SISYPHUS AS A CASE STUDY

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**ABSTRACT:** *The purpose of this study is to shed light on esthetic uses of Greek myth, its artistic and realistic uses, and the reasons for the allusions to it in contemporary poetry. Selected poetic texts will be analyzed for the use which some modern poets make of the legend of Sisyphus for expressing their views and for showing how they perceived its artistic value. Among these poets are Al-Sayyāb, Al-Bayātī, Adonis, ‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Muqāliḥ, as well as the Palestinians Aḥmad Daḥbūr, Murīd al-Barghūthī and Fārūq Muwāsī, all of whom made use of the legend in order to express both suffering and hope in the crisis of Arabs in current times, in an attempt to bring these across to the reader.*

**KEYWORDS:** Sisyphus, Ancient, Myth, struggle, nation, symbol, suffering, exile.

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### INTRODUCTION

Myth is a prominent expressive device that poets have used in order to write about their experiences. It is not merely a primitive literary genre that flourished in pre-historical and early historical times. Rather, it has been a basic core factor in human life in every period, including in the most advanced cultures, and has been a constant source of inspiration for artists and poets alike.<sup>1</sup> Myth thus survives in the age of reason, as the basic living fabric of every idea, theory and school of thought, while at the same time it represents the childhood of human thought and the most pristine and spontaneous material, since it is fundamentally associated with metaphysical thought while it deals with the adventures of heroes and their interactions with the gods. Myths occur at a time that is outside of history and belong to a fantasy world of their own, not a part of the world of experience.<sup>2</sup>

In view of the preceding we may say that myths may be considered a most complete vessel through which primitive man interpreted his existence and explained his theory about the nature of the universe. Myths contain a mixture of knowledge, imagination and dreams about reality,<sup>3</sup> thoughts and the unconscious. It unites time and space and various types of beings,<sup>4</sup> in order to express the truth of the cosmos in its entirety. For this reason Myths were defined as "a story or a collection of story elements that express in an inner symbolism the tragedy of human existence and the most profound aspects of mortal life".<sup>5</sup> Poets draw new meanings from myths, which they find suitable for expressing contemporary views towards the problems of life, because of their cultural complexity. Myths therefore constitute a special system in the structure of contemporary Arabic poetic speech, due to

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Izz al-Dīn Ismā‘īl, *al-Shi‘r al-mu‘āšir qaḍāyāhu wa-ḥawāshiruhu al-fanniyya wal-ma‘nawiyya*, (‘Ammā: Dār al-Fikr, n.d), 222-223.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 228.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Abd al-Riḍā ‘Alī, *al-Uṣṭūra fī shi‘r al-Sayyāb*, (Baghdad: Ministry of Culture and Information, 1978), 19.

<sup>4</sup> Ans Dāwūd, *al-Uṣṭūra fī al-shi‘r al-ḥadīth*, (Cairo: Dār al-ma‘ārif, 1992), 12.

<sup>5</sup> Salmā Khaḍrā‘ al-Juyūshī, *al-Ittijāhāt wal-ḥarakāt fī al-shi‘r al-‘arabī al-ḥadīth*, (Beirut: Markaz dirāsāt al-ḥadīth al-‘arabiyya, 2001), 795.

their profound cognitive structure and their connection to nations' beliefs, traditions and spiritual heritage. In short, they constitute an evolving and fragmented view of the structure of time and place. From a historical perspective myths were a way for primitive man to overcome his terrors, while politically they were an attempt to create a more radiant and beautiful alternative, a window through which the Arab could see the light, since it creates a state of mental equilibrium with one's surroundings, and provides the basis for dreams, imagination and recall.<sup>6</sup>

The reason why I chose the legend of Sisyphus is the frequency with which it has been alluded to in modern poetry, as a symbol of man's eternal suffering and struggle in his attempts to attain his aspirations. He knows that life is a quest, but he continues in his exertions to the end.<sup>7</sup> The myth symbolizes fruitless effort. The goddess punished Sisyphus because he had discovered the secret of Zeus and because he scorned and rebelled against her. His punishment was to roll a heavy rock from the bottom to the top of a mountain in Hades, whereupon the rock would roll back down to the bottom and he would have to begin his labor anew.<sup>8</sup> Most of the allusions to this legend within poems occur only as partial elements within the overall context of a general topic: "Perhaps this artistic behavior emulates the habit of poets in the 1950s who first opened up this field in modern Arabic poetry, such as al-Sayyāb, al-Bayātī, Adonis and others".<sup>9</sup> These poets used the myth in a way that went beyond its original framework in expressing contemporary experiences and views and taking it as a symbol of continuity and persistence.

