# Occupying Absence: Mahmoud Darwish's *In the Presence of Absence* as a Cosmopolitan Space[1]

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> [T]he language you hear brings your heart back to its senses: No, this is not my language. Where is the eloquence of the victim recalling his long suffering in the face of the misery of the moment when enemy looks enemy in the eye and shakes his hand insistently? Where are the voices of those murdered, old and recent, demanding an apology, not only from the murderer, but from history as well? Where will meaning go when opposites meet? (Darwish 126)

Exilic writing takes form and flight in Mahmoud Darwish's' *In the Presence of* Absence (2011) as the narrator speaks into existence abstract notions of home and exile in an eloquence that carries the sorrows of the exile through translation. For an exiled-Palestinian from the age of seven, Darwish occupies multiple identities: he is aware of lands that go beyond Palestine, and yet the longing for his homeland pulses within him. *In the Presence of Absence*, translated by Sinan Antoon, is a farewell by the Palestinian poet: a farewell to his exilic life and to his dying-self.[2] In this twenty chapter book, Darwish creates a presence for his self, the Arabic language, and for the Palestinian people. A presence that is constantly at the brink of erasure. What does identity look like for an exile who is not allowed to live in his homeland? To an exile that resides on the borders of multiple nations and cultures? For Stuart Hall, identity is "embedded" in the cultural meanings of an imagined community (28). Darwish creates this imagined community in and through his book by being a vernacular cosmopolitan. Hall considers vernacular cosmopolitanism as a means through which one can understand others and a way of portraying the multiple identities in a world that is "aware of the limitations of any one culture or any one identity" (30). Through the use of vernacular cosmopolitanism *In the Presence of Absence* creates a new way of expressing the identity and home of the silenced. Home, for the exile, is neither rooted in a homeland nor dependent on the physical features of the world. The manner in which the text, writing, and words create a new space—a new field—upon which the exile can look back upon their life as an exile showcases how 'home' for the exile, specifically in chapter sixteen, cannot be pinpointed to one certain place or location. Home and life for the exile does not follow the linear form of the tree with roots that are easily distinguishable and identifiable, but rather the text and the spaces on the page create new routes that map a new homeland for the exile on the page. These maps, as theorized by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in relation to a rhizome, "fosters connections between fields" (12). The routes that the rhizome is composed of allow the reader to witness Darwish as a vernacular cosmopolitan that constantly tries to translate and renegotiate his position between cultures. Thus, Darwish creates a new vocabulary necessary to build a new homeland: one that he is the owner and host of on the page (Darwish 84).

Words are tools used to either restrict or liberate; words are either the weapons of destruction of identities or the building blocks of materialized memories. Through his writing style, Darwish creates a space upon which the abstract notions of home, belonging, and identity can materialize through imagination. From the macro—the genre, structure and form of the book—to the micro—the figurative language in the book—the writer speaks into existence the abstract notions he is robbed of in the physical world. For the exile, the text, the spaces on the page, and form, is home: a home created through the building blocks of words and a home that continues to build as the

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reader flips the pages. This home creates a new vocabulary for vernacular cosmopolitanism to be presented to the reader and allow multiple identities to flourish. This home, the text, for the exile is a place he is the owner of, while the reader, in contrast, is the visitor, who ventures through the narrator's walls and boundaries. This book becomes a homage to his past, a legacy for his land, and a presence amidst the threatening absence.

