The Politics of Identity in Mahmoud Darwish's *Absent Presence*: A Textual Act of Resistance

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Abstract

The study explores the concept of identity in Mahmoud Darwish's *Absent Presence* (2006), a work published less than two years before his death. Though recurrent in many of Darwish's previous works, the theme of identity is tackled differently in this funeral speech. As a self-eulogy, *Absent Presence* connects the search for identity with death, showing that this search is endless and inexhaustible. Yet, since the reality of death (as the ultimate signified) is beyond human comprehension, it can be only represented through language, which, from a post-structuralist perspective (a system of free-floating signifiers), shares the same endlessness of what comes after death. In this regard, the search for identity in *Absent Presence* is ultimately achieved through language, which, for the bereaving Darwish, is the only true and lasting form of identity.

By introducing identity as a product of the play of language, the study also aims to prove that resistance in *Absent Presence* extends to the reality behind it. When defined as a process, identity not only establishes the endless possibility of meaning in the text, but also in the world as meaning is transferred into it to effect change.

Key words: Identity; Language; Poststructuralism; Change; Death; Textual Resistance; Signifier

"We are absent, you and I; we are present, you and I. And absent.

Which of your Lord's blessings do you disown?" (*AP*, 123)
"But words are beings: The game will bewitch you until you become part of it…" (*AP*, 18)

The theme of identity is not new to Darwish, neither is the theme of death. Both recur in his prose and verse works and both are presented in the context of his experience as a Palestinian writer. Yet, what is unique in *Absent Presence* (*fī haḍrat al-ghiyāb*) (2006),[1] the funeral speech he wrote less than two years before his death, is that Darwish connects identity and death in an attempt to see whether his long search for identity could be relieved in death. How does death affect Darwish's search for identity? Does death act as a new state of exile setting him further from the land and identity he is seeking? Or does it act as a state of homeliness making reconciliation to the lost land and identity a dream come true? These questions, among others, form the center of the article which adopts a poststrucuralist approach to language and identity in *Absent Presence*.

INTRODUCTION

It has been seven years now since Darwish left us; nevertheless, his search for identity will never come to an end. It will live forever in his works. Whether in the early works written in Palestine or in the later works written in exile, Darwish has always posed questions such as "Who am I?"[2] and the answer, to make the matter more

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[1] *Absent Presence* is translated into English by two translators: Mohammad Shaheen and Sinan Antoon. The adopted translation is that of Mohammad Shaheen.
[2] This question recurs in several poems by Darwish. In "In Jerusalem" (2003), Darwish asks: "I don't walk, I fly, I become another,/ transfigured. No place and no time. So who am I?" In "Who Am I Without Exile?" (1999), he also asks: "What' will I do without exile, and a long night/ that stares and the water?" In "A Rhyme of the Odes" (2003), the question is more direct and daring: "Who am I? I am my language, I am an ode, two odes. Ten. This is my language".

complicated, has never been easily discerned in any of them. In fact, Darwish himself has found it hard to give one specific or direct answer as to who he really is.[3] But, what is never questioned is that Palestine has always been there at the back of his mind whenever the question of identity has been raised. As early as his poem "Identity Card" (1964) (from *Leaves of Olives*), identity has been established in connection to the land (Palestine in specific and the Arab world in general):

Write down!	My roots
I am an Arab	Were entrenched before the birth of time
I have a name without a title	And before the openings of the eras
Patient in a country	Before the pines, and the olive trees
Where people are enraged	And before the grass grew… (Trans. Barghouti.com)

No doubt, for Darwish, identity is the homeland. His roots are deeply entrenched into the land, into its pines and fields. Nothing can ever uproot him, not even being given "a name without a title" by the Israeli government. In an interview conducted by Raja Shehadeh (2002), Darwish stresses this point when asked about the reason for residing in Ramallah:

I shall only be liberated of Palestine when Palestine is liberated. Then it shall no longer be a condition to be here [in Palestine] in order to write. That which is sought after is easier to write about. That which is realized is harder. No one praises a country that is liberated. You praise what has not been attained. (5)

Indeed, Darwish could never be liberated of the homeland. Yet, what should be borne in mind is that the concept of the homeland has taken different meanings for Darwish throughout his life. Palestine is the physical land that Darwish has been living in as a child, then as a 'present-absentee' after the Israeli occupation. It is the memory that Darwish has retained after he left it in 1971. To belong, therefore, is essential to construct an identity for Darwish. But, belonging is not just a geographically-defined matter here. It takes different forms (the physical land, the memory, the words of a poem and death) and these construct different identities. Thus, just as what it means to belong to a homeland has changed throughout Darwish's life, the identity he constructed has accordingly changed.

Darwish is always on a quest for identity. Being a refugee, a "present-absentee", homeless and an exile have never hindered this quest. On the contrary, these have helped diversify the experience and have, as a result, lent Darwish a malleable sense of identity that defies fixation. From a poststructuralist perspective, identity in Darwish's

works is not a fixed entity that is established and never changed. Neither is it a product of the physicality of the place. On the contrary, it is endlessly constructed in a process that never finishes, not even in death. In "Who Am I Without Exile?" (1999) (from *The Stranger's Bed*), Darwish declares that he is light enough that "nothing [carries him]: not the road/ and not the house".

…Our weight has become light like our houses in the faraway winds. We have become two friends of the strange creatures in the clouds ... and we are now loosened from the gravity of identity's land.

(Trans. Fady Joudah/ Poetry Foundation)

Our weight has become light like our houses in the faraway winds. We have become two friends of the strange creatures in the clouds ... and we are now loosened from the gravity of identity's land.

Contrary to what a first reading of these lines might render, Darwish is not "identity-less" because he is "now loosened from the gravity of identity's land". On the contrary, he has managed to construct an identity that is light enough to evade the fixity of geographical borders. It is born with the words of each line of his poetry and will ever reside in them becoming the "present-absentee" that Darwish himself is.