Al-Sayyāb, who was known for his use of numerous legends, found in Sisyphus a figure through whom he was able to enrich his text and to express his various moods, even if he had to change some meanings in order to do so, which is something that certainly lies within the scope of poetic license. This can be seen very clearly in his poem "Welcome, Monsters", in which he says:<sup>10</sup>

### **Father, father**

Oh ladder of melodies, what desire lies in your depth?  
Sisyphus lifts it but it falls to the bottom as you break down  
Oh ladder of blood and time, from the water to the sky  
Monsters ascend toward me from the soil of my father and grandfather  
His hands touch mine and caress my cheek  
Then I see my beginning in my end

Here al-Sayyāb has taken away the myth's atmosphere of tragedy and turned it into a symbol of celebration upon the birth of his son while his mother was still breast feeding. In this he took the myth's basic meaning of human suffering and made it embody the idea of the temporal cycle, the idea that everything eventually turns full circle,<sup>11</sup> just like Sisyphus' efforts, which always begin at the same point as he lifts the rock. The festive atmosphere experienced by al-Sayyāb was born in the wake of the absence of a sense of

<sup>6</sup> Muḥammad 'Abd al-Raḥmān, *Tawzīf al-uṣṭūra fī al-naṣṣ al-shi'rī al-'arabī al-mu'āṣir*, (Cairo: al-Muntadā al-adabī al-'āmm, n.d).

<sup>7</sup> 'Abdullāh al-Masāwī, *al-Bunyāt al-dālla fī shi'r Amal Danqal*, (Damascus: Arab Writers' Union, 1994), 180.

<sup>8</sup> Al-Ramz al-uṣṭūrī fī shi'r Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb, 180.

<sup>9</sup> Al-Bunyāt al-dālla fī shi'r Amal Danqal, 8.

<sup>10</sup> Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb, *al-Dīwān*, (Beirut: Dār al-'awda, 1971), 325-326.

<sup>11</sup> 'Abd al-Raḥmān Badawī, *al-Zamān al-wujūdī*, (Cairo: Maktabat al-nahḍa al-miṣriyya, 1955), 53.

frustration and emptiness, which was the point where he began. Al-Sayyāb's text celebrates the fact that the fathers survive through their offspring. Elsewhere al-Sayyāb combines the figures of Sisyphus and Christ as eternal symbols of sacrifice in the comprehensive sense, especially in the crucifixion scene described in his poem "A Message from a Cemetery":<sup>12</sup>

At my door the informers cry out  
Rugged is the ascent to Calvary  
And the rock, oh Sisyphus, there is none heavier  
Sisyphus .. the rock is the others!

Here the "informers" are the people who warn both al-Sayyāb ("the Messiah") and Sisyphus against trying to save humankind from its sins. Christ's sacrifice begins in the rough ascent to Calvary, where he was to be crucified, while Sisyphus is fully aware of the weight of the rock and his repeated suffering as it eternally rolls down to be raised once more. He discerns this through the informers' warning cries. This is quite a distinction, for the suffering of Sisyphus/al-Sayyāb is not caused directly by the rock. Sisyphus is fated to fall in order to discover that the rock is a manifestation of humanity, not of stone. It is humans for whose sake he makes his sacrifice. A number of interconnected stylistic devices, such as informing and warning, calling out and wonderment, conspire to prevent this sacrifice. Al-Sayyāb needs unification through sacrifice in order to stress his identification with these comprehensive symbols whose course is fated to fail, especially with respect to Sisyphus. This usage by al-Sayyāb projects how own contemporary experience on these symbols and so gives them a new value that reaches beyond their time. Elsewhere al-Sayyāb gives the myth of Sisyphus a paradoxical turn by having him cast away the rock in a referring to the noble "Algerian struggle in the War of Independence. Man here is at a strong peak, his victory a triumph over a fate that has tested him for ages".<sup>13</sup> In the same poem he says:<sup>14</sup>

Glad tidings for you .. Oh tombs, the resurrection has come!  
Glad tidings for you ... from Oran the echoes of the pictures  
Sisyphus has cast off the burden of ages  
And greeted the sun over the Atlas Mountains

