The Geography of Poetry: Mahmoud Darwish and Postnational Identity

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Abstract: This essay was written several years ago at UMass Boston as part of my Senior Undergraduate Honors Thesis in Literature. Since then, my continued interest in the postnational as a political and social construct has led me to continue examining poetry as a means of accessing ideas of universal community based not on the limited identities of nationality but on chosen affiliations across boundaries of space and time. This was a starting point for a consideration of what arises from post-colonialism from a poetic perspective.

Ours is a country of words: Talk. Talk. Let me rest my road against a stone.

Ours is a country of words: Talk. Talk. Let me see an end to this journey.

(Unfortunately 11)

Mahmoud Darwish, acclaimed as "the saviour of the Arabic Language" (Saith 1), is perhaps today the best known Arabic language poet. Darwish was considered the poet of his people, the Poet Laureate of Palestine, and a voice for the voiceless. His work contains a universality born from specific suffering that reaches across the boundaries of language and nation to "inscribe the national within the universal" (Darwish, *Unfortunately* xix). The dual project of Darwish's work is simultaneously anti-colonial, concerned politically with the establishment of an independent and self-determined Palestine free from imperial occupation, and postnational in the sense that Said hints at in his introduction to *Culture and Imperialism*. Said describes "new alignments made across … nations" which "provoke and challenge the fundamentally static notion of *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" (Said xxv). This gesture beyond identity defined in national terms requires a movement beyond the structures of post-colonial identity.

If post-colonial identity is founded in the anti-colonial establishment of an historical nation, projected linearly through time by means of narrative, postnational identity is loosed from the bonds of causal time. Said takes this point from Eliot's "Tradition

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and the Individual Talent" writing:

> "Past and present inform each other, each implies the other and, in the totally idea sense intended by Eliot, each co-exists with the other. What Eliot proposes, in short, is a vision of literary tradition that, while it respects temporal succession, is not wholly commanded by it." (Said 4)

The postnational relies on the destabilization of temporality and territory, and strives to create an identity capable of engagement with universal systems. Contextualizing and demystifying the national narrative, the postnational collapses time from a progressive movement along points on a line into a *momentary eternity*, a "fluid ever-changing present" (Zamorano, 106 in Friberg). In this postnational scape, imagining becomes a kind of agency, constructing oneself, and one's place in the world as well as the possibility for political and cultural interaction and reproduction. This occurs especially through poetry: narrative forms, as context-driven, reproduce cohesive communities, while poetics, as context-generative, produce ruptures leading to new possibilities. It is the postnational and context-generative nature of Darwish's poetry that focuses my reading throughout this paper, which by no means should be understood as minimizing his anti-colonial political agenda, but rather as situating the two moves as simultaneous and mutually informing.

Darwish writes in "I Belong There," "I have learned and dismantled all the words in order to draw from them a single word: *Home*" (*Unfortunately* 7). This statement, as pure in its elegance as it is in its raw desperation, not only speaks to a commonality of suffering but stands (without necessarily demanding) deeper analysis, yielding a richer understanding of the relationship between words and place. It is not the physi-

cal location but the word "*Home*" that the poet has created, and the word has been created only through the destruction of all words. Paradoxically, one assumes the word "*Home*" was among "all the words," and was therefore learned and dismantled along with them, only to be reborn from the understanding of all the words, which is to say all the world. As words are signifiers for the world, so they symbolize what they represent, and from words an understanding of what they represent is created. 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.

Though even that one line could stand deeper explication, its urgent despair for *Home* is readily apparent and universally significant. Rising as it does from Darwish's experience of exile, of homelessness, it addresses not only the Palestinian people's disarticulation (both literally and figuratively), but that of all displaced persons. In "Another Road in the Road"—a title that speaks to the endlessness of the journey of exile—Darwish writes: "I am from here, I am from there, yet am neither here nor there" (*Unfortunately* 4). The physical displacement in the last phrase does not diminish the place of origin in the first clause ("I am from here"). This seems at first glance to be only within the concerns of the post-colonial exile literary tradition. While the establishment of a physical Palestinian nation is a central concern for Darwish within his work, it is no less his concern to establish concomitantly a community that moves beyond geography and nation. Darwish said: "I want, both as a poet and as a human being, to free myself from Palestine. But I can't. When my country is liberated, so shall I be" (Saith 1). Darwish's Palestine is a memory, an imagined nation in the truest form.