The elegy, a genre that reflects or laments on the dead, has several subgenres including the self-elegy. In a self-elegy the individual imagines their death (Dyer 1452). In addition, in the "Translator's Preface" of *In the Presence of Absence,* Antoon highlights self-elegy as a subgenre that has been "established in classical Arabic poetry" with origins beyond pre-Islamic times (6). The self-elegy poems are described as examples of "redeemed subjectivity" and the "construction of selfhood," for the poets create "ciphers of themselves for the edification of the like-minded" (Cavitch 97). By bidding farewell to his dying self and speaking to his impeding death, Darwish reflects back on his life and creates images of his life that were otherwise absent. These immortal images serve as a place where readers across history and time can gather upon and witness his life and connect with their own. In the opening lines of chapter sixteen, the narrator states: "A long time elapses between exiting and entering, which allows you to bid farewell to exile with appropriate melancholy" (121). By separating his dying-self from his living-self, the narrator speaks to and about his dying-self—the self that is being exiled from the living—in a manner that allows him to give identity to this exiled part of him. Exiles are seldom given the space to speak for their existence, they are brushed over with wide strokes that paint them with colours that the colonizers wish. Verena Conley in "Chaosmopolis" states that Ackbar Abbas criticizes Ulf Hannerz for his use of "one world culture" for it hints at the domination of one culture over all others (129). By separating the exiled from the self, Darwish challenges the notion of one culture, for even within a country there are varying experiences and by being able to put these experiences into words allows for individuals to take control of their narratives and become vernacular cosmopolitans that translate their lives into narratives others can read and interact with on the page. Homogenization has no place in Darwish's book. By characterizing the exiled-self, Darwish gives voice to this existence and creates a space on paper where a cosmos, a "mental, social, or natural territor[y] … for a sense of existence" (Conley 129), is conjured. The narrator alludes to the battle for recognition between the dying and the living self. This implies that the exile is challenged by those who have been the face to the world: the ones that the world sees—the living—dominate those who have passed on.

The narrator states that he spent "as many years in exile as [he] did in the homeland" (125). Thus, home for the exile is in both the homeland and in other countries he has spent his life. By exiling his dying-self in this self-elegy, Darwish creates a "habitable space" through which the exile is able to live in his self-created home on the page (Conley 136). The exile is no longer at the mercy of others to dictate whether or not he belongs in a land. Instead, the narrator provides this part of himself in order to build the home he has been searching for. Edward Said describes the exile as being cut off from their land, roots and past. Said describes exiles as having an "urgent need" to "reconstitute their broken lives" ("Reflections" 177). For the narrator, his identity is split: the part in exile and the part in his homeland. By splitting the exile and placing him in the form of his dying-self, the narrator attempts to create a place where his dying-self can construct a new land on the pages of the book.

Darwish refers to his dying-self as "you" thus, placing distance between Darwish, the storyteller, and Darwish the exile. This allows for the narrator to speak for and to his exiled, dying-self as a character separate from himself. He also refers to traveling back to his homeland with his exiled, dying-self and states: "Returning, we are returning, without a lofty anthem or a bold border" (121). Here, the exile and the narrator are grouped, identities conflating into one: a hybrid existence—illustrating that exilic identities do not come to an end but rather are continuous

elements of one's identity. To be an exile in the past is to be marked by exile in the present and future. Both narrator and exile are rejected not only from their homeland, but also from the rest of the world, and then further from a homecoming. The narrator puts life into the exile's thoughts, articulating the inarticulate: "You wonder: What kind of linguistic or legal wunderkind could formulate a peace treaty and good neighborliness between a palace and a stuck, between a guard and a prisoner" (192). In this statement, the narrator questions what language can be used to provide a peace treaty for exiles who have been subjugated to violence and homelessness.

According to Conley, chaosmopolites do not believe in "the resolution of opposites" (136). Thus, through a questioning of the type of peace treaty and talks that would resolve the differences between two opposites, the exiled and the one who exiled him, the narrator challenges the idealization of a resolution. Instead, through the presence of the exile on the pages of the book, his wonderment, thoughts, and emotions displayed by and spoken by the narrator, the book creates a new space that is provided by the "culture of disappearance" (Conley 135). Once the exile's home disappeared, identity became split, and a new space with new opportunities is created by Darwish in *In the Presence of Absence*. Hall asserts that vernacular cosmopolitanism consists of new vocabulary that speaks for those that do not have their existence displayed. Through the self-elegy, the narrator places the exiled part of himself onto the page and into a newly created space upon which the exile's thoughts and opinions are displayed unapologetically for the reader to enter upon and observe. The exile, who prior to this, was homeless, is given a home onto the page once he is distinguished from the body of an individual who is exiled from his homeland and existing in the world as a traveler.