Al-Sayyāb's text is based on paradox and goes against the reader's expectations. In his poetic language he transforms the terror that accompanies the Day of Resurrection into glad tidings in a surprising context created by the repeated phrase "Glad tidings for you", in contradiction to the Qur'ān's warning that on that day "they will emerge from the graves as if they were locusts spreading".<sup>15</sup> Al-Sayyāb in his text uses the call to the graves as a joyful one, on the occasion of the upcoming independence of Algeria. The graves in this case are the victims of the revolution, who gave up their most prized possession, their lives, for the cause. This is one glad tidings. The other is that Sisyphus/al-Sayyāb cast off the burden of the ages, in the long-awaited objective correlative of the Algerian people. The "burden of ages" here represents the defeats and cultural fragmentation that beset the Arab nation on the path of its struggle. He uses the symbol of the sun over the Atlas Mountains

<sup>12</sup> Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb, *al-Dīwān*, 391.

<sup>13</sup> *Al-Ittijāhāt wal-ḥarakāt fī al-shi'r al-'arabī al-ḥadīth*, 814.

<sup>14</sup> Al-Sayyāb, *al-Dīwān*, 393.

<sup>15</sup> Q 54:7.

as a metaphor for the coming of this revolution and independence from colonialism. Sisyphus' burden in the myth is represented by the hard rock, but here it is used symbolically and given an elevated meaning, referring to a joyous event whose positive meaning promises good to oppressed people. Here we see al-Sayyāb's great artistic and poetic skill; he does not only transform the original meaning, but also contrasts one text with another, so that the original literal meaning is turned into a mythical meaning in keeping with the context and the conditions imposed by poetic experience.

Another poet who used the myth of Sisyphus was 'Abd al-Wahhāb al-Bayātī, for whom Sisyphus symbolized every displaced Arab revolutionary who tried to change the bitter realities of his nation. Here is what he says in his poem "In Exile":<sup>16</sup>

In vain do we try to flee, oh you dead  
 Who will bring the stubborn wild ass  
 In the wilderness of the far-away exile  
 The hard rock which the slaves will roll into the valley  
 Sisyphus will be resurrected anew, anew  
 In the form of the displaced exile

In many of his poems al-Bayātī speaks of the tribulations of exile and its many forms: Existential exile, the class estrangement of the poor and separation from one's homeland. Al-Bayātī himself experienced the last-mentioned of these in 1955, when he was forced to leave Iraq because of his Leftist views. In his poetry collection *Marginalized Jars*, published at a time when the school of Socialist Realism expressed an alternative to the contemporary world and called for justice and freedom,<sup>17</sup> he used the myth of Sisyphus, which he described as a myth of suffering and exile, as representing the great mental anguish of people with an opinion of their own who are silenced under despotic and repressive regimes. He compares these revolutionaries to the dead who are unable to escape their fate, and in this sense are like Sisyphus: Both cannot escape their fate and their punishment is final, with one difference, that in the case of Sisyphus the judge is the goddess, while in the case of the revolutionaries the judge is the oppression which the poet here embodied in the stubborn wild ass and the hard rock. Al-Bayātī went beyond the original myth in a number of ways, the most significant of which is the fact that the rock is rolled by slaves (that is, revolutionaries), including Sisyphus, who is to be resurrected, in another deviation from the original myth, where no resurrection takes place. The poet uses the metaphor of resurrection to describe the suffering of the revolutionaries, which is renewed every time an opinion is repressed, a free person is exiled, a revolutionary is deprived and someone calls for a revolution to get rid of oppression. This suffering is constant, for oppression has been one of the strongest forces to cause cultural fragmentation and social backwardness in all times and places. The myth is thus the objective correlative of tragedy, as required by the poetic context.

In another poetic example al-Bayātī uses the same myth in order to express his view on the issues of his times, in his poem "A Date with Spring":<sup>18</sup>

I began to run on the road

<sup>16</sup> 'Abd al-Wahhāb al-Bayātī, *al-Dīwān*, (Beirut: Dār al-'awda, 1975), 1:195.

<sup>17</sup> 'Abd al-Qādir Ṭālib, *al-Tanāṣṣ al-usṭūrī fī al-shi'r al-'arabī al-mu'āṣir: Qirā'a fī shi'r 'Abd al-Wahhāb al-Bayātī*, maamru-impl2010.yoo7.com.

<sup>18</sup> Al-Bayātī, *al-Dīwān*, 1/212.

