The Specters of Nation and Narration in Mahmoud Darwish's

Absent Presence

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Abstract

Since 1948, the Israeli occupation has strived to push Palestinians to the sphere of absence to legitimize their presence and claim over Palestine. The Palestinian-Israeli conflict is a conflict of narratives over a nation (Palestine), revealing that the nation is discursively constructed and power structures are created and controlled through discourse. Thus, in response to the Zionist narrative that legitimizes the presence (establishment) of Israel and obliterates and negates Palestinians and Palestine, many Palestinian authors charged their literary works with themes of exile, war trauma, nostalgia and return; among these authors were Ghassan Kanafani (1936-1972), Samih al-Qasim (1939-2014), Jabra Ibrahim Jabra (1919-1994), Fadwa Touqan (1917-2003), Sahar Khalifeh (1941- present), and Mahmoud Darwish (1941-2008). These prolific writers have devoted their lives for the purpose of reclaiming the lost paradise via the power of words. In this paper, I will explain the ghostliness of the self, land and language in Mahmoud Darwish's self-eulogy, *Absent Presence* (2006/2010), drawing on Derrida's *Specters of Marx* (1993/1994) and Barthes' post-structural seminal (ghostly) text, "The Death of The Author" (1967).

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> We became the ghost of a murdered man who pursues his killer asleep or awake or on the borderline between the two so that he is depressed and complains of sleeplessness, and cries out, 'Are they not dead yet?' No, the ghost has reached the age of weaning, has come to the age of maturity, the age of resistance, the age of return. Aeroplanes chase the ghost in the air; tanks chase the ghost on the ground; submarines chase the ghost in the sea, but the ghost expands, occupies the consciousness of the killer till it drives him mad. (Darwish, 2006, p. 47)

In his self-eulogy *Absent Presence*, Mahmoud Darwish draws on themes of resistance, exile, and alienation, among many others, yet throughout his work there is a recurrent specter[1] of absent presence that haunts the text. Although his masterpiece designates a paradoxical amalgamation of two antithetical concepts of absence and presence as the title indcates, he brilliantly demonstrates how the two orchestrate together to reflect this synthetic state which eventually serves to textualize him as well as his homeland Palestine.

This paper is a Derridean, Barthesian reading of Mahmoud Darwish's *Absent Presence* which is a notable rendition of Edward Said's famous statement ,in *Culture and Imperialism* (1994), "nations themselves are narrations" (p. xiii). This autobiographical text demonstrates how narration functions as a spectral medium for resurrecting the absent author and absent land into the realms of presence. Selecting *Absent Presence* in particular stems from the ghostly nature of the text as it is a

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[1] The terms specter, ghost, revenant, apparition, and reapparrition will be used interchangeably regardless of the specific connotations carried in each word.

presence of an absence *per se*; it is a self-eulogy, which Darwish wrote in 2006 expecting his death very soon.

Darwish tackles unconventional themes not only in his *Absent Presence* but in almost all of his literary works, which "break the conventionality of composition" (*Sanakūn*, 2005, p. 131) especially when it comes to Palestinian resistance literature as Ghassan Kanafani coined the term. Darwish opines that:

> It is a duty that the Palestinian poetry should be employed to resist what hinders its progress [...] but it should never be a pretext to limit our poetical creativity for the sole purpose of resistance because literary idiosyncrasy is also a form of emancipation. (*Sanakūn*, 2005, p. 31; my translation)

Therefore, the occupier does not only strive to eradicate the land but the language and the authorial identities from the landscape of the text as well. For this reason, there are fears for the loss of the idiosyncratic writing self of the author whose works can become imbued with overloaded notions of resistance and anger to the extent this causes the absence of the author and ultimately his land. Darwish's literary works can be read as a reclaiming of the lost self and land. This interpretation is illuminated in his poem "A Rhyme for the Odes (Mu'allaqat)" (1995) which demonstrates how language revives his lost self

> I am my language, I am words' writ: Be! Be my body!
>
> And I became an embodiment of their timbre.
>
> I am what I have spoken to the words: Be the place where
>
> My body joins the eternity of the desert.
>
> Be, so that I may become my words. (2013, p. 91)

Analogously, in his *Absent Presence*, Darwish brilliantly manipulates his text via an unfamiliar combination of verse and prose, and an alternation between "I" and "you" that refer to the same antecedent. He even manipulates the typography of words as he alludes to his own name in Arabic "add one letter to another and you find your name formed like a stairway with few steps" (p. 16). All of these linguistic aspects harmonize together not only to denote the idiosyncrasy of Darwish as an author but also to signify his mastery over language.