Based on the above, the study aims to show that identity for Darwish is endlessly constructed. It changes from the physical place in the poetry written in Palestine to the words of the poetry written in exile and culminates in the wholeness of death in *Absent Presence*. Therefore, by tracing the change in the concept of identity in the works published before *Absent Presence* and contrasting it with the way identity is connected to death in it (*Absent Presence*), the study proposes to show that the search for identity is, like death, endless and inexhaustible. Yet, since the reality of death (as the ultimate signified) is beyond human comprehension, it can be only represented through language, which as a system of free-floating signifiers in search of an ultimate signified, shares the same endlessness of what comes after death. In this regard, the search for identity in *Absent Presence* is ultimately achieved through language, which, for the bereaving Darwish, is the only true and lasting form of identity.

1. OVERVIEW

In "Mahmoud Darwish and the Quest for Identity" (2011), Tawfiq Yousef argues that Darwish's treatment of identity goes through two main phases depending on the place his poetry is written at (inside Palestine or outside it) (675-79). In Darwish's early poetry, which is written while he has been living in Palestine, the physical connection to the land shapes identity. Thus, by recreating Palestine, Darwish is establishing his identity. A case in point is the

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[3] In "A Rhyme for the Odes" (1995), Darwish states this openly: "Who am I? This is a question that others ask, but has no answer" (91). It having no answer, however, does not mean that Darwish is 'identity-less'. Identity, for him, is not a fixed entity; it is endlessly constructed as is shown in the discussion in the following parts.

poem "The Most Beautiful Love" (1964) (from *Leaves of Olive*) in which Palestine is represented as a sought-for-beloved:

كما ينبت العشب بين مفاصل صخرة As the grass grows
between the joints of a rock

وجدنا غريبين يوما We were found strangers one day

و كانت سماء الربيع تؤلف نجما ... و نجما And the spring
sky was composing a star

Though physically close, the two lovers are strangers. They are weighed by the pain of separation that is enforced on them. Nevertheless, the lover is full of belief that one day reconciliation will be 'a dream come true:

كما ينبت العشب بين مفاصل صخرة As the grass grows
between the joints of a rock
وجدنا غريبين يوما We were found strangers one day
و نبقى رفيقين دوما And we will forever stay
companions (darwishfoundation.org)

Darwish's image of the two lovers reconciled at the end of the poem extends to the homeland. One day, the land will be freed and the lost identity recovered. To borrow the words of Yousef, "the unattainable beloved becomes a metaphor for the lost homeland," and once this beloved is regained, he could "eventually regain his identity" (676). In another poem, "Stranger in a Faraway City" (1969) (from *Birds Die in Galilee*), Darwish expresses his deep sadness at being physically close to the land but emotionally far from it:

عندما كنت صغيرا صارت الوردة جرحا When I was
young The rose became a wound
و جميلا و الينابيع ظمأ and handsome and the
springs thirst
كانت الوردة داري هل تغيرت كثيرا The roses were
my home Have I changed that much_
و الينابيع بحاري ما تغيرت كثيرا and the springs my seas
I haven't changed that much.
(darwishfoundation.org)

It is ironic that Darwish feels a stranger at the time that he is supposed to feel at home in his homeland. He feels at loss as to why he fails to connect to the flowers and the springs that he grew up among; he is so far away from them to be able to find his identity in any of them. Nevertheless, the experience of Palestine as a homeland has never been lost to him even after he left it.

From a political aspect, this could be ascribed to his unshakable belief in the Palestinians' right of return: One day the lost land will be recovered and the lost identity regained. This belief, as Yousef explains, is embodied in his view of the Arabic language as a binding element for all Arabs so that the identity he sought and felt proud of at that period is the identity of an Arab (677-78). In

the interview with Shehadeh, Darwish celebrates the Arabic language as a metaphor of national unity and victory:

> The poet can contribute to the development of a nation in language. He can empower people, make people more human and better able to tolerate life. My poetry is read during times of mourning and celebration. It has also given people joy. Some of my poetry that has been turned into song gives a sense of compensation for losses and defeats. (4)

The belief in return, however, started to dwindle after he left Palestine.[4] It could be that being physically severed from the homeland has made him less believing in the possibility of return and pan-Arabism. However, a closer reading of the post-Palestine poetry shows that it is not only a matter of being spatially displaced. In an introduction to Darwish's *Unfortunately, It Was Paradise* (2003), Muni Akash and Carolyn Forché argue that for Darwish "the land is fragile" (xviii) and therefore not enough to restore a place. The only resort would be history which cannot be "reduced to a compensation for lost geography." (xviii) Darwish's sense of the place, therefore, is not merely geographical. No matter how far he is from the motherly Palestine, he has managed to establish a personal connection with the place (Palestine).

In "Another Road in the Road" (1986) (from *Fewer Roses*), for example, Darwish ponders on the theme of the endless road taking him far from his native land. The road is a transitional phase for him; it never cuts off the connection with the place he left. His words "I am from here, I am from there, yet am neither here nor there" (4) show that he has managed to free himself from the restrictions the physical place imposes on him. In a chapter titled "Home is Lovelier than the Way Home: Travels and Transformations in Mahmoud Darwish's Poetry" (2014), Rehnuma Sazzad touches on this point by emphasizing Darwish's "ability to transform himself through the constant travels that refine his poetic sensibility towards reaching a transcendent realm, which he envisages as home" (90). Being neither here nor there annihilates the physical reality of Palestine in the memory of the exiled Darwish by transforming it from the geographical space on the map to the aesthetic space in the text. This is also evident in the poem "A Rhyme for the Odes" (1995) (from *Why Did You Leave the Horse Alone*?) where Darwish manages to recreate the lost homeland by turning the physical connection with the place into an aesthetic experience:

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[4] In the interview with Shehadeh, Darwish ascribed the loss of hope, not only on his part but also on the part of all Palestinians, after the Arab defeat in 1967, to the "many verbal victories that tried to compensate for the defeat that the nation was suffering" (4). Hence, his constant call for innovation in poetic forms and for "liberating poetry from empty rhetoric and romanticism and [bringing] back to it the pulse of life" (4)

Who am I?
I am my language, I am an ode, two odes. Ten. This
is my language. (91)

Darwish invokes his native language (the Arabic language) to bring him back home. He is in no need for a physical return anymore. Language becomes the transplanted abode that evades physical and geographical compartmentalization; for, like Darwish, it is the 'present-absentee' that is neither here nor there.