The slave of life, I, the slave  
 The slave of life returns, once again bearing  
 The rock with joy, up the stupid slope

In this passage the current text and that of the myth interact, although only by gesture or indication. The interaction here functions in a way as an explanatory simile, since the Sisyphic meanings are hidden under the poem's overt words. Here the myth is not alluded to explicitly as it was in the first example. This textual interaction highlights the poet's success in transforming the mythical element into a constructive element that was fused together with his poetic experience<sup>19</sup> and attached the myth to the body of the poem, making it possible for the reader to perceive the past in the present and the present in the past.

Another poet who used this myth was Amal Danqal in his poem "Spartacus' Last Words". Here the role is changed: Sisyphus/Danqal has relinquished his rock and his suffering, which have now been taken up by those "born of the bedrooms of slaves", that is, people who are content to be lowly and humiliated, whose security is bought and sold from those who have become used to saying "yes" to everything:<sup>20</sup>

Sisyphus .. the rock is no longer on his shoulders  
 It is borne by those born of slaves' bedrooms

Here Sisyphus has escaped the goddess' punishment through determined rebellion and refusal. His pride will not permit him to continue to carry the rock; he is a gambler who refuses to be humiliated. Sisyphus/Danqal, like the Roman rebel Spartacus, the devil who refused to bow before Adam, and Hannibal, are all revolutionary symbols of rebellion in this poem. This is the new meaning which Amal Danqal has created in his text in an act of creation,<sup>21</sup> by glorifying the idea of rebellion and of saying "no". This means a new life and a spirit of eternal suffering, because it involves going against the stream with courage and determination, as he says at the beginning of the poem:<sup>22</sup>

Glory to the devil ... Worshipped by the spirits  
 Is he who says "no" rather than those who say "yes"  
 Whoever taught not to  
 Whoever taught man to tear up nothingness  
 Whoever said "no" and did not die  
 And remained a spirit of eternal suffering!

The characteristic that is common to these personalities that convinced the poet was that they committed a sin that was followed by a curse. Therefore the Romantic writers identified with them and used them to express the aspiration to freedom.<sup>23</sup>

The poet Adonis made good use of this myth and mythological symbol, and thus showed himself to have profound understanding of its nature. Like al-SayyÁb, Adonis used the

<sup>19</sup> *Al-Tanāṣṣ al-usṭūrī fī al-shi'r al-'arabī al-mu'āṣir: Qirā'a fī shi'r 'Abd al-Wahhāb al-Bayātī*, 4.

<sup>20</sup> Amal Danqal, *al-A'māl al-shi'riyya al-kāmila*, 148.

<sup>21</sup> *Al-Bunyāt al-dālla fī shi'r Amal Danqal*, 167.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> 'Alī 'Ashrī Zāyid, *Istid'ā' al-shakṣiyyāt al-turāthiyya fī al-shi'r al-'arabī al-mu'āṣir*, (Cairo: Dār Gharīb lil-ṭibā'a wal-nashr, 1996), 124.

possibilities inherent in the myth and overturned the original meaning of sterile effort, making it instead refer to resistance to fate and victory over weakness through sheer willpower. This is the intellectual message with which Adonis burdened the myth. However, it would not be just to accuse him of Sisyphism, isolationism and rumination over worries,<sup>24</sup> as shown by the following lines from his poem "The Rock":<sup>25</sup>

I am satisfied with what I desired:

My songs

My bread and my kingdom are words

Oh my rock, make my steps heavy

I carried you on my shoulder at dawn

I drew you as a vision on my features

Here Adonis masks Sisyphus completely, yet uses him to convey his message of overcoming weakness by coordinating Sisyphus' obedient steps in the repeated act of raising the rock and having it fall back, with the moment that he realizes that he is stronger than the rock. As Albert Camus, wrote, "The myth is a tragedy and its protagonist is sunken in misery and pain, his fate in his hands and his rock his property".<sup>26</sup> Here the rock has become transformed into a new symbol, with which Adonis changed the myth's message of suffering to the mental message which the poet expresses with the words "my bread and my kingdom are words". A connection with the other cannot be formed without transmitting the words of the message to him. For that reason Adonis (the new Sisyphus) asks the rock to make his steps heavy. This shows that he was aware of the importance of his role, even if it caused him suffering and fatigue. It was part of his psyche and occupied much of his life experience, leaving signs of wisdom, honor, harmony and artistic creativity throughout his extended journey. He therefore carried it on his shoulder at dawn, as a sign for the heaviness of his trust, and had its vision of the future drawn on his features. The more he suffered, the more he was able to write and take responsibility in a direct proportion. This usage here highlights the radiant, optimistic aspect, the advance with sure steps in two inseparable lines, the first of which consists of pointing to the depth of historical responsibility and making it accessible to whoever is able to comprehend its significance.