Going through *Absent Presence*, the reader can sense a collective autobiography that documents and narrates not only the story of Darwish but also the story of a people's nation disrupted by the specter of absence. Yet, out of absence, presence is conceived. This literary conception is referred to in Roland Barthes' spectral text "The Death of the Author" (1967). Barthes argues that as "action is recounted…[a]disjunction occurs" (p. 2); he adds that after "the voice loses its origin [and] the author enters his own death" (p. 2), the process of "writing begins" (p. 2) hence marking the beginning of absence (of the author) and the advent of presence (of the text). Within the context of the absent people's homeland, the loss of voice runs parallel with the absentees' deprivation of the means of self expression, which can be read as a type of metaphysical death of the nation. Despite the multiple stages of absence presented in Barthes' text, he sets forth the specter of presence, namely, the beginning of writing. Hence, it can be said that absence sets a preliminary stage for the presence or more properly the rebirth of the absent homeland.

The rebirth of homeland that *Absent Presence* depicts resonates with Derrida's definition of a ghost which "begins by coming back" (*Specters of Marx*, p. 11); the ghost is also a "revenant [that] is going to come" (p. 2). The two notions denote a state of absent presence; the former indicates a present state while the latter signals to

a state of absence. *Absent Presence* hence is a ghostly text, which is in a dialogue with the ghosts that open the gates of the this paper. Although this is the first encounter with an apparition, one must recall Derrida's words commenting on the apparition in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* "everything begins in the imminence of a re-apparition, but a reapparition of the specter as apparition for the first time in the play" (p. 2). The first encounter, as a reader, with the ghost entails change, action, or performativity because "everything *begins* [emphasis added]" (p. 2) with that encounter. This explains why Derrida perceives a literary work as "a masterpiece [that] always *moves* [emphasis added],by definition, in the manner of a ghost" (pp. 20-21). Furthermore, Derrida deconstructs the conventional perception of a ghost as a "disembodied soul" (Merriam Webster Dictionary, 2017) and renders a more comprehensive meaning of it as a "living-dead" (p. 169). This present/absent dichotomy exists even in the word "ghost" which is ghostly *per se*. Although it contains the letter "h", the very phonemic absence of the "h" predicates a semantic presence of the word "ghost".

These deconstructive procedures that define a ghost attain further spectrality as they cross the literary margins of the text to the marbled margins of the tombstone. A ghostly hymn serenades, "On this land/ the lady of lands/ is what is worth living for". The first reading of this eulogy conjures Darwish's poem "On this Land" (1986) that still haunts our memory even after Darwish's death; however, memory this time is illusive as these words are Darwish's epitaph bidding farewell to his homeland. This instance, in particular, is a paragon deconstructing ghosts as it abounds in paradoxical notions: It celebrates life while announcing death; it is a congratulatory commemoration of absence. It is the presence of an absence, it is a ghost. The epitaph is further spectralized as it comes back as a revenant that anachronistically resonates with Friedrich Nietzsche's celebration of his land in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (2010):

"It is worthwhile living on the earth: one day, one festival with Zarathustra, has taught me to love the earth" (p. 247). This literary telepathy reveals an ephemeral feature of ghosts, namely, timelessness. They are a disturbance of the present, they are in Hamletian words "out of joint" (1.5.188). They are the presence of absence.

"To make an end is to make a beginning" : Beginnings Coming Back

Derrida's instantiation of the ghost as a revenant that "*begins* by *coming back* [emphasis added]" (p. 11) reveals that a ghost once existed before and that its beginning is in fact a continuation of a previous beginning. Darwish's rhetorical question on a beginning "there is no end which joins up with the beginning. How many times have we started?" (p. 46) spills out his first words "line by line, I *scatter* [emphasis added] you before me with a capacity which I am only given at beginnings" (p. 3). These introductory words clearly illustrate how beginnings begin with a "scatter"; beginnings are themselves scattered, and they are scattered in the sense that there is no real beginning. *Absent Presence* opens and closes with the same aesthetic transformation of a self-scattering scene. This disturbs the traditional notion of beginnings that become the amalgam of scattered works. Edward Said elucidates this idea on "beginnings" in his book *Beginnings: Intension and Method* (1975), proposing that:

> We can regard a beginning as the point at which, in a given work, the writer departs from all other works; a beginning immediately establishes relationships with works already existing, relationships of either continuity or antagonism or some mixture of both. (p. 3)

Accordingly, the opening lines of the text cannot be said to be the ultimate beginning of *Absent Presence*; there is possibly another entry beginning the book, namely, Malik ibn al-Rayb's self-elegy that opens Darwish's very first lines:

Do not go far! They say as they bury me

Where, if not far away, is my place? (Antoon, 2011, p. 11)

This intertexual reference to a seventh century poem further supports Said's own definition of a beginning that is rather a nested beginning. Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, two poststructuralist professors, define intertextuality as "[the] displacement of origins to other texts, which are in turn displacements of other texts and so on- in other words an undoing of the very idea of pure or straightforward origins" (p. 6). I believe that this text is imbued with intertextualities which epitomizes the state of the "displacement of [Darwish's Palestinian] origins" (p. 6). Intertextuality is in fact a key feature in Darwish's works. Sinan Antoon, a distinguished Iraqi scholar, poet and novelist, traces the poetical progress of Mahmoud Darwish in his tribute "In the Presence of Darwish" (2008), stating that "he moved from the lyrical style of his early "resistance period" to a fusion of lyricism and longer epic poems employing biblical and Canaanite mythology and symbols" (para. 7). This tendency towards employing mythology and symbolism clearly mirrors his experience as an exile displaced from his homeland causing him to be a "scatter[ed]" self. Moreover, intertextuality in this sense implies spectrality as it is the intervention of the past into the present and more possibly into the future. Julia Kristeva, who coined the term "intertextuality", defines it as "a mosaic of quotations" (p.37), and *Absent Presence* is a "mosaic" of texts and memories that abounds in ghostly reapparitions that haunt the text.

Still, the text, which is a multilayered "tissue" (p. 4) as Barthes argues, is also packed with multiple beginnings which qualify absence to be the ultimate beginning of all. Darwish offers an enigmatic chain reaction of temporal contemplations that illuminate this "uncanny" relation between "beginnings" and "absence"; he declares that "the past was born of absence" (p. 30). But, he states earlier in the text that "the future ever since is your past" (p. 13). These temporal declarations elucidate how the future as a beginning is also born from within the ghosts of absence. In this sense, re-examining Said's statement "nations themselves are narrations" (xiii) shows how

> Writing [is] potentially a means of demonstrating absence […] in Derrida's terms […] an act of mourning for that which lies already in the past. But the very signs employed to represent that lost presence announce the absence of the presence they signify. Presence is again postponed, pushed into the future. (Holderness, p. 8)

Accordingly, we find Darwish wondering in his rhetorical question "Is it true that he who writes his *story* [emphasis added] before the other wins the land of the story?" (p. 46). It is true that narrating a story is a form of exercising power as Ross Chambers suggests in his book *Story and Situation* (as cited in Bennett and Royle, 2004). To narrate is to produce oneself as Edward Said accentuates in his book *After the Last Sky* (as cited in Inez Hedges, 2015).

Although "the nation was born, far from the nation's land" (p. 95), the nation "seek[s] warmth in the story" (p. 29) and that is what sustains a nation. The etymology of a narrative substantiates the notion that nation is narration: To narrate is to "*narrare*" which literally translates into "to make known" (The Concise Dictionary of English Etymology, p. 301); it is also derived from "*gnarus*" meaning "knowing, acquainted with" (p. 301). Narration hence deconstructs the traditional meaning of

death. This explains Darwish's serenades to remembrance that keep recurrently reminding him to

> Remember, so that you grow before dissolution.
>
> Remember, remember
>
> Your ten fingers and forget the shoe
>
> Remember the features of your face,
>
> And forget the flies of winter.
>
> Remember, with your own name, your mother,
>
> And forget the letters of the alphabet.
>
> Remember your country and forget the sky.
>
> Remember, remember! (p. 31)

Darwish conjures remembrance in these lines so that his deceased land may not really become dead. For him "Galilee has poems, written in mystic delirium, and dead men who are training to *return* [emphasis added] to a childhood which butterflies have delivered from encroaching oblivion" (p. 107). Remembrance hence is the elixir of perpetuity and return delivered via the "mystic delirium" of the poem. Darwish's reiterative style that conjures "remembrance" in almost every line of the poem echoes the ghost of Hamlet's father's words "Adieu, adieu. Remember me" (1.5.62). This harmonious conversation between death and remembrance converts the presumed influence of absence that dismembers the land into what actually re-members and remembers it.