2. POSTSTRUCTURALISM[5]

The shift in Darwish's poetry (after he left Palestine) shows that exile has left him not only physically displaced. As a writer, he has also experienced what poststructuralists might have called had they read his poetry "linguistic displacement". To explain, Darwish's belief in the Arabic language as a binding element for Arab unity while still in Palestine (first phase of his poetry) corresponds to the Saussurian concept of the sign in which the signifier and the signified exist in an unbreakable bond.[6] The Arabic language as a signifier alludes to Arab unity and to the belief in the right of return. Both serve as two faces of the same coin. Thus, by restoring the Arabic language, Darwish is restoring the lost land and the lost identity. This, however, is too good to be true, which is a fact the older Darwish has come to realize after he left Palestine. Exile has taught him not only to adapt to physical displacement but to linguistic displacement too. Hence, his dwindling belief in the hope of restoring language, the land or identity. From a poststructuralist perspective, the signifier-signified bond is no longer viable. To talk of such a direct relation where what represents (the signifier) is directly related to what is represented (the signified) is even naïve at this level,

especially that, as a politician, Darwish has started to see things less romantically; more realistically.[7]

As the bond between the signifier and the signified is broken, the possibility of regaining a free Palestine becomes less realistic. It is not as simple as by recreating Palestine, you reestablish identity. Language pops in declaring that the lost beloved in "The Most Beautiful Love" is not regained at the end of the poem as expected; neither is the lost Palestine by analogy. The broken bond results in free-floating signifiers which float freely establishing multiple relations with multiple signifieds. The result is multiple meanings, none of which is fixed or static. In post-structuralist terms, this means that the broken signifier-signified bond results in a "deferral of meaning" so that the identity which Darwish is seeking is not solely found in the actual homeland, the imaginary homeland or its memory, but in all of these together.

Language in this phase of Darwish's poetry (the poetry written in exile) is what constructs identity, so that identity is no longer sought by restoring the lost land, but by appealing to what poststructiralists call "the game of language". In "Threatened Longing and Perpetual Search: The Writing of Home in the Poetry of Mahmoud Darwsih" (2008), Najat Rahman touches on this point by arguing that

> Poetry for Darwish becomes a space of survival after Beirut 1982. His poetry seeks an inheritance that will not dispossess and that will open toward a future. It is through playing with the tension of lyric as desire and loss that Darwish charts the possibilities for home. The creation of homeland becomes the work of the poet. (42)

Since the physical entity (Palestine) of the home is beyond reach for the exiled Darwish, language becomes the replacement. But language itself is beyond representation as Derrida argues in "Srtructure, Sign and

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[5] The term 'poststructuralism' is used instead of 'deconstruction' throughout the paper for two reasons. First, as Robert Dale Parker explains in *How to Interpret Literature: Critical Theory for Literary and Cultural Studies* (2008), poststructuralism is based on Derrida's theory of deconstruction, but it places it in a context. (90-92) In the discussion in the following two sections, the play of language is analyzed and related to the formation of identity in *Absent Presence* and some other works by Darwish. This places deconstruction in a context and extends the play of language from the level of the text to reality. Second, the term 'poststructuralism' makes incorporating Barthes' contribution in literary theory to the discussion possible, since, as known, Barthes started as a structuralist before becoming a poststructuralist.

[6] Saussurian linguistics, which is considered the launching pad of Srtucturalism, is based on the concept of the sign, which, according to de Sausssure, is made up of the signifier (the voice or the image) and the signified (the abstract concept associated with the voice or the image).The signifier and the signified serve as two faces of the same coin, but they exist in an arbitrary relation, in the sense that the relation between the signifier and the signified is conventional (not natural).

[7] To talk of identity in the works of Darwish is to talk of the relatedness of the personal and the political that we see in his life as a Palestinian. Though Darwish has repeatedly drawn a clear-cut line between his being a poet and a politician, being a Palestinian has fueled his search for identity in an unquestionably obvious way. In 1973,Darwish joined the Palestinian Liberation Organization. In 1987, he was elected to the PLO executive committee, but resigned the day after the 1993 Oslo agreement was signed disbelieving that it could ever support establishing a Palestinian state. Leaving Palestine has helped Darwish see things more realistically. In an article appearing in The Guardian (2002), Maya Jaggi remarks, borrowing Darwish's words, that he has "liberated [himself] from all illusions and became cynical. [He] asked absolute questions about life, where there is no room for nationalist ideology" (2). Darwish, however, has never abandoned the Palestinian cause for he has always believed thathe cannot "achieve [his] private freedom before the freedom of [his] country" (2).

Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences" (1967).[8] It is no longer the stable structure with the fixed center. Now, it is decentered, "play" is introduced into it and signifiers are left to float freely in pursuit of an ultimate signified. The result indeed is an endless process of signification where meaning is continuously produced but never exhausted (109-111). Not only is Derrida relevant here but Barthes also.[9] In "The Death of the Author" (1967), Barthes liberates the text from the hegemonizing discourse usually represented by the author figure and introduces language as an alternative authority. As language fuels the process of signification into the endless cycle of engaged and disengaged signifiers and signifieds, it creates reality instead of only representing it (169-71).[10]

The new authority given to language paves the way for change (textual resistance) in two ways. At one level, the subject[11] is introduced as an active participant in the process of signification. This idea is also introduced in Barthes' *Lisible/Scriptible* (1970) where he marks a clear-cut distinction between *lisible* reality, in which the subject is no more than a passive consumer, and *scriptible* reality, in which the subject becomes an active agent in what Barthes describes as an inexhaustible process of meaning production (5-7). At another level, change is seen in the new possibility for dynamism and creativity. As Derrida explains "there is no-outside-text" (158)[12] meaning that reality in the text is no longer correspondent to an outside

reality that precedes it and restricts it; on the contrary, reality becomes a product of the text (of its language) and is later transferred into the world in an act of resistance.

No doubt, the shift to the authority of language is not a disappointing one; for 'authority' in the case of language takes on a new meaning: the game that language infuses into the text. Language initiates an endless process of meaning production in the text and this makes the possibility of resisting the fixed reality existing outside it more conceivable. To read Darwish in a poststructuralist context, therefore, is to look for the endless possibilities that the play of language creates in a text raising the question of identity, such as *Absent Presence*.

3. *ABSENT PRESENCE* DECONSTRUCTED

Absent Presence[13] is a self-eulogy that Darwish has written as he felt death too close to him. It is a farewell to a life that has given him little, if no, rest to make him stick to it. But, to think of it differently, why would someone eulogize himself while still alive? It is true that, for Darwish, a critical health situation[14] would have been enough to think of writing such a work, but if one reads between the lines, one would realize that a more serious issue lies beneath the intention for writing *Absent Presence*.

In the context of what has been discussed above, *Absent Presence* continues the tradition that Darwish has started before. In fact, the shift in Darwish's post-Palestine poetry cannot be fully comprehended if *Absent Presence* is excluded from the discussion. One may well say that *Absent Presence* is a book about occupation, exile, separation, nostalgia and illness, yet, to attempt a poststructuralist reading of the work helps bring Darwish's long search for identity to a more relieving end. To start with, *Absent Presence* continues the themes of identity, homeland and death that have so far become a Darwishian trend. The title itself takes us back to Darwish's landmark "Identity Card". Following in the steps of its ancestor, the much younger *Absent Presence* raises the same question of "Who am I?" but gives an even more subtle answer. One need not forget also that the title reminds the reader,

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[8] In "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences" (1967), Derrida criticizes the structuralists' overdependence on abstract structures. Structures are made up of the word 'events' which he defines as ruptures (redoublings of the structure): "The appearance of a new structure, of an original system, always comes about…and this is the very condition of its structural specificity-by a rupture with its past, its origin, and its cause" (p.120). He also criticizes the structuralists' belief that a structure should have a fixed center. According to him, the center exists inside and outside the structure simultaneously; therefore, the center is not the center. In the absence of a center, the bond between the signifier and the signified is broken initiating play in an endless cycle of meaning.

[9] In "Arguable Distinction between Barthes' Structuralism and Poststructuralism" (2013), Divya Ramakrishna Rao argues that while Barthes' works (especially Lisible/Scriptible) are "considered to have moved from structuralism to poststructuralism" (p.2), they combine structuralist and poststructuralist elements. As Barthes declares the death of the author, he introduces the reader as an active participant in the production of meaning, which is a feature of structuralism (which stressed the role of the reader). Barthes also introduced language as an alternative authority in the production of meaning in the text, and this coincides with the poststructuralist tendency to emphasize the role of language as a sign system in the production of meaning.

[10] To impose a fixed authority on the text is to restrict the process of signification in it and to turn it into a mimetic representation of reality. Barthes refuses to sacrifice the complexity of signification (meaning production) to a monolithic discursive voice for the text, he believes, hides no ultimate truth to be unearthed by the reader.

[11] The subject here refers not to the narrator of the text. It is the voice the reader hears in the text. In this sense, language becomes the subject for Barthes.

[12] For further information, see *Of Grammatology* (1976), translated into English by Gayatri Spivak (p.158). Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

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[13] *Absent Presence* is the third prose memory work by Darwish. Before *Absent Presence*, he wrote *Journal of Ordinary Grief* (1973) and *Memory of Forgetfulness* (1985), which share *Absent Presence*'s poetic nature. In the interview conducted by Shehadeh, Darwish expresses his love for writing prose: "I like prose. I feel that sometimes prose can achieve a poetic state more poignant than poetry..." (p.2)

[14] Darwish suffered from a heart problem throughout his life. In 1984, he had a heart attack, but was saved and brought back to life through an electric shock. He was also operated on for a heart problem in 1998. He died in 2008 of complications following an open-heart surgery in the USA.This heart history has caused the theme of death to recur in his literary works. *Mural* and *Absent Presence* are two examples. In *Absent Presence*, he explains that "…death does not grieve the dead; it rather hurts the living" (p.76).

which is probably the reason why Darwish has chosen it, of the status that Darwish has been given after his return from Beirut to Palestine one year after he left it in 1948.

For the mature Darwish, *Absent Presence* is therefore the words of bitter wisdom that exile, age and illness have taught him. In a commentary on the book titled "Lessons in life from the great divide" (2011), Guy Mannes-Abbott explains that *Absent Presence* "offers costly wisdoms from a life journey, rendered in the opaque lyricism of his poetry" (1). This should not, however, lead to the wrong conclusion that *Absent Presence* is simply an autobiographical work that sums up the main events in the life of its writer. Memory does constitute an integral part of the work, yet, the pastness of memory should not make the reader underestimate its relativeness to the present. *Absent Presence*'s twenty sections take the reader back to Darwish's early years as a boy when his family was forced to leave Palestine due to the Israeli occupation. They also take him through most of the main events that make up Darwish's life as a Palestinian: Al-Nakhba 1948, returning to Palestine as a "present-absentee", consequent exile, the Oslo Accords, Al-Intifada, etc.. All of these events, however, are presented to the reader in the context of his nearby death. In an article titled "*In The Presence of Absence*: Mahmoud Darwish's Farewell to Language" (2011), M. Lynx Qualey touches on this point by noting that *Absent Presence* is "fueled by its author's intimacy with death" (1), which is rather true. *Absent Presence* has indeed acquired more attention after Darwish's close death, which comes less than two years after its publication.