The myth is used here in an optimistic sense, as a contemporary symbol for a new future and a way to overcome the difficulties. Adonis does not let Sisyphus carry the rock alone, but announces his intention to help him carry it. In his poem "To Sisyphus" he even swears to this:<sup>27</sup>

I swore that I would write on the water

I swore that I would carry with Sisyphus

His hard rock

I swore to remain with Sisyphus

Subject to fever and sparks

Searching for the blind eyes

<sup>24</sup> *Al-Shi'r al-'arabī al-mu'āsir, qaḍāyāhu wa-ẓawāhiruhu al-fanniyya wal-ma'nawīyya*, 206.

<sup>25</sup> Adonis, 'Alī Aḥmad Sa'īd, *al-Āthār al-kāmila*, (Beirut: Dār al-'awda, 1971), 1:370.

<sup>26</sup> Albert Camus, *The Legend of Sisyphus*, translated into Arabic by Ḥabība Shaykh 'āṭif and Ghazlān al-Ṭāhirī al-'Alawī: [www.alquds.com](http://www.alquds.com).

<sup>27</sup> *Al-Āthār al-kāmila*, 1:427.



For a last feather  
That will write to the grass and the autumn  
A poem of dust  
I swore I would live with Sisyphus

This poem may have been the reason why Adonis was accused of "Sisyphism" and isolationism. Here Sisyphus as a symbol in the poetic context brings together the general and the particular, or the individual and the collective, it may be allowed to say so, since he addresses the collective human conscience.<sup>28</sup> Adonis here shares Sisyphus' fate and at this point perceives that it is the moment of the soul's recovery and the conscience's awakening, for he is stronger than the rock, since he has someone to share the burden with. The poem begins with an oath and ends with an oath, in a cyclical structure that is quite similar to the movement of the rock from the top of the mountain to the bottom.<sup>29</sup> The poem as a whole conveys "knowledge that is conscious of impotence and rebellion, of rejecting the defeat and the collapse towards acceptance of the burden".<sup>30</sup> This is the religion of life and the effort of man, who continues to rejoice while the rock rolls down again.

As a last example of the artistic use of the myth of Sisyphus in poetry we present the following lines from the poet 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Muqāliḥ's "Letter to Sayf b. Dhī Yazīn":<sup>31</sup>  
Do you wait for honorable assistance,  
Oh Ibn Dhī Yazīn?

We shall reject any solution that will come to us  
On ships  
My homeland will reject it with pride  
If Sisyphus will not see to his rock  
And cast it down  
Who but him will do it  
In the name of love, leave him to struggle against the occupier  
He will fail once  
But in the coming attempts  
He will not fail

The poet in this case has equated Sisyphus in the myth to the Yemeni people, struggling to overthrow the yoke of colonialism. Here he answers the popular hero Sayf b. Dhī Yazīn and others of his kind, who wish to occupy their country using various expedients such as ships that help to drive out another occupier, in an allusion to Sayf's using the help of the Persians. The poet announces that he rejects this shameful situation into which his country has fallen, and hopes that it will not recur in his days. He thus conveys one dimension of his emotional experience by way of using the myth of Sisyphus as a parable. In this case he also deviates from the original meaning of the myth, since Sisyphus was resigned to his fate and continued to roll the rock. In al-Muqāliḥ's poem he represents enslavement and occupation, but he rejects the role which fate has assigned to him. This rejection is repeated in the line "We shall reject, and my homeland will proudly reject". On the other hand,

<sup>28</sup> *Al-Shi'r al-'arabī al-mu'āṣir, qaḍāyāhu wa-ẓawāhiruhu al-fanniyya wal-ma'nawiyya*, 206.

<sup>29</sup> See *The Sisyphus Myth*, 1.

<sup>30</sup> Salmā Khadrā' al-Juyūshī, *al-Ittijāhāt wal-ḥarakāt fī al-shi'r al-'arabī al-ḥadīth*, (Beirut: Markaz dirāsāt al-waḥda al-'arabiyya, 2001), 814.

<sup>31</sup> 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Muqāliḥ, *al-Dīwān*, 284-285.