'Are they not dead yet?': Ghosts as Emblems of Agency

The uncanny ghost of *Absent Presence* that appears and reappears 16 times throughout the text is an illuminating example of the agency of the ghost which becomes "the thing made [that] overpowers its maker" (p. 45). The opening lines of

this paper portray a lively scene of an ever-present revenant that haunts the "air", "ground", and "sea". Derrida aptly points out that "A ghost never dies, it remains always to come and to come back" (p. 123). It is a ghostly experience to finally confront the ghost here in this chapter after many unnoticed meetings with it (him or her). This section is highly spectral due to the recurrent visibility of the ghost encountered while reading the text. Over the previous sections, ghostly and spectral absences were textually present 37 times which accordingly qualifies the whole paper to be an apparitional presence. This ghostly uncanniness is elucidated in Derrida's words that are imbued with specters:

> There is no *Dasein* of the specter, but there is no *Dasein* without the uncanniness, without the strange familiarity (*Unheimlichkeit*) of some specter. What is a specter?...The specter, as its name indicates, is the frequency of a certain visibility. But the visibility of the invisible. And visibility, by its essence, is not seen…[it is] beyond the phenomenon or beyond being. (*Specters of Marx*, p. 125)

It is evident that the textual presence or more properly the textual "visibility" of the specter in *Absent Presence* is an actualization of the "invisible" homeland as well as the author himself. Furthermore, "frequency" is another element imparting ghostliness to the text. It is no coincidence that the textual frequency of "poem" parallels with the textual presence of "ghost" in which both occur 16 times throughout the text.

Absent Presence abounds with a consortium of ghosts haunting that text: homeland has become a memory and a ghost to the author; the author himself has become a ghostly presence stating that "for you there is no form but the ghost" (p. 122). Above all and ultimately the ghost is *Absent Presence* itself. In this spectral context, one can also think of the shape-shifting of a ghost for "The ghost is already taking *shape*

[emphasis added]" (p. 187) as Derrida argues in *Specters of Marx*. Therefore, Darwish's text qualifies as a ghostly presence for "literature is a place of ghosts, of what's unfinished, unhealed, and even untellable" (Bennett and Royle, 2004, p. 135). Indeed, *Absent Presence* is still an "unfinished" narrative because "the chapter with the end, is open to what is endless" (p. 49), an "unhealed" scar of an "inherited …wound" (p. 110), and an "untellable" desire to return and turn the burdens of absence.

Derrida's visualization of a ghost as a "paradoxical incorporation, the becoming-body, a certain phenomenal and carnal form of the spirit" (p. 5) elaborates *Absent Presence's* paradoxical state; the text phenomenally replicates this definition as its very carnal presence is the result of multiple absences. It is an amalgam of two "mighty opposites" (5.2.142) of presence and absence as Hamlet in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* puts it. Julian Wolfreys marks in "On Textual Haunting" (2013), that "Texts are neither dead nor alive, yet they hover at the very limits between living and dying. The text thus partakes in its own haunting, it is traced by its own phantoms" (as cited in Jane Wong, 2016, p. 8). Hence, *Absent Presence* is a ghostly text that blurs the lines between presence and absence.

Darwish's declaration that "However much you are killed, you will live" (p. 6) shows that death is a transcendence of the self into a ghostly presence represented by the textual presence of *Absent Presence*. The spectral presence of the text is a disturbance of the present as it is the spectral intervention of the past into the present. Derrida, in his essay, "The Time is Out of Joint" (1995), argues that

> one must stop believing that the dead are just the departed and that the departed *do* [emphasis added] nothing. One must stop pretending to know what is meant by "to

die" and especially by "dying." One has, then, to talk about spectrality. (as cited in

Nicholas Royle, 2003, p. 151)

Derrida's deconstructive method of conceptualizing death offers new renditions for *Absent Presence*. This technique that redefines death liberates the text from the confining Absence/Presence dichotomy into a wider horizon that directs both extremes towards one direction. Derrida proposes that "There is something disappeared, departed in the apparition itself as reapparition of the departed" (p. 5). This proposition accurately depicts the memorial as well as textual "apparition[s]" of homeland that bear the elemental aspect of absence, of the "departed" and "disappeared" that reappear in *Absent Presence*.

