

“[T]he echo of our voices” – translating the paradoxes of exile through the poetry of Breyten Breytenbach and Mahmoud Darwish

In his essay, “Reflections on Exile”, the Palestinian- American thinker Edward Said declares that “to see a poet in exile – as opposed to reading the poetry of exile – is to see exile’s antinomies embodied and endured with unique intensity”(181). Exile forcibly and deliberately separates the self from all that is familiar – family, friends, history, geography and language. Like all traumas, this shattering of the outward trappings “that allow us to construct and sustain ourselves as social beings” punctures through our “linguistic and psychological frameworks of comprehension”(La Capra, 43). There could be no better designed torture-chamber for those who make their art through the translation of feeling into language.

The challenge of the poetry of exile is to communicate the poet’s own state of alienation and isolation without thereby making these states feel “familiar” to their readers. Paradoxically, were a reader to reach the end of a poem describing the state of exile feeling that they had gained greater understanding of this state, then the poet would have failed in their task of truly communicating exile’s unintelligibility. In this essay I will examine the way that two different poets, Breyten Breytenbach and Mahmoud Darwish, walk this delicate balance between introspection and revelation when discussing their own experiences of exile in their poems “Eavesdropper” and “Winds shift against us”, respectively. I will argue that both poets ultimately attempt to “lend dignity to a state legislated to deny dignity”(Said,182). And I will compare how these attempts are informed by the differing contexts of their exiles, and whether they are successfully achieved without romanticizing or giving false meaning to their suffering.

If the curse of the refugee is anonymity – to be caught in the tide of history, herded into the faceless mass, persecuted and feared in abstract – that of the exile is its opposite, to be singled out and punished specifically. In the case of South African poet Breyten Breytenbach, this punishment appears to have come as a shock. Breytenbach left South Africa to travel Europe in 1959, though he continued to publish in his native language, Afrikaans. In 1961, he settled in Paris, and married Vietnamese-born Yolande. In 1964, the couple prepared to return to South Africa in order for Breytenbach to receive the Afrikaanse Pers Beperks (Afrikaans Press Corporation) prize, seemingly ignorant to the fact that they were now living in violation to both Apartheid’s Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act (1949) and Immorality Act (1950). Only when

Yolande was denied her visa did Breytenbach realize what he risked by returning to South Africa, and thus, as fellow Afrikaans writer Andre Brink described it, Breytenbach “sojourn in Europe [was transformed] into permanent exile”(Lazarus,158). In “Eavesdropper”, Breytenbach speaks to the state of exile as a simultaneous outward and inward straining - “where eyes look for always further” in their attempts to reach home, whilst “ears listen quietly inward” to grapple with what self is left when all its outward trappings are removed and only “rooms of loneliness are left” (15,16,12).

Unlike Breytenbach, Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish’s appears to have been preparing his entire life for his eventual exile to the USSR in 1970. As a child, Darwish and his family fled the destruction of their village, Birwe, by the Israeli Army. They returned to Palestine a year later, now subject to the oxymoronic category of “internal refugees” and “present-absent aliens” (Akash and Forche, *xvi*). In “Winds shift against us”, as in all his poetry concerning the plight of the Palestinian people, Darwish resists these euphemisms by asserting his people’s state of exile within their own land.

The poems’ communicative aims are made clear from the fact that both are addresses.

Breytenbach’s poem is dedicated “(for Stephen L.)”, and its opening line “you ask me how it is living in exile, friend-” allows us to see Breytenbach’s poem part of an extended and ongoing conversation (1). Breytenbach responds to his friend’s question with a question of his own – “What can I say?” (2). This deceptively simple phrase is revealed in all its ambiguity. For the rest of the poem, Breytenbach need only list all potential answers. Protected by this double-bluff, he can try for size any number of responses to his exile, without being pinned to a single one.

But even before we get the first line, the poem’s title, “Eavesdropper”, lets us know that we are being granted access to an intimate conversation from which we remain in some fundamental way excluded. An eavesdropper is by definition excluded, one who listens at the eaves to conversations taking place without them inside the house. However, as the poem continues the title takes on a double meaning, as Breytenbach confesses that exile has reduced him to a state of perpetual eavesdropping, a “beggar” who “pray[s] for the alms of ‘news from home’”, surviving on the multiple stolen snatches of others’ nostalgic conversational clichés – “the mercy of ‘do you remember’”, and ‘the compassion of “one of these days”’(17-20).

Where Breytenbach's address is intimate and personal, Darwish's is communal, enveloping both himself and the reader in "us" and "we", having no qualms about establishing "our enemies"(1-2). In this way, his poem becomes a manifesto, an "epic effort to transform the lyrics of loss into the indefinitely postponed drama of return" (Said,185). Darwish brilliantly evokes the simultaneously movement and stagnation of resisting a great oppressive force. From the second line "The/passage narrows", he creates urgency, mimetically creating the claustrophobia of an ever-mounting assault on the physical space his voice is allowed to occupy (2-3). The actions of resistance which he details are those of Sisyphean defiance - "[f]or the thousandth time we write on the last breath of air" – many in number, each one individually constitutes the greatest possible sacrifice (9). They must "run after the echo of our voices", seeking a future in what has already been spoken (12).

This same specificity which renders the state of exile such personal torment can also lend it a tone of romanticism. Descriptions of exile, even when a result of political oppression all-too-common in our modern age, can easily fall into the mode of the mythic, the epic and the biblical. Those exiled become tragic heroes struggling against the machinations of fate itself, their suffering constructed "narcissistic masochism" (Said, 189).