Darwish continuously asks the question of what identity appears like to a Palestinian. He wonders at what the world thinks when a Palestinian is a poet and when a poet is a Palestinian: "In the first instance: it is to be the product of history, to exist in language. In the second: to be victim of history and triumph through language" (126-7). For Darwish, exile is the "poet's journey through a poem," but it is not a journey that is marked by a leaving and a returning but rather a journey that is expressed through words and imagination for others; it is a journey that highlights the strength of the exile who relies on itself to grow (82) and uses the senses, such as smell, and the power of imagination, to connect memories along the route. The structure of the book, its fragmented narrative, and the form of the narration, with its combination of prose and poetry, portrays the way the text is a meeting ground of opposites. The structure further transforms the reader as a passive consumer of the book into an active consumer that pieces together the journey of the narrator's homecoming. Darwish's text portrays the way citizens connect on and through the page to form an assemblage, and how the exile's life and conception of home is rhizomatic rather than linear: every place and every moment in the writer's life as an exile creates a route. These routes are interconnected and stem from and bleed into one another. For the smell of one place, as Darwish states, reminds the exile of the fruits that grow in another, and the physical presence in one land is shadowed by the longing for another. The fragmented narrative reflects the manner in which the exile's identity is disconnected from his past and his roots (Said, "Reflections" 177). His identity is not one that resembles a tree with identifiable roots, but rather it is a rhizome, which contains routes that he took in his life trying to find a place to call him: yet failing to do so because every place is a temporary reprieve and home always seems out of reach—a horizon unable to be met. These routes portray the various moments in his life. By describing his journey back and through Palestine, Darwish emphasizes the transient nature of the life of the exile. The exile's life is not rooted in one place, but rather it has multiple spots of entry and existence: the exile's place of residence is in multiple nations in the world. Deleuze and Guattari likewise define a rhizome as a structure that is interconnected (7). Similarly, Darwish's life is marked as a journey that is always in movement and connected to different cultures and nations other than his own homeland, Palestine. Even when Darwish assumes that he has returned back

to his homeland, to his roots, he realizes that he does not feel at home, for he cannot fit in with the people or in the ever-changing land marked by occupation. What is homecoming for the one whose home has become unrecognizable? Darwish exhibits the fragments of a homecoming neither celebrated at home nor familiar to the exile. A root implies that there is one origin, but the life of the exile, and the home created in Darwish's book portrays how life consists of routes that touch upon other nations and is cosmopolitan in character: for it transcends borders and regards the world as a city—a cosmopolis (Conley 127).

Conley describes the cosmopolis as existing due to the interactions of individuals with one another. According to Conley, these interactions create a "temporary assemblages in real or electronic space … composed of many different parts but will have different inflections, depending on one's position in the globe" (131). Similarly, the non-linear narrative of the book allows for one to begin reading at any given point and derive new meanings from the position one began reading from. Said states, "Nations themselves are narrations" (Introduction xiii), and Darwish's narrative is able to "delineate the contours of the homeland," and break through the occupation, the rigid structures that hold Palestine captive, and the impenetrable wall that conceals his occupied homeland from the rest of the world. He is able to present the identity of a Palestinian exile by transcending boundaries and bringing into existence what the world is pretending has disappeared (Sazzad 3). Palestinian identity is expressed in the crossings of place to place, and is an expression of an exile from land, history (Mattar 103). As Conley theorizes, the culture of disappearance allows for new opportunities and forms of existence to manifest, and that is what Darwish's book represents.