Sisyphus/al-Muqāliḥ himself chooses to cast off the rock, in yet another deviation, for in the original myth the rock rolls back down as part of the punishment. This shows the poet's desire to rid himself of all forms of control and enslavement. As a result of this deviation, the outcome in the two cases is also different: While the mythical Sisyphus fails every time he brings the rock to the top, Sisyphus/al-Muqāliḥ fails once, but is certain that he will not fail in the future. This optimistic outlook reflects the local character: "Al-Muqāliḥ wove a fabric that is in keeping with the state of the Yemeni nation, whose customs and traditions do not permit it to be protected by others. Rather, it is the citizen who is most properly responsible for defending his own homeland, and Sisyphus in al-Muqāliḥ's poem indicates that nations are responsible for liberating themselves and for bearing their own hard rock".<sup>32</sup> The poet here becomes united with his historical symbol (Sayf), conveying the meaning of "we will reject any solution that will come to us by ship". On the other hand, the two symbols, one mythical (Sisyphus) and one popular historical (Sayf b. Dhī Yazīn), are intertwined and then separated in the linguistic expression "let him fight the occupier". Were it not for this declaration, "the two symbols would have become amalgamated without any subsequent separation. The text thus attains a positive poetic character, since the verb phrase "let him" constitutes an indication of the two symbols' separateness on the one hand, and of Ibn Dhī Yazīn's superiority on the other, for he has become the dominant figure, who determines the nature of the mythical symbol and mortgages his freedom, so that it is no longer absolute".<sup>33</sup> This state of affairs comes into being when the poet feels that the personality he depicts does not correspond to his own personal experience but rather reflects a more subjective dimension, thus giving the text itself a subjective tone.<sup>34</sup> This clarifies the role played by the myth of Sisyphus, a symbol that has attracted numerous dimensions of meaning and various interpretations, ranging from the positive and optimistic to the negative and pessimistic, depending on the structure of texts that utilize the difference between the original myth and the contemporary situation of the Arabs, and become enriched by the poet's human experiences and his feelings towards reality and its contents.

### The Sisyphus myth in contemporary Palestinian poetry

Palestinian poets have always been very much aware of what was going on around them. They saw the plots against their revolution and watched as their people bled at the hand of the enemy as well as at the hand of other Arabs. They accepted this with endless patience, great determination and unyielding firmness, thanks to their dream of creating a cultural identity that would confirm their existence on the face of the earth, so that these generations would not have to live under the bitter results of defeat and would no longer have to taste the homelessness, poverty hopelessness of a black future. Palestinian poets thus attempted to break through the thick veils towards a new and bright dawn, using the myth of Sisyphus as a symbol of sacrifice.<sup>35</sup> However, their use differs from the original in a number of aspects, which they changed creatively in order to transform imaginary personalities, events and situations into more contemporary ones. The myth was thus used metaphorically

<sup>32</sup> Aḥmad Qāsim al-Zamr, *Zawāhir uslubīyya fī al-shi'r al-ḥadīth fī al-Yaman*, (Sanaa: Markaz 'Abād lil-dirāsāt wal-nashr, 1996), 153.

<sup>33</sup> 'Abd al-Ḥamīd Sayf, *al-Ḥadātha fī al-shi'r al-yamanī al-mu'āṣir 1970-2000*, (Mosul University, 2002), 176.

<sup>34</sup> *Istid'ā' al-shakḥīyyāt al-turāthīyya fī al-shi'r al-'arabī al-mu'āṣir*, 208.

<sup>35</sup> 'Imād Ḥātim, *Asāṭīr al-yūnān*, (Libya: al-Dār al-'arabīyya lil-kitāb, 1988), 192.



and its personalities and events were often ignored while the poet focused on the basic meaning alone in order to deal with a similar contemporary situation.<sup>36</sup>In other words, the poet used the myth in a context which he evoked after having chosen the events that were appropriate for expressing the poetic experience in question.

Sisyphus' continuous suffering and pain were perceived as an appropriate symbol to express the tragedy and suffering of the Palestinian people which, like Sisyphus, is urged on by the hope of eventually bringing the rock to the summit, although at present it is in a state of pain and homelessness. This is a natural reaction of people with legitimate dreams, people who are driven by a desire to realize their personal and cultural identities. Sisyphus' actions are thus not futile or useless; in other words, they do not symbolize vain human effort, but rather the effort of someone who resists and fights against inner misery through a spiritual act,<sup>37</sup>while on externally it is the action of someone who dreams of creating a better present for humanity, looking forward towards the horizons of the future, and defeating the powers of evil, oppression and barbaric mistreatment of one's fellow human beings. Sisyphus searched for his own salvation and that of mankind, a situation which is similar to that of Palestinians who are moored to the Holy Land and seek their own lives and the life of their nation by freeing the land and the people from oppression and oppressors.