In this ghostly setting one can think of the author who stands in purgatory between absence and presence. Darwish explicitly depicts his transformation into a ghost in his poem "Mural" (2000), stating that "As for me, I have gone/ The man you see is no longer myself!/ I am my ghost" (Unfortunately, 158). The opening lines of this paper also portray a lively scene of ghosts and this time the inclusive "we" exhibits the spectral nature of the author who defies death to return as a revenant . This revenant is omnipresent; it haunts the "air", "ground" and "sea". Darwish is the revenant who returns via this text as an inscribed specter. Derrida notes in his book *Of Grammatology* that "writing is the dissimulation of the natural, primary, and immediate presence of sense to the soul with the logos" (p. 37); this scene is set earlier in *Absent Presence* as the author parts with his "self" which deviates to perpetuate in "language" (p. 3). This self textualization is not exclusive to Darwish's oeuvre, it can also be found in Fadwa Tuqan's autobiography *A Mountainous Journey* (1989/1990) in which she remarks that

> I shall write, I shall write a lot. I feel I have been for some time living moment by moment in a drama, moved by every act in it. All of a sudden I, myself, am a poem burning with anguish, dejected, hopeful, looking beyond the horizon! (p. 191)

Therefore, being an author entails that "the author…[is] living out his own imminent death" (as cited in Tetz Rooke, 2008, p. 18) as Boutros Hallaq comments on Darwish's *Absent Presence*.

A trilogical conversation appears between Darwish, Barthes, and the eminent critic Graham Holderness; Darwish states that "the future ever since is your past which is to come" (p. 13). Barthes argues that "the author, when we believe in him, is always conceived as the *past* [emphasis added] of his own book" (p. 4). In the same vein, Holderness notes in his article "Vanishing Point: Looking for *Hamlet*" (2005) that "writing is *future*-oriented [emphasis added]" (p. 6). These harmonious elements of futurity and pastness dovetail together to render a new Mahmoud Darwish who, by the opening pages of *Absent Presence,* is in conversation with himself. This uncanny conversation opens with Darwish splitting with his "self"

> On two paths: you, to another life, which language has promised you, as a receiver who may be saved from the fall of a shooting star on the earth; and I to an appointment, which I have put off more than once, with Death. (p. 3)

This dispersed self that reduced Darwish to a matter of an alternation between two pronouns, namely, "I" and "you" suggests a ghostly presence of him. Maud Ellmann notes that "the ego is a ghost, or rather a consortium of ghosts, consisting of the replicas of lost or absent objects of desire" (p. 17). Ellmann's analysis of the "ego" is an accurate depiction of the two egos framing Darwish; the "absent" aspect in his ghostly ego is embodied in his absence from his homeland as well as the text as

elaborated earlier. However, the present aspect of his ghostly ego is manifested in the typographical presence of "I" and "you" standing as textual surrogates of the author. Hence, Darwish is "the haunting absent-presence of the 'I' who writes, of the author. The author is a kind of ghost" (Bennett and Royle, 2004, p. 19).

Absent Presence opens and closes by "scatter[ing]" the self onto the page. Darwish declares, "line by line, I scatter you before me with a capacity which I am only given at beginnings" (p. 3). Although most of the translations for this line render the verb *"anthuruka"* (*Fī ḥaḍrat al-ghiyāb*, p. 1) into "scatter you", yet the verb also refers to writing and narration; it is derived from *nathr* [prose]. However, both renditions (of scattering and prosifying) harmonize together to resonate Barthes' perception of writing (which can be thought of as a form of silent speech) as a "substitute for life" (*On Racine*, 1960/1983, p. 119). To "scatter" himself "line by line" means to dissolve his body in order to transform into prose, writing, as well as narration that Barthes refers to as a process of "spill[ing] oneself" (On Racine, p. 19). The transformation into these aesthetical compositions functions as a substitute for his absent-present "life" which does not only pertain to the aura of a wandering Palestinian, but also a wandering self and a wandering "I". Antoon, in his "Farewell Mahmoud Darwish" (2008), points out that "the anchored and fixed I of his early years was now *scattered* [emphasis added] in pronouns as the self became a site severed by time and space and open to all its others, in the widest sense" (para. 8). It is evident that the increasing use of pronouns in his writing is a reflection of the scattered self.