Exile literature may be categorized as a part of the post-colonial literary tradition

because of the shared concern with identity in connection to the geography of a nation-state, or lack thereof. While the experience of exile informs Darwish's work, I do not believe Darwish to be primarily an "exile writer." Rather, Darwish is in a sense a postnational writer—his postnationality is one of necessity, rather than explicit choice, because by necessity Darwish creates and expresses a community that is without national borders.

Darwish is not given the choice to look beyond his nation, but rather by necessity of circumstance carries his community with him as an imagined construct. He is thus able to write beyond the constraints of the borders of national identity, and reach a community of people who are external to any sense of "Palestinian-ness." Where the post-colonial literary tradition is primarily concerned with a re-establishment of dis-placed identity through connection to land, the postnational is concerned with moving beyond the need for a primary connection to boundaries. Darwish does this inher-ently, in part because his circumstance as a Palestinian does not allow for anything else.

The post-colonial sense of time is one of progression: from a projected historical narrative to an infinitely extending future, the post-colonial nation posits a fixed causal beginning and no end. The postna-tional community, however, exists in a cy-clical time, when past and future exist simultaneously and are interconnected in a momentary eternity. Here, it is important to keep in mind the difference between the postnational *community* and the abstract *na-tion*; the nation, even in a wholly abstract form, still relies on temporal boundaries to define it and oppose itself against.

Darwish's work illustrates this postna-tional sense of time. "An end like a begin-ning, like the beginning of an end" Darwish writes in "The Hoopoe" (*Unfortunately* 35), and later "*Everything will begin again*" in "The Lute of Ismael" (*Unfortunately* 66).

The end is a beginning, and has a begin-ning. It is not a fixed movement from one to the other, but they are similar and con-nected through. Later, in "The Owl's Night" Darwish uses a refrain-like phrase that explores the shifting of this momen-tary eternity:

> There is, here, a present not embraced by the past.
> When we reached the last of the trees, we knew we were unable to pay attention.
> And when we returned to the ships, we saw absence piling up its chosen objects
> and pitching its eternal tent around us.
> …
> There is, here, a timeless present, and here no one can find anyone.
> No one remembers how we went out the door like a gust of wind,
> and at what hour we fell from yesterday, and then
> yesterday shattered on the tiles
> in shards for others to reassemble into mirrors
> reflecting their images over ours.
>
> There is, here, a placeless present.
> Perhaps I can handle my life and cry out in the owl's night:
> *Was this condemned man my father who burdens me with his history?*
> Perhaps I will be transformed within my name, and will choose
> my mother's words and way of life, exactly as they should be.
> …
> There is, here a transient present.
> (63-64)

The present shifts through the poem, first disconnected from the past in a sepa-rateness that arrives to unity as the present becomes "placeless" and "transient." This shift exemplifies the shift into postnational-ity. At first the present is "not embraced by

the past"—the two cannot be reconciled. The present is projected back onto the past to force an agreement between the two, which necessarily distorts both. The inability to pay attention and the "absence piling up its chosen objects" could be read as this distortion of the past under the lens of post-colonial identity. The "eternal tent" closes the poet off from the world, surrounding the poet and his readers in the historical imagination of national identity. This is the border of the abstract nation—its existence in time. While the physical nation imposes itself on geography, drawing borders and boundaries, the abstract nation is born and lost in time. In the postnational reality however, time is not a series of causes and effects, nor a linear progression, but a constant flux. It is precisely this that is the "momentary eternity"—rather than projecting a fixed linear progression both backwards and forwards in time from the present, each moment of the present is taken individually as reality, and as a constantly shifting experience. The sense of the present in the poem shifts and becomes "timeless," without progression or change which erases the past. Darwish writes that "no one can find anyone," that they "fell from yesterday"—they are unable to even form a community in this "timeless present" that is cut off from its past, both literally because of the suppression of the Palestinian history, and metaphorically because of the drive towards continuity that erases the historical reality of the past.