No doubt, Darwish is bereaving; he is lamenting his own death, which he felt is looming quite near to entice such a dense funeral speech. But, death, for him, is not an end in itself; it is not the traditional "farewell to life" that the reader is familiar with. Death in *Absent Presence* is a means to reach what is beyond it: The eternal question of "Who am I?" Thus, like many of Darwish's previous works, *Absent Presence* starts a new quest for identity. But, unlike most of them, it connects the search for identity with death to show that this search is endless and inexhaustible.[15] Yet, since the reality of death is beyond human comprehension, it can be only represented through language, which shares the same endlessness of what comes after death.

If identity is achieved through language in *Absent Presence*, then what gives it the authority? To start with, the form of the work as an elegy in prose blurs the line between a multiplicity of genres. *Absent Presence* mixes a number of literary genres: prose and verse, dirge and autobiography, past narrative and present narrative. As a mixture of all these categories, the text comes to challenge the authority of conventions and gives more space to the play of language which takes over this authority. In an article titled "The Postcolonial Writer in Performance: J.M. Coetzee's *Summertime*" (2013), Serena Guarracino argues that form plays an important role in turning the text into an 'event' by freeing it from the restrictions that literary conventions enforce on it. Thus, as a mixture of elegy and autobiography, *Absent Presence* is innovative; it gives more space to the play of language and establishes, as a result, the endless possibility of meaning in the text. In her discussion, Guarracino borrows the term 'act of genre' coined by Jane Poiner (2009)[16] which she employs to show that it is through the form of the work rather than the substance that "the most significant intellectualizing is done" (qtd in Guarracino 105). No doubt, it is 'textual resistance' that Guarracino is hinting at here:

> Literature actually hovers on the border of what "is" performance…To think of literature as an event means to stress its transient state against the apparently stable nature of the written text- a text that is, or may be, performed into 'literariness' by each reading, including academic readings and writings. (103)

Guarracino's words show that the text can be a rich ground for resisting reality. By stressing its transient rather than its stable nature, Guarracino is introducing language as an alternative authority. The free-floating signifiers engage and disengage endlessly with multiple signifieds making resistance to fixed meaning a feature inherent in the text, not enforced on it. In *Absent Presence*, this is evident in Darwish's non-traditional employment of the conventions of the elegy.[17] Though an emotionally-dense text that laments the dead and praises his/her achievements is the trend, Darwish's elegy touches on issues not related to death such as writing poetry, authority in the text and the letters of the Arabic language. In chapter nineteen, this is clear when the narrator wonders why the addressee (the dead) refuses to have him lament his death in emotionally-charged statements:

> You said to me, "If I die before you, protect me from canned words which have been past their sell-by date…" What, then, should I say to you, friend, in the presence of this obvious absence? You have dictated to me a very curt speech of farewell,

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[15] There are other works by Darwish that connect the themes of identity and death. *Mural* (2001), a work which Darwish wrote after a second heart attack in 1999, is one example where the question of identity is raised in connection to death. In an article titled "The Discourse of Death in Mahmoud Darwish's *Mural*" (2015), Mustafa Al-Geraffi describes death as a "mental state" (p.2) that fuels his search for identity.

[16] For further information, see Jane Poiner's *J.M Coetzee and the Paradox of Postcolonial Authorship* (2009), Farnham: Ashgate.

[17] In the interview he conducted with Darwish, Shehadeh asks Darwish about what has made him one of the most "prominent Arab poets who is constantly introducing poetic innovations" (p.3). Darwish ascribes this to his constant innovation in form, which was badly needed at the time to address the political situation in Palestine: "After 1948, we Palestinians who stayed in what became the state of Israel found ourselves in a state of defeat. It was a most perplexing time. There was nothing in the old forms of poetry that could help us express the state in which we found ourselves. Hence, the need arose for a revolutionary form of expression for revolutionary poetry..." (p.3)

devoid of grief, orderly in disarray, no tears to dampen the words…Yes indeed, you gave no instructions except to forbid excessive interpretation. (114)

By writing this tearless speech to lament his death, Darwish is distracting the reader's attention from the conventions of the form so that he may focus more on the language. In another instance (in chapter four), Darwish insists that the reader challenges set conventions by rewriting "our story" (22) not as others write about us, but as we feel we should write:

Do not look upon yourself in the way they write about you. Do not investigate the Canaanite in you in order to establish that you exist. Rather, seize this reality, this name of yours, and learn how to write your proof. For you are you, not your ghost, the one who was driven away that night. (22)

Darwish's words call for resisting not only the reality of occupation, but the fixed identity imposed on him by this reality as well. In its place, he constructs an identity that shares language's multiplicity and malleability and thus makes resistance possible. In an article mourning the death of Darwish, Sinan Antoon (2008) touches on this point by explaining that "Mahmoud Darwish once said that he considered himself to be a Trojan poet recollecting and reconstructing the voices of the defeated" (1) to tell the other part of the story which has been kept hidden for a long time. Quoting his words, he adds: "The Trojans would have expressed a different narrative than that of Homer, but their voices were forever lost. [He is] in search of those voices" (qud in Antoon, 1)