Despite the very presence of the "I" and "you" on paper, the silent typography made them vulnerable for acquiring a new antecedent every time they are read, which indicates how the author's pronominal identity has also been dispersed. Indeed, Darwish depicts the state of alienation of the pronominal self in his "Mural" (2000),

stating that "When I looked for myself I found others/ And whenever I looked for them I only found my estranged self/ Am I the collective I?" (Antoon, para. 5, 2008). Anthony Allesandrini in his article "Darwish's Revenants" (2009) also remarks how ghosts are an embodiment of a cleavage in the author's self propounding that "the ghost represents part of a split within the self [of Darwish]" (para. 20). The volatility of the "I" stems from its phantasmatic nature. This linguistic ghostliness has been examined by Karl Bühler, a German philosopher and psychologist, who introduced *deixis am phantasma* which "entail the use of a …word to refer to a tangible object which is *displaced* [emphasis added] from the time and place of the referring act…[it] is absent…[it] has not materialized at that particular time" (as cited in Donna E. West, 2013, p. 27). Bühler's conceptualization of absence aligned with presence introduces further evidence to the textual, ghostly self of the author.

From a Nation into Narration: the Presentation of the Absent Land

Absent Presence is an uncanny emulation of reality and of the author's emotions in particular; homeland has become a memory in the author's mind. Darwish celebrates in *Absent Presence* the beauty of Palestine and mourns the tragedy of its loss. This antithetical combination of beauty and tragedy is the magical formula for the birth of a poet as Jabra I. Jabra, an eminent Palestinian author, points out in his novel *The Ship* (1970/1985) that "all Palestinians are poets by nature…because they have experienced two basic things: the beauty of nature, and tragedy" (p. 20). Jabra's conception of the poet as the nexus of "the beauty of nature" struck with "tragedy" serves further to explain how narratives could become a surrogate homeland for the displaced poet. A genius analogy of language as homeland offers new horizons as Darwish reconceptualizes language in a fashion that subverts imposed compartmentalization; for him, *shi'r* [poetry] is an abode for a line of poetry is also in

Arabic a *bayt* [home] (Bittone, 1997) where he can reside because "letters…construct a house" (p. 15). Hence, we find Darwish restoring his homeland using "words [that] are the raw materials for building a house" (p. 61) because for him, he proceeds, "Words are a country" (p. 61).

Narration is, therefore, the foundation of a nation not only at an ontological level but also at a linguistic level as "narration" contains the phonological construction of "nation". Hence, narration signals to the existence of the traces of a lost nation; Carolyn Forché, a distinguished American author, writes that a poem, "might be our only evidence that an event has occurred: it exists for us as the sole *trace* of an *occurrence* [emphasis added]" (as cited in Jane Wong, 2016, p. 6). Antoon in his tribute to Darwish hints at this poetic trace in Darwish's writing noting that

> The harrowing experience of losing his home and being an internal exile in his land at such a young age would *haunt* [emphasis added] Darwish's poetry and become a central theme with rich and complex variations running throughout his oeuvre. "I will never forget that wound," he said. In one of his last books Darwish wrote of still hearing "the wailing of a village under a settlement". (para. 2)

Indeed, the misfortunate loss of homeland keeps haunting the text as if this memory is the timeless apparition that Derrida observes in *Hamlet*. He notes, in his *Specters of Marx*, that a ghost is timeless, and he instantiates this trait in the archetypical pattern of appearance, disappearance, and reappearance by referring to the ghost's activity: "enter the ghost, exist the ghost, re-enter the ghost" (xix) which parallels Darwish's recurrently haunting reference to his absent-present homeland. At one point, homeland appears on the poetic spheres of *Absent Presence* as a present entity; nevertheless, it abruptly departs to let *Absent Presence* narrate its absence causing the reappearance of the absent into the realms of presence.