There is an insular sense of the post-colonial present as timeless that separates individuals from their community and from their past as well. Because in a post-colonial sense of history, the present national independence is projected as a pre-colonial condition, and also as an inevitably continuous future condition, there is a sense of the timelessness, the unchangingness, of the post-colonial reality. Post-coloniality requires this timelessness in order to assert its national authority over identity, claiming that the national identity as defined in the post-colonial period always existed, was imposed upon by the condition of being a colony, but has been recovered and will always exist. In this sense the timelessness amounts to unchangingness tied to place. However, in each repetition in the poem the present is "here," a word emphasized by the commas on either side of it. It is a present connected to *space*, and in the third repetition we come to that postnational movement: "There is, here, a placeless present." It is here, but it is placeless, which is to say it is physically existent but not limited to place. Once the present is freed from the necessity of projecting itself into the past, creating a continuous linear progression up to itself, it can also move beyond the ties to place. Only then can the poet reach beyond the present and the past to his connection with his family, his community, his "mother's words and way of life, exactly as they should be."

Darwish's postnationality is one of necessity. Because the post-colonial condition requires a connection to land and historical place that the Palestinian people have not been able to realize, they are by circumstance both a colonized nation and a postnational community. Post-coloniality therefore is a mis-categorization of Darwish; his writing is significantly concerned with building a community that is independent of national borders and outside of linear historical progression in order to enact simultaneous anti-colonial and postnational agendas. It is extra-temporal, and existing only through language it is both eternal and changing, rather than the static infinite projected by the post-colonial nation.

This complex relationship with time is one that is difficult to relate in English, and within the constraints of Western literary theory, but is vital to understanding Darwish's poetry.[1] He returns to it in "Ivory Combs:"

Would that I had a different present,
I would hold the keys to my past.
And would that I had a past within me,
I would possess all tomorrows.
…
Here is the obsession with a song
through which I convey a repeated
    tragedy. (79-80)

The present as it is (the postnational present) distances the poet from causal history, and therefore the past that is necessary as a cause of the future. The relationship is interwoven, but begins not with the past but with the present—for it is from the present that all understanding of past and future come. Following this is a phrase in which the poet becomes the singer and storyteller, historian, prophet and teacher. Darwish is conveying the "repeated tragedy" of not only his experience, and the Palestinian people's experience, but that of anyone who has been displaced either spatially, linguistically or temporally.

Throughout Darwish's work this question of identity in the face of displacement continues to be a primary one. This concern with identity, however, is not one that looks simply to reconnect a specific identity claim with corresponding borders, linguistic or geographic, but one that seeks to answer more abstract questions about developing an identity rooted in community as constructed through words, or rather, through what the words represent.

Who am I? This is a question that
    others ask, but has no answer.

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[1] "Further, because Arabic has no tense as such, grammatical time is not, as in English, defined in relation to the moment of speech, a process that interjects an implied subject in every utterance. Arabic prose does not have to maintain the consistent pattern of tense sequence required in English. Hence it is easy for Darwish to scramble time, removing the action from the temporal sphere and placing it in a dreamlike realm" (Darwish, *Memory for Forgetfulness* xxviii).

I am my language. …
I am my language. I am words' writ:
    Be! Be my body!
…
No land on earth bears me. Only my
    words bear me,
…
This is my language, a necklace of stars
    around the necks
of my loved ones. They emigrated.
They carried the place and emigrated,
    they carried the time and
    emigrated.
…
We don't linger upon what is to come.
There is no tomorrow in this desert,
    save what we saw yesterday,
so let me brandish my ode to break the
    cycle of time,
and let there be beautiful days!
How much past tomorrow holds! (90-
    92)

Without linear history and place there is only language connecting community. Darwish writes later in the poem: "This is my language, my miracle…/my first identity, my polished metal, the desert idol of an Arab / who worships what flows from rhymes like stars in his *aba*, / and who worships his own words" (*Unfortunately* 93). Language for Darwish is home and self—it is outside of place and time, because with it "they carried the place…they carried the time." This poem exemplifies what Saith wrote about Darwish: "His poetry gives power to the tired and forlorn, to revive, restore, and relive the imagined mobile space called home" (Saith 1). His identity formed from words, portable and untied to a physical nation, is universally experienceable and communicable. It is the identity he is claiming not only for himself, but also for anyone reading his words. However, it is his "first identity," which implies correctly that there are layers and a multiplicity to identity.