Another feature that establishes language as an authority in *Absent Presence* is the multiple voices that make up the text. The mixture of the textual "I", the addressed "you" (and a third absent person (most probably a female)[18] that the reader is introduced to in the text produces the same effect that the multiple genres produce. As explained in the previous section on Barthes, it diffuses the authorial authority behind the composition of the text. It also lends the fragmented text to the play of language and establishes an endless process of meaning production. Contrary to the single voice that laments the dead person in a traditional funeral speech, *Absent Presence* opens with two voices, one ("I") addressing the other ("you"):

I scatter you before me with a capacity which I am given only at beginnings. And as you instructed me, I stand here now, in your name, to thank those who have come to bid you farewell on this last journey, to invite them to make a brief leave-taking, to come together in a meal worthy of your memory. (1)

Though Darwish's words bespeak of a fragmented self (two in one), the reader realizes that the two voices constitute one person; Darwish. Yet, this separation of one into two is employed as a technique of resistance by

Darwish. First, one of the voices, the narrator, is the one mostly heard by the reader in the text, while the other one, the addressee, is rarely heard and is mostly spoken about by the narrator. Moreover, the reader realizes not long after he starts reading the text that the other voice is physically dead at the time that the narrator seems to be immortal. These two points may lead the reader to mistake Darwish's intention as one engaging two traditionally opposites (the soul and the body) in the familiar conversation where the soul is privileged over the dead body, or to simply conclude, as explained by Antoon, that "the living "I" bids farewell to its imagined dying other in a sustained poetic address" (qtd in Qualey 2011, p.1), which still sustains the same binarism. Yet, a poststructuralist reading of the work sees not the two voices as opposites. In fact, the line is blurred between the two voices just as it is blurred between the different genres that make up the text. At some points in the text, the reader knows not whether the speaker is the living "I" or the dying other:

"Become a child again, so that I may see myself in your mirror. Are you me? Am I you? So teach me poetry so that I may write an obituary for you now, now, now, as you do for me" (19).

"You are you and not you at the same time.

Split out inside and into outside" (43).

"If you are I, and I you

My friend, then we have a postponed appointment

In legends. Which way shall we go?" (56)

"From afar come poems. I resemble you, but am not you.

I am you but do not resemble you" (76).

These examples, among others, prove that Darwish's intention is not to use the two voices as opposites. For if so, the whole argument of language as the ultimate authority behind the text collapses. In her discussion of Coetzee's use of fictional autobiography in *Summertime*, Guarracino touches on this point. She explains that the multiple subjectivities that the reader encounters in the text help "[articulate the] irruption of the other (*autre*) in the narrative account of oneself- an other who can assume the uncanny features of the writer himself…" (108) This can be seen in the intentional merging of the two voices that coexist in *Absent Presence*. As the identity of the two voices intertwines, the two voices become too precarious for any of them to be trusted as a sole authority. In their place, language is introduced as constituting a more democratic authority, bringing the two together, yet sacrificing the genuineness of none. Again, *Absent Presence* becomes the intellectual space where the same kind of resistance which Guarracino attributes

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[18] In "Lessons in life from the great divide" (2011), Mannes-Abbott remarks that *Absent Presence* is a book that "characterizes the place of women in Darwish's life" (2). This statement can serve as the launching pad for future research on the topic.

to mixed genres is found in multiple voices. The words of the narrator in chapter four are a good example: "So learn by heart this night of pain. You may be the narrator, the narration and the subject. Do not forget this narrow, winding road which carries you and carries it to the riotous unknown that will throw you and your family into perplexity" (24).

The third reason is the shifting places that the reader is taken to as the narrative goes back and forth between past and present events. Two points are worth mentioning here. First, the different events are narrated by the narrator from a transitory space. The purgatory or Al-Barzakh, as it is called in Arabic, is best described as a space that is geographically hard to define. It even lacks the physicality needed to call it a "place". This, however, is not a drawback for Darwish. On the contrary, as a space that defies fixed categorization, it helps minimize the authority of the narrator in the production of meaning and gives more space for the democratic authority of language. In chapter twelve, the narrator describes a new kind of journey that his dead other is bound on:

> …you are bound on a journey without roads, maps or addresses, on an outing freeof any purpose. You leave the world, the world of things and words and what lies between them and comes together in the night hours, as if the night were a bed. You marvel at those who turn night into day and day into night… (70)

Here, it matters not to the speaker that the journey is mapless, for there is another map that guides him. Language is the alternative map that gives directions without the need for roads or addresses. This takes us to the second point: The narrative shifting from one place to another as events from the writer's life are narrated. At one point, the reader is taken to the old Palestine which Darwish's family was leaving in 1948. At another, the reader finds himself with the imprisoned Darwish in a cell, then in a European country, later in Ramallah, etc. The shift from one place to another disseminates the rigid authority that place is traditionally given in the text and replaces it with the "spatiality" of language. This is especially true of Darwish's description of exile in *Absent Presence*. In chapter ten, Darwish calls exile a "space" rather than a "place" with territories and borders.

> The place, then, is pulled with the leash of expression; bear it, as you bear your name, not your shadow, in your imagination, not in a suitcase. Only words are qualified, in this sunset to repair the breakages of Time and place, to name gods who have ignored you and plunged you into the wars with primitive weapons. Words are the raw materials for building a house. Words are a country. (61)

Contrary to the physical Palestine the reader finds in his earlier poetry, exile is transformed into the aesthetic space of the text in *Absent Presence*. In poststructuralist terms, Darwish "spatializes" the text by introducing place as a construct of language. Words can be so powerful as to rebuild not only the house that Darwish and his family have left in 1948, but also the homeland that he

has been forced to leave later. A poststructuralist reading these lines would also agree that Darwish's spatialized description of exile frees language of the old "two faces of the same coin" Saussurian statement. Here, signifiers are spatially eligible to establish multiple and transitory relations with numerous signifieds rendering an endless cycle of meanings. The word "homeland", in this sense, stands not only for the physical land that Darwish is trying to regain, but for multiple meanings (identity, family, friends, history, heritage, etc.) which are as inexhaustible as the transitory space from which the narrator is speaking.