The meanings of mythical symbols differ from one poetic discourse to another, depending on the poet's perspective, his awareness of his individual or human existence and the way he probes the depths of this existence. Mythical symbols do not possess stable meanings with a constant connection to their source; rather, they are characterized by ever-renewed movement and a flexible ability to enter into new multi-dimensional semantic relationships. This is what can be perceived as being present in the poem "Mingling of Night and Day" by Aḥmad Daḥbūr, in the course of the questions which he poses there:

What is it that brings death to the bird?  
Have they come?  
Mines on the mouth, so who will dare give a kiss?  
All this death, is it for me?  
Then how did I deal with my resurrection?<sup>38</sup>

Here we see how the poet used the mythical symbol through the device of "role" and a "partial" technique, which reveals new dimensions of meaning, having to do with defending the oppressed. This is one of the aspects of the myth of Sisyphus, who heard Aegina's cry for help when she was caught in the talons of Zeus, in the shape of an eagle, who wished to deflower her. Sisyphus set out to defend her and exposed the nefarious intentions of the head of the gods, who punished him for his deed by having him carry a rock to the summit of a mountain.<sup>39</sup> However, in the context of the poem the meaning is changed, so that Sisyphus becomes a martyr on behalf of the homeland. By using the

<sup>36</sup> Muḥammad Fattūḥ Aḥmad, *al-Ramz wal-ramzī fī al-shi'r al-mu'āšir*, (Cairo: Dār al-ma'ārif, 1984), 288.

<sup>37</sup> Nabīl Ayyūb, *al-Bunya al-jamāliyya fī al-qašīda al-'arabiyya al-ḥadītha*, (Beirut: Manshūrāt al-maktaba al-būlīsiyya, 1992), 368.

<sup>38</sup> Aḥmad Daḥbūr, *al-Dīwān*, (Beirut: Dār al-'awda, 1983), 488-490.

<sup>39</sup> 'Abd al-Mu'ī al-Sha'rāwī, *Asāfir iḡhrīqiyya, asāfir al-bashar*, (Egypt: al-Hay'a al-miṣriyya al-'amma lil-kitāb, 1982), 1:134-135.

interrogative construction he turns the poem into a revolutionary act derived from the martyr's pure blood that passes through the heart. Its words are transformed into a sticky cry which covers the faces of the tired people and their souls with disgrace and shame. The nation, it says, lives but its life is more like death. It is in a state which can only be followed by complete deterioration and collapse. The rot has reached the bones, and therefore the poem abounds in pointed questions which must be resolved in order to arrive at the poetic truth. The myth here is thus not a mere imitation of what has been transmitted "or the record in the past with which we imitate the surprise of the past or advice for the future. Rather, it is an active use of tradition and the past, making them operate in the present; in other words, they are a spark in the past that lights a fire in the present".<sup>40</sup>

The innocence of the poetic self and the purity of its nature give the poem and its questions a temporal course. It continuously poses questions of this kind, to which no answer has yet been found, nor will there be an answer as long as humankind continues to commit its Original Sin. The questions, however, will remain posed in the face of the world's tyrants and in the face of those in the Arab nation possessing a living conscience, so that they transform their existence into something actively useful, so that they are no longer dead but willing to champion the Palestinian people, who have been killed and are unable to manage its own resurrection. Here he extends the circle of semantic projections through the use of the plural form of the word for "resurrection", so that every Palestinian becomes a "Messiah" capable of revival and resurrection from the depths of his suffering. However, when the poet says "Then how did I deal with my resurrection?" he shows that Palestinians do not possess a place in which their resurrection can take place. This is a harsh and frightening question, one that deepens the Palestinian negation of self collective disintegration. But the questions continue to come with increasing frequency, until they become the poem's center of gravity and the key to its meaning, as embodied in the mythical symbol of Sisyphus, whose ultimate semantic dimension is based on inescapable fate. Two questions express this idea:

I ask: Will I push my rock again this time?  
Or will I push my rock again this time?<sup>41</sup>

These questions highlight Sisyphus' ancient/new tragedy. He wishes to alleviate his pain and once more rebels against the goddess and the false idols of the present age, to become a fighter who "pushes" his rock far away, instead of "lifting" it, as the original Sisyphus did in the ancient myth. As a matter of fact there are no two questions here, but just one, and the word "or" in the poem is used with the meaning of "indeed". In other words, the first question receives its answer in the following line, which declares that indeed the rock must be "pushed".