The combination of poetry and prose alters the way the reader interacts with and views the page. Darwish uses the page as a new space upon which his identity can be built. Exilic writing has been identified as writing that "eschews traditional theories of publicity altogether" (Bernard-Donals 39). For the speaker must willingly approach the reader, the other, and share their vulnerabilities with the possibility of rejection (Bernard-Donals 46). Furthermore, the exile's mother-tongue is often stolen and re-purposed to oppress, to colonize, and to restrict. It is often an odd sensation: to have one's mother tongue be spoken to with in order to further colonize their language and their land. To be told that the land one's heritage stems from, belongs to, and is rooted in, no longer has space for one's footsteps is to be told that settler occupation is very much in the present. However, to be exiled from one's home in one's own language, by another who has recently acquired the language to articulate the unimaginable (occupation) is yet another blow. Thus, language becomes a tool, either for restriction or liberation. Exiles, often use the language of poetry for the latter, for poetry allows them to "break with the monopoly over history granted to the cognitive regiment of phrases" (Bernard-Donals 47). Poetry transcends historical domination of one group over another, for it allows a new means through which one can express that which was not articulated up until now. Instead of being filled from top to bottom with continuous prose, Darwish's book occupies the space on the page differently: there are spaces in between paragraphs, blank spots where prose is expected to fill the page. Thus, it is in the way the narrator fills the pages, creates a home and an identity that allows the exile to revel through the combination of prose and poetry.

Said, in reference to exiles, states that what while most individuals are aware of the singular, one culture, one setting, and one home, exiles are aware of the plural, and it is this "plurality of vision" that signals an "awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that … is contrapuntal" ("Reflections" 186). The independent voices of both prose and poetry meld together in chapter sixteen in order to portray the multiple identities of the exile. The exile crosses borders of nations and in Darwish's text, the narrator blurs the line between prose and poetry in order to express his notions of exile. Furthermore, by alienating the reader away from a traditional prose-piece and by placing the reader in an unknown, fragmented, narrative, the narrator turns readers into exiles, for they are exiled from the comforts of an easy narrative. The reader now turns into the

exile for "whom the entire world is a foreign land" (Said, "Reflections" 185). Thus, the writer creates a new vernacular to displace the reader.

In addition, readers of the book are aware of the fact that they are reading a translated text of Darwish's original book, which was written in Arabic. This isolates the reader. They are aware that the words on the page are translated words delivered by a translator. Thus, the reader occupies the position of an exile unable to reach familiar places: for the reader this is the familiar position of assumed superiority granted by the assumption that their reading will be able to distinguish the codes and moral values reflected in the book. However, through a translated reading, the reader is confronted with their own lack of knowledge of the Arabic language and of having complete access to the original sentiments through the translated work. Thus, readers become the "outsiders" to the narrator's Arabic community (Said 177). In the "Translator's Preface," Antoon explains her rationale behind her translation. Her methodology is explained as followed:

> Blocks of poetry, written in meter and rhyme, were set apart from the rest of the Arabic text in the original. I have kept this distinction in the translation. The rest of the text, while not in metered poetry, pulsates with syntactic rhythms and frequently includes internal rhyme. Although not without effort, I have tried, whenever possible to render this translation. (8)

For Antoon, the purpose was to abide by Darwish's main concern: to give Arabic prose its "maximum potential." According to Darwish, he was "interested in celebrating language and making it dance … [he] wanted to free the demons, doves, and birds of Arabic" (Darwish 8-9). In regard to being an outsider to a community's langauge, Said relays the story of listening to his friends Eqbal Ahmed and Faiz Ahmed Faiz recite poetry in Urdu without translation. He states that although he was at the disadvantage of not being able to understand what was being said he nonetheless enjoyed listening to the beauty of the language. Antoon states that as a translator it was difficult to "translocate this celebration [of language] to another language, but it had to be done" (Darwish 9). The translated book is "an act of love for Darwish and homage to his poetry and genius…It also celebrates his eternal presence in his words and his long life in us, his readers" (Darwish 9). By translating his work into another language, Antoon allows for those who are not a part of the community built by Arabic-speaking readers to interact with the writer and witness the beauty of his writing, albeit through a translator. It allows for Darwish's words to spread and to come into contact with the 'other' to his exilic self. Translated works open new worlds for readers: allowing them to become witnesses through the materialist practice of engaging with "others" and to become a part of another's journey.