With language becoming the new authority, *Absent Presence* takes on a new significance. Thus, Darwish's intimacy with death becomes an intimacy with language which continues the search for identity. In an article titled "The Geography of Poetry: Mahmoud Darwish and Postnational Identity" (2009), Erica Mena touches on this point by arguing that words have helped Darwish establish a lasting sense of 'who he is' at the time that the place which these words refer to has failed to. (115-16) If place is physically lost, words are not; this is the good news that Darwish is trying to impart to the reader in *Absent Presence*.

> It is not the physical location but the word "*Home*" that the poet has created, and the word has been created only through the destruction of all words…As words are signifiers for the world, so they symbolize what they represent…But it is only by "dismantling" all the words which is to say the world, that *Home* (and what it signifies) can be found- as the driving motivation behind all action, and that to which everything returns. (112)

Mena's words show that creating a replacement for the lost homeland necessitates filling the gap resulting from the "destruction of all words" (112). In poststructuralist terms, this is explained by the fact that language is needed to fill in the lack resulting from the broken bond between the signifier and the signified. Meaning is produced because of absence, which is represented in the loss of land and identity in *Absent Presence*. Thus, as Mena explains, physical displacement "does not diminish the place of origin" (112); on the contrary, it recreates it through language:

> Three letters turn into a door or a dwelling. Thus obscure letters, which have no value when separated, construct a house when joined together. What a game! What magic! The world is born gradually out of words…All distant things become near at hand and all that is locked is opened. If you make no mistake in writing the word "river", river comes into your notebook. (15)

An element of magic is sensed in Darwish's words. With three letters put next to each other, a door is created, then a dwelling, and eventually a homeland. Presence is born out of absence, but not without a price paid to make up for this imbalance. In chapter five, Darwish employs the bee-sting as a metaphor for the price that has to be paid for making what is absent present:

You remember the stinging taste of the honey that your grandfather made you take; how you refused and fled from the sight of your grandmother as she put a sieve over her face as protection against the bee stings and collected the honey with a daring hand. Everything here is proof of loss and impairment. Everything here is a painful contrast with what was there. The thing that wounds you most is the fact that "there" is near to "here". (29-30)

Darwish's words bespeak of the suffering caused by displacement. Loss is painful, it is heart-breaking but it is a fact of life that cannot be ignored.[19] Had there been no absence (loss), there would have been no being. In chapter eight, he states this openly arguing that "without an absence, their absence, [he] would not be present" (48). Ironically enough, presence and absence are brought together again. In the title, Darwish explains that his presence is a result of an absence. Once again here, he ascribes his presence to an absence, but not to the absence resulting from being physically torn away from Palestine. Here, absence is linguistic. As language replaces the lost land, it turns restoring the land into an endless process of meaning production: signifiers and signifieds engage and disengage causing this absence to be filled, unfilled and filled again in an ongoing cycle:

So go with them, with the words, and play a game of hide-and-seek. Write with them our previous names and a longing for a flight to make the world more round, an apple which falls upwards and turns on itself, time turning with it. Not everything which has been shall be; not everything which shall be has been. (72)

No doubt, Darwish realizes the latent power that words possess in creating not only meaning but also reality as meaning travels into the world to effect change. Therefore, to see identity as a product of the play of language is to see identity as an ongoing process that defies fixation. Fixation is the *death* that Darwish fears, it is the *death* that he runs away from. This is seen in chapter twelve where the narrator wonders why his dead other refuses to have a statue carved to immortalize him after his death:

The sculptor asks you, "Why do you refuse to let me make you a small statue to put beside the photograph album?"

You say to him, "I have no photograph album or archive."

He asks, amazed, "If you die, where will they find you?"

You say, "In my grave." He persists, "Why do you not want the statue?"

You say, "Because I want to move, to reach out my hand to wave the flies from my face, to put out my tongue in mockery, to put my foot down on the street… A statue is incapable of self-criticism." (67)

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[19] In a poem titled "Now…in Exile" (2005), Darwish touches on this idea. He explains that he got so used up to absence that he seldom questioned it. Absence, which started as physical for Darwish, moves to the level of the word. Unlike physical absence, linguistic absence can be filled, giving a sense of relief when the hope for regaining the physical is no longer there. This sense of relief, however, is not permanent; the signifier engages with the signified, but disengages from it after a while to engage with another.

For Darwish, death is not static; it flows in a constant flux. Therefore, he does not need a statue to immortalize him after he dies. Language, which, like death, is in a state of constant flux, immortalizes him and gives him an identity that lasts longer than a carved statue would.

Words are waves. You learn to swim out of the tempting wave which covers you with foam. Words have the rhythm of the sea and the call of the mysterious: 'Come to me, to me in search of what you know not,' the blue calls to you…How do letters expand to make room for all these words? How do words expand to embrace the world? (18)

These words bring to mind Barthes' call for turning the passive subject into an active participant in the production of meaning. A subject learning to "swim out of the tempting wave which covers [him] with foam" (18) is an actant; he constructs an identity that is malleable and beyond fixation. Darwish's narrator adopts such kind of an identity in *Absent Presence*. He is neither dead nor alive, but both together. He is neither a citizen nor an exile, but both together. He is neither present nor absent, but both together:

You lie shrouded before me like a rhyme insufficient to make my utterance reach you. I am both the mourner and the one mourned for. Be myself so that I may become you; get up so that I may carry you; draw near so that I may know you; draw away from me so that I may know you. (6-7)