The contemporary Palestinian Sisyphus' death in the context of the poem becomes a religious and folk ritual, an object of commerce in the hands of profiteers. His human existence, or his human death, if we may use this expression, is turned into merchandise which others seek to possess in order to make a quick profit. And when the Palestinian tries

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<sup>40</sup> Muḥammad Shāhīn, *al-Adab wal-ustūra*, (Beirut: al-Mu'assasa al-'arabiyya lil-dirāsāt wal-nashr, 1996), 55.

<sup>41</sup> Daḥbūr, *al-Dīwān*, 490.

to defend himself he finds the gun blocked with wax derived from the hunger of others, caused by rulers who trade in the lives of their nations. But still he insists on entering the fight, heeding only the sound of the thunder emanating from the clouds, which inevitably take him to the shores of Jaffa, a wonderful dream which still entices the poet and gives him no choice but to repeat its presence in his poems.

In the poem "Had only" Murīd al-Barghūthī uses the Greek myth of Sisyphus, who is explicitly named, as a symbol of human effort and continuous suffering:

Had only Sisyphus succeeded in lifting the rock  
We would have forgotten him!  
How miserable would Layla have been  
Had only Qays really needed fire!  
What a fiasco it would have been  
Had only God made al-Mutanabbi succeed in being appointed governor!<sup>42</sup>

The phrase "had only" in this poem is the core from which the meanings emanate to express Sisyphus' presence in the realization of his historical or mythical existence through his tireless effort and unbending will as he lifts the rock to the summit, and then fails. The phrase "had only" thus indicates the impossibility of escaping the past. What remains is merely a hypothetical poetic situation, in which success would mean the ripping apart of the highest example, as embodied in the figure of Sisyphus.

Fārūq Mawāsī in his poem "Dream of Peace", dedicated to Fadwā ṭūqān, uses the myth in the following lines:

Sisyphus suffered, then became immortal  
In the pages of history as a most admirable tale  
The suffering which fate has decreed for Sisyphus is an admonition to us, in my opinion.  
It teaches us to persevere even if the outcome is unknown. It is our Palestinian right to continue to defend ourselves and to begin every time anew.<sup>43</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Many poets have used the myth of Sisyphus, giving it various meanings, positive as well as negative, in reference to the myth's actual time and its message that efforts are futile and fate cannot be avoided, the rock symbolizing unending suffering, self-isolation and acceptance of one's fate, or alternatively interpreting it as an artistic expression of new dimensions of human experience, such as refusal to accept one's fate and a willingness to bring about change, whether on a personal level through the transmission of an intellectual message to others as in the case of Adonis, through the rejection of oppression and tyranny, as in the case of al-BayÁtĎ and Danqal, or through the rejection of foreign occupation and rebelling against colonialists, as in the case of al-SayyÁb. All of these dimensions of experience were conveyed by means of taking the myth and overturning its meaning so that it becomes an eternal example for any time and any place, in order to hone ambitions

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<sup>42</sup> Murīd al-Barghūthī, *al-A 'māl al-shi 'riyya al-kāmila*, (Beirut: al-Mu'assasa al-'arabiyya lil-dirāsāt wal-nashr, 1997), 365.

<sup>43</sup> Fārūq Mawāsī, *Fī intizār al-qiṭār*, (Nablus: Jam 'iyyat 'ummāl al-maṭābi', 1971), 81.

and spread a spirit of hope, optimism and openness that lead to creativeness and persistence.

Palestinian poets were always very aware of the events around them, the plots against their revolution and the Palestinian blood that was shed, whether by the enemy or by fellow Arabs. They accepted all this with unending patience, inflexible determination and implacable toughness, due to their dream of creating an individual and cultural identity that would establish their existence on the land, so that future generations would not have to experience the misery and bitterness of the defeat, nor have to live under the conditions of poverty and hopelessness that have darkened their lives. The Palestinian poets tried to break through the thick clouds towards a bright new dawn, using the myth of Sisyphus as a symbol of sacrifice. The myth was thus put to metaphorical use; the figure of Sisyphus and the specific events of the myth were relegated to the background, while its main message was highlighted, in order to get inspiration from it for a similar contemporary situation. In other words, the poets used the myth in a context which they themselves evoke, after its events are sifted.