Furthermore, the translation allows for readers to connect with Darwish, through is poetry and prose, and to become citizens of the world "who dare to recognize the other in themselves and who enable the construction of a cultural and political cosmopolis that consists of diverse citizens" (Conley 128). In regard to approaching the "other" and establishing connections between oneself and the other Rabindranath Tagore creates a link that travels beyond compassion and traverses into the personal: Tagore states that individuals read about others in order to understand more about themselves (50). It is through a translated version of Darwish's book that the reader gains a better understanding of their position in the world and gain further insight on how Darwish is a vernacular cosmopolitan whose experiences are translated from one language to another. Subjectivity is formed when one's "I" comes into another's "you," thus it is when the reader's "I" comes into contact with the translated story of Darwish's "you" that the reader can gain better insight into their own "I": what is their own stance on exile? What is their own position to home? What is their own ethics of witnessing another's destruction? What can they do to raise awareness for the continued occupied presence that has rendered 7.98 million Palestinians as refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs)? ("Palestinian Refugees"). Unable to directly help the refugees, exiles, and IDPs across the world, reading about their displacement emphasizes the need to self-reflect and to raise awareness for the atrocities present all around the world. This

awareness can come in the form of research, discussions in academic circles, and can result in the resistance to the erasure of roots buried deep in the lands that have been occupied.

Darwish identifies exile as a "misunderstanding between existence and borders" and as a "bridge between images" (85). Through the use of metaphors and figurative language, the poet expresses his identity in imaginative terms. His identity is a creation built from imagination and placed upon the page for the imagined community to gather upon. The exile becomes a connective device that brings together distorted images of lands that have been pushed to the margins. Through his writing style, Darwish creates a space upon which the abstract notions of home, belonging, and identity can materialize through imagination. Imagination is a reoccurring theme in the text for it is a way the exile is able to express his identity and his perception of home. Thus, through the use of figurative language, the writer speaks into existence the abstract and reins through the power of expression. Darwish uses metaphors and figurative language in order to "lift [the record of Palestinian] aggression up to an aesthetic level" and as a response to the violence that tore up his homeland" (Sazzad 2). Furthermore, similar to the way a metaphor and figurative language allows for Darwish's writing to beautify the violence that is present in his country, the style of his writing prevents one from reading the narrative and instantly grasping the 'center' or the meaning of the text. Instead, readers are forced to analyze and deconstruct the imagery. Thus, the "center" of the narrative is "indefinitely postponed, so is the exile's homeland (from which he presumably derives his ideas and his imagery) postponed (Thomson 500). Darwish uses the Palestinian land in chapter sixteen as "Raw material" used as a canvas upon which he creates images that allow for the experience of being in Palestine to be present (Bowman 53). Darwish carries his community and his identity as a Palestinian exile and constructs it onto the page through metaphors and imagery. Thus, he transcends beyond the borders of "national identity, and reach[es] a community of people who are external to any sense of "Palestinian-ness" (Mena 113).

The narrator asks "[W]hat can a poet do before history's bulldozer but guard the spring and trees, visible and invisible, by the old roads?" (126). He stakes claim to the Palestinian land and uses trees, horses, and fruits to describe the emotions of returning 'home': "You will kiss the earth, embrace tree trunks, and utter sacrosanct words from the rhetoric of the victor of the prisoner" (124). He describes the way the "Returnee's imagination" takes a hold of beautiful images, "which atone for the sin of obligatory and semi-obligatory departure. And that alone is recompense enough for our exodus" (122). He also states: "The apple is biting the form without being punished for acquiring knowledge" (122). This can be interpreted as Darwish, as a writer creating a book that transcends the boundaries of a given form, is able to produce the knowledge of being an exile through the combination of poetry and prose, without having an other dictate what he can and cannot do. He is the owner of his words, his book, and the home he creates through the words in his book.