Darwish never denies that the estab-

lishment of a Palestinian nation is a concern for him; and the development of national identity is part of that establishment. He was a senior officer in the PLO for many years, and continued to be vocal about this issue. But this national identity comes after the "first identity" founded in language, through poetry. Darwish said in an interview: "Poems can't establish a state. But they can establish a metaphorical homeland in the minds of the people. I think my poems have built some houses in this landscape" (Politics of Poetry 1). In "Mural" he writes: "I don't want to return to any country. / After this long absence, I want only to return to my language…" (*Unfortunately* 145). The community constructed through poetry, and the identity based in that community is essential for the poet. In "The Last Train Has Stopped" Darwish asks "Where can I free myself of the homeland in my body?" (*Unfortunately* 15). The desire is to be free of the borders of history and nation, to find an un-colonizable, un-occupiable, lasting source for identity. Later, in "The Hoopoe" he asks: "A boundary within a boundary surrounds us. / What is behind the boundary?" (*Unfortunately* 34). The answer is language, words, poetry. Because his identity exists first in language, outside of the restrictions of time and geography, it is unconquerable, indestructible, and transportable. It is also accessible to those who would be placed outside a community based in national borders, or ethnic heritage. "Denied the recognition of citizenship…Darwish settled on language as his identity, and took upon himself the task of restoration of meaning and thus, homeland" (Darwish, *Unfortunately* xvii). "We have both been freed from the gravity of the land of identity," he writes in "Who Am I, Without Exile?" and the freedom he speaks of is this freedom of self from "the land of identity," the ties to the physical borders of the nation (Darwish, *Unfortunately* 115).

The postnational, though related to the post-colonial, is quite distinct. Postnational communities exist outside of the boundaries of the nation, both the physical borders and the temporal progression that enclose a nation's people. Postnational communities also determine identity by inclusivity, rather than by opposition and exclusivity, and are not limited by linguistic, geographic or historical borders but rather invite all to participate in a collective imagining. Darwish developed a postnational community through his work by necessity. His identity and his community are formed inherently outside of the borders of the nation, but in this location he finds the strength and power of the postnational community equally important to his anticolonial project.

The poet sees that the adopted, imposed or adapted model of national authority cannot, as Said wrote, merely replace old authority with new authority, but must be transcended in order to establish a truly self-determinate and free community. Darwish is able to do so in large part because of the form he work in. Poetry works to construct postnational identity because it is already outside of the control of causal history and a limited exclusive national experience. This does not mean that it is not rooted in the specific. Rather the different expectations and functions of the form allow the poet to make universally accessible the individual or specific experiences related.

In this way, Darwish is a "poet of the people" (*Unfortunately* xviii) and writes in "Mural:" "I wish to live. I have work to do on this volcanic bit of geography" (*Unfortunately* 139). Though his use of the word "geography" invokes ties to specific national borders, it seems in context to encompass more than just the Palestinian territory. The work that Darwish is referring to is not restricted to the physical borders of geography, but occurs also in the abstract geography of community constructed through poetry. Darwish expresses his obligation towards their community to work,

through their words, to be a voice for the voiceless (and to create a state for the stateless, if only in abstraction). Darwish writes later in the same poem: "We—who are capable of remembrance—are capable of liberation" (Darwish, *Unfortunately* 151). It is the poet who remembers for the people, and who makes possible the liberation of his community. In liberating his people, Darwish is also making it possible to develop broader communities. In an interview Darwish said: "The first step of real peace is to know the other side, its culture and creativity" (Omer 2) and in a different context: "Poetry and beauty are always making peace. When you read something beautiful you find coexistence: it breaks walls down" (Saith 2).

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