Here, Darwish can be seen lingering behind his narrator, so that he is able to bring together the two voices that make up the text (the textual "I" and the addressed "you") in an act of resistance. Resembling the game of language which Darwish describes as a game that "will bewitch you until you become part of it" (18), the relation between the text's "I" and "you" is best described as a game of constant attraction and rejection. In post-structuralist terms, the signifier ("I") floats freely in constant search of an ultimate signified ("you"), during which it engages and disengages with multiple signifieds, none of which fills in the gap permanently. In chapter two, Darwish likens the relation between the "I" and the "you" of the text to a father-son relationship:

You are, as it were, my child, and I your father. Your father did not spoil you, lest your brothers throw you into the pit in the tale. Carry me as I carried you, so that I may see in the distance that blue which seeps out of every distance and which distance purifies of any stain. (10)

So possessive is the father of the son that he rarely lets him slip away: "You will not be free of me unless my freedom is excessively generous, teaching you peace and guiding you home" (41). This possessiveness on the part of the father, however, hinders not creativity, for it is based on a give-and-take process that goes beyond all restrictions:

"And you, you and more…
And you, you and less…" (39-40)

The dynamism that characterizes the father-son relationship defies the fixation usually found in an authoritative voice in a traditional text. This is why resistance is an inherent feature of *Absent Presence*. If the identity of the text's subject is not fixed, then it is multiple and open to change. In her discussion, Mena stresses this point by describing identity as "post-national" in Darwish's poetry (111-13).[20] According to her, a post-national identity is characterized by a malleability

that makes resistance to fixation and statism possible. It breaks free from temporality and territory establishing a "community that moves beyond geography and nation" (112) and paving the way for a new geography; the geography of the text where a limitless aesthetic space is created and offered for new possibilities.

The geography of *Absent Presence* is, therefore, a geography created aesthetically (i.e. it is a geography created by language). Being beyond the restrictions imposed by time and place, language endows the text with a sense of malleability and multiplicity and opens it up to new possibilities. This idea is not new in the poetry of Darwish; it is found in the earlier poetry written in exile. However, what makes *Absent Presence* unique in its presentation of the aesthetic geography of the text is that the game of language is enacted in the context of death, and this gives more room for resistance. Just as death is an endless and inexhaustible space where all restrictions and borders are lost, language becomes so. The play of language is, therefore, expanded to the space of the unknown (death) to produce meaning with no limits or restrictions. In chapter nineteen, Darwish (in the words of the text's 'you') lends language the inexhaustible power of knowing the unknown: "What is defined is known, and what is known is possessed, and that is possessed is desecrated, used up, destroyed" (114). When can a thing/a person be defined to be known, possessed, desecrated, used up and eventually destroyed? Only in death, the endlessness of which is beyond the limits of human comprehension:

> You said to me, 'The correspondence of image to reality is an event which drives the imagination into neutrality. So we must make the image of the thing lie about the thing, so that we may see what lies behind the thing, see in the light of vision that which saves us from nothingness. (115-16)

Darwish's words stress the inherent feature of resistance in *Absent Presence*. In death, correspondence to reality is lost. Meaning is freed from reference which imposes the fixation that Darwish has been evading

from the beginning of the work. As a result, meaning is no longer seen as a necessity, but as a privilege. In post-structuralist terms, this is explained by the fact that absence is what necessitates the search for presence; once absence is made present, the search for meaning is no more a necessity. In death, however, this rule is no longer viable, for presence and absence stand on equal grounds. The gap that keeps the signifier in constant search for an ultimate signified is, therefore, bridged annihilating the need for the production of meaning.

> Had I known you, I should've possessed you, had you known me, you should've possessed me, and there would be neither you nor myself alone…O my "I", sleeping at the white dawn of eternity, when eternity's sign is a white beyond colour. With which of your meanings shall I set up the form worthy of a white absurdity? How can I protect your meaning from dust while our journey is shorter than the sermon of the priest in an abandoned church, on a Sunday, when no one is saved from the wrath of God? (4)

As the signifier and the signified merge, not only is the gap no longer there but also the pain that results from seeking an answer to Darwish's eternal question "Who am I?" For now, it matters no more if this question is raised with no answer given. In fact, Darwish embraces a new kind of identity that is not based on absence in death. Hence, the relief that he, for the first time, could find when faced with who he really is or who he ought to be. Death gives him a wholistic sense of identity that necessitates no sacrificial tribute of loss and no language to make up for this loss. In chapter twenty, Darwish states openly that language is no longer needed as it culminates in the wholeness of death:

> I see a bird carrying me and carrying you, with us as its wings, beyond the dream, to a journey that has no end and no beginning, no purpose and no goal. I do not speak to you and do not speak to me; we listen only to the music of silence. Silence is friend's trust of friend, imagination's confidence between rain and rainbow. (123)

Once united with death, the authority of language as a source of meaning in the text becomes redundant. Eventually, there is somewhere where there is no absence to be filled, no loss to be made up for and no pain to be relieved. Eventually, there is no need to keep separated the 'I' and the "you" of the text, the signifier and the signified, the living Darwish and the dead Darwish. Eventually, identity becomes a spectrum of wholeness where it matters not whether one has an actual homeland to be identified with or whether one manages (or not) to create a homeland of words in case he does not. Eventually, identity becomes an allness and a nothingness at the same time; the "present-absentee" that Darwish has spent a lifetime looking for:

> "Who are you?"

> And you felt all your limbs and said, "I am I."

> And they said, "What proof is there?"

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[20] The term 'post-national' is based on Edward Said's definition of identity in his book Culture and Imperialism (2003) as one that "[provokes] and [challenges] the fundamentally static identity that has been the core of cultural thought during the era of imperialism… by which one is defined by the nation, which in turn derives its authority from a supposedly unbroken tradition" (xxv) Mena argues that Said's words apply to Darwish's poetry because it promotes a 'post-national' sense of identity by breaking free from the traditional notion of identity.

And you said, "I am the proof."

And they said, "This is not enough; we need a nothing."

And you said, "I am complete and nothing." (6)

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