The image of the sunset is a reoccurring one that serves to connect geography with history and in turn to identity. The narrator describes the sunset with its rays "embracing the palm fronds" before he reaches Gaza. The sunset's fiery color "descend[s] from them [the palm fronds] to adorn the sea's undulations as they give in to an eternal dalliance" (128). He is told by his friend to enjoy the sunset in al-Arîsh because the way the rays hit the sea in Egypt differs from the way they hit the sea in Gaza since the "sea there is colonized" (128). This reflects the manner in which the sea impacts the way individuals view their place in the world. Since the sea in Gaza is surrounded by Israeli land, restrictions mark the location, although nature is considered to be free of occupation. Darwish reiterates this point by connecting land and sea to the existence of individuals. Similarly, Conley states that "New ways of existing that can no longer be conceived outside the environment have to be invented [for the chaosmopolite]. Existential territories of chaosmopolites henceforth have to include the question of global degradation of humans and the environment" (137). Thus, the chaosmoplite is also concerned with environment as they are with citizens of other nations.

Darwish's way of existing is connected to the environment in which he lives in, and his freedom and the freedom of his Palestinian people is marked by nature.

With land and sea occupied, Darwish uses metaphors to take back what was taken from him. He uses metaphors readers are familiar with in order for them to connect with the Palestinian situation. Conley state that humans "are in exchange with each other and with their environment, from which they cannot be separated in the first place" (128). The narrator states that he had written about Gaza before he had laid eyes on it, based on the way it had presented itself: "a fort besieged by sea, palm trees, invaders, and sycamores. A fort that never falls. Gaza is pride taking pride in its name" (127). Thus, homeland to the narrator's exiled self is a land that was and is still out of reach, similar to the way the land is distant to the reader. His identity is a creation built from imagination and placed upon the page for the imagined community to gather upon. It is a place where the reader as the 'other' to the narrator's 'I', can enter into dialogue with the narrator by setting foot into his home.

Words are the bricks with which an imagined community can be constructed and welcomed upon and they are the tools Darwish uses to create a community through the use of the sub-genre of a self-elegy, the merging of poetry and prose, and figurative language. *In the Presence of Absence* is a meeting ground of multiple imagined identities through vernacular cosmopolitism. This vernacular cosmopolitanism is expressed through new terms and forms that allow the exile's multiple identities to materialize. Said states that the exile must "cultivate a … subjectivity" ("Reflections" 184) and that is what Darwish does: he cultivates his subjectivity through figurative language about the land in which he is both at home and a stranger to, he cultivates his self through the transcendence of form, the mixing of both prose and poetry, and he cultivates his identity through the self-elegy which allows him to characterize the exile in him and give it a persona for the world to witness on the page. In Darwish's text absence is given importance as much as the occupation, for it is in disappearance, in absence, that new forms can be created. As opposites meet Darwish asks: "Where will meaning go?" To which Conley answers: there is no solution, there is only movement towards new way inventions of existing (137) – an invention Darwish delivers upon through the portrayal of identity in relation to the environment: fusing both body and land for eternity and defying blockades and restrictions that dictate otherwise.

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## Notes

[1] The purpose of the terms "Occupying Absence" in the title is three-fold. First, to express the occupation of an exile who is regarded as an absentee in their homeland. Thus, the exile occupies the persona of an absentee. This can be regarded as the occupation *of* absence. Second, to express the occupation of Palestine by Israel. Palestinian land continues to shrink as Israeli borders and walls push against it. Absence in this case is a result of occupation: occupation *for* absence. Third, words in Darwish's book occupy empty/absent space on a page in order to conjure the notion of home. Thus, this occupation takes the form of occupation *in* absence. In all three instances, absence is grappled with. Absence becomes a place charged with cosmopolitanism: for the exile occupies the persona of an absentee who carries homeland across foreign borders and interacts and enters into dialogue with the citizens of other nations. Further, common discussion on the Palestine and Israel brushes over the concept of land: the land Israel occupies is rich with the footprints of Palestinians whose presence still lingers in the air. The land they built their homes on is

the same land that was brimming with life of those now exiled. Finally, as words occupy the empty spaces on the page, they become tools with which the writer builds a home for Darwish, an exile, to express his identity and for readers to come into contact with his home and his homeland. The words create a dialogue amongst readers and between the narrator and the reader.

[2] This paper refers to the narrator as Darwish, himself, because *In the Presence of Absence* is described by translator as a self-elegy in which "each section … is a self-contained unit and addresses a theme or a phrase in the author's past" (Darwish 6).

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