Almost by the end of *Absent Presence*, Darwish takes us through his book on a tour through a textual orchard of "fruits" (p. 94) in which each and every one is attributed with an "intellectual" (p. 94) aroma, but suddenly this aesthetic beauty is scattered by the specter of "exile" (p. 94). This specter reappears to remind him that "the nation was born, far from the nation's land. The nation gave birth in exile; paradise was born from the hell of absence" (p. 95). As he parallels the absence of "the nation's land" with the birth and presence of the exiled nation, Darwish becomes the mythical Pygmalion of Palestine who endows it with life and revives it via his words. For Darwish, "words are beings" (p. 18) and "the world is born gradually out of words" (p. 15). This aesthetic reconstruction of homeland transcended Darwish to a world of creativity incarnated in his writing.

This transcendence is translated into the visual and olfactory images of homeland that Darwish offers: "The house and the mulberry tree and the chicken coop and the beehive and the smell of bread, and the primal heaven" (p. 24). Nevertheless, Darwish wonders "how can one word (*watan*) of three letters be wide enough for all these contents, but is too narrow for us?" (p. 24). Although the three-lettered word *watan* [وطن][homeland] has the capacity to carry all these senses of home, the atrocity of exile is cruel enough to snatch the author out of *watan* to imprison him in exile. Thus, Darwish resorts to poetry as it offers "natural scenes rather than mere metaphorical images of a looted homeland" as he once noted in an interview (Bitton, 1997). He further explains this affiliation by remarking that poetry allows "the geographically absent", yet "present in its memory" exile to reside in the text as the text is a surrogate for the lost homeland (Bitton, 1997) .

In his book *A Phenomenology of Landscape: Places, Paths and Monuments* (1994), Christopher Tilley sheds light on the integrative relationship between narratives and landscapes proposing that

> when a story becomes sedimented into the landscape, the story and the place dialectically help to construct and reproduce each other. Places help to recall stories that are associated with them, and places exist (as named locales) by virtue of their emplotment in a narrative. (as cited in Jake Phelan, 2007, p. 7)

It is evident that a narrative is inescapably an intrinsic aspect in the construction of homeland because landscape alone cannot simply be a home. Thus, a narrative is the nexus between homeland and landscape. Due to the absence of and from homeland, Darwish creates what I term a pagescape in order to narrate the story of his exile. This pagescape constitutes a surrogate homeland for the author. Therefore, he captures a geological textualization encompassing his homeland

> The east, a barren palm tree,
>
> The west, eucalyptus, to repel mosquitoes,
>
> The north, willow, at the meeting of two times,
>
> The south, olive. (p. 113)

Presenting a rich visual image of his homeland is not only an aesthetic rendition of an exiled poet, but also an attempt to restore "the land of the story" (p. 46). Eventually, the narrative does restore the homeland of the story, but does the land remember him?

In his swan song, Darwish charges the final chapter with a linguistic chain reaction of words shedding light on the shadowy meanings of them then departs with the Quranic remark "Which of your Lord's blessings do you disown?" (p. 123). Again,

intertextuality intensifies the ghostly departure as it conjures the past into the present. After all, "we are absent, you and I; we are present, you and I" (p. 123). Darwish eventually exits the scene, yet unlike the opening lines, the scattered self on the beginning and ending of his text reunites with its other.

Conclusion

In his uncanny prosaic-poetic will, Darwish artistically merges the annihilating yet ontologizing experience in a single work creating a synergetic effect marked by the advent of the ghost. In *Absent Presence*, presence and absence are juxtaposed to echo the spectral self of the nation. Darwish's text is hence a universalization of the particular. It is a philosophical dialectic of absence amalgamated with presence conceiving a textual ghost of exile, homeland and nation, yet from a wider view *Absent Presence* is a rendition of Derrida's conceptualization of a ghost which deconstructs the stereotypical image of a specter. Furthermore, the text is a replication of Barthes' ghostly text which redefines "death". Derrida's and Barthes' ghostly postulations thus have become a springboard for the absent-present endowing them with the alchemical secret of immortality, namely, narration. Darwish's metaphorical and actual (expected) death in *Absent Presence* is what opens new horizons for the timeless, immortal ghost to reappear. Therefore, this ghostly text is one of the reapparitions of Darwish, of homeland, and of exile. This specter departs thusly leaving traces of an unfinished narrative to disappear and reappear.

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