Both poets resist falling into the temptation of endless reminiscing about the losses specific to their own personal experiences of exile. Instead, they reach for the imagery of the natural world so beloved the romantic poets when trying to capture the universal and the immortal. However, they manage to do so in a way that does not conceal the manmade oppression they have suffered behind the guise of natural cause. For Darwish, the elements themselves are the battleground upon which the war for freedom is fought. In the poem's opening line, we see that the southern wind itself has become a weapon of oppression, "shift[ing] against us" and "blow[ing] with our enemies" (1-2).

As Darwish conceives it, the Palestinian's attempt to win back their land must begin with the literal winning over of that land to their cause and its righteousness. They must "flash victory signs in the darkness, so the darkness may glitter", and "sing for the rocks" to "startle[]" them out of their neutrality (4,14). They must nourish the land with rivers of blood that "billow up" from bodies "engrave[d]" with the "iron" of combat (15). When the line "winds shift against us" is repeated, these images of sacrifice changing the course of nature have subtly changed its

meaning (16). Instead of the tide of the winds turning against an already violated people, we see the winds as forced to shift when thrust against the power of those same people rising up.

Breytenbach too employs the images of nature in his poem. He speaks not of the winds but of the sea – he is an exile sent away from his land rather than trapped within it. Breytenbach's personal reflection also resists the epic mode which comes naturally to Darwish's representation of the struggles of an entire exiled nation. To him, far away from home, a "letter[] without tidings" seems as dramatic as a "sea without tides" (29). Similarly, there is gentle self-deprecation in Breytenbach's characterization of himself as "too old for... acceptance of my Destiny" (4-5). The capitalization of "Destiny" places it in too grand a register for this informal and familiar correspondence between friends, conversely diminishing its power. Breytenbach suggests he has outgrown the need to place his suffering within a heroic arc.

If exile is the ultimate state of disavowal constructed by the modern nation state, then its opposite is nationalism, "an assertion of belonging in and to a place, a people, a heritage"(Said,182). As I have shown, Darwish embraces exile as a form of nationalism, an oppression under which the Palestinians can unite to win back the very elements of the land that has been taken from them.

However, Breytenbach's longing for home is surely complicated by guilt that the land he is longing for may not even rightfully be his, but was stolen by people with whom he shares a language and a culture. In fact, central to the Apartheid state's self-justification stands Afrikaner nationalism's own exile narrative. In it, the Afrikaners are God's chosen people, cast out of the Cape and later persecuted in the Boer War by the British, their promised land only recently reclaimed, any means justified in service to maintaining this land (Darwish would himself be familiar with this line of reasoning as one employed to the effect of equal moral exemption by the Israeli state). As S.G.J. Van Niekerk laid out in the official guide to the Voortrekker Monument in 1954: "This monument will arouse the pride of belonging to a nation of heroes who saw the Great Trek through; it will arouse and strengthen a love for the country for whose sake so much was sacrificed..." (Delmont, 76).

Little wonder then, that Breytenbach ends his first stanza with the admission that one possible answer to the question "What can I say [about living in exile]" is "that even here I feel at home" (2,11). As an exile, resisting assimilation becomes the necessary proof of the injustice of your

banishment. To even entertain the notion of “feeling at home” is to allow triumph to those who have exiled you in their attempts to separate you from your former life and self. However, how tempting it must have been for Breyten Breytenbach to slip into the anonymity of becoming merely “one of the ‘Frenchmen with a speech defect’”, thereby giving up any guilt or heartache at the crimes committed in the name of his people in the land to which he nevertheless pines to go home (10).

And so, Breytenbach throws his lot in with the nation of national misfits. “The maladjusted/the hosts of expatriates, deserters” - Breytenbach considers them all “citizens of the guts of darkness” (8-9). They dwell not in the lofty ideals of the modern world, but in its dirty reality, its small intestine. In a touch of humor, Breytenbach eludes to the fact that whilst he has been exiled from the continent Conrad claimed contained darkness’s heart, in supposedly sophisticated Europe he in fact finds himself stuck in a far less pleasant body part. Later, Breytenbach describes exiles “throwing up the knowledge of self” (33). In light of Breytenbach’s self-proclaimed citizenship, this line cannot help but conjure a visceral image of a body turned nearly inside out in the act of purging itself.

Like all losses, the loss of the self brought on by exile is inevitably compared to that final and greatest loss. Edward Said puts it bluntly - “[exile is] like death but without death’s ultimate mercy”(181). And yet, in the final passages of their poems, both Breytenbach and Darwish resist this bleak reading of their current situations. There’s a tiredness in the second-last stanza of “eavesdropper”, as if Breytenbach has reached the limit of all the possible answers he can give to the question he posed at the beginning of the poem:

“- must I too give a deeper meaning?

That all of us are only exiles from Death

Soon to be allowed to ‘go home’?” (34-36)

His use of quotation marks around the phrase “go home” allows us to group it with the other inane platitudes, signaling a euphemism for which the poet has little patience. In his final stanza, Breytenbach resists justifying the suffering of exile through generalizing it as part of the natural cause of life before death. Instead, his final stanza is a pledge of allegiance to the dispossessed, both “those who were here before” and “those who come after” (38,41).

The final line of “Winds shift against us” appears at first to agree with Said’s statement. Darwish declares “[w]e live our deaths” (24). However, Darwish draws out of this oxymoron further proof of his people’s inevitable victory – “[t]his half-death is our triumph”(24). In a world where winds can change their course and rocks can be startled, Darwish knows that nothing is dead until it has died completely, and that anything less than complete destruction in the face those who would destroy you completely is miraculous.

In their respective poems, Breyten Breytenbach and Mahmoud Darwish attempt to give voice to a state of being designed to strip from its victims all sense of themselves. For Breytenbach, this takes the form of an intimate address which begins as an endless questioning of the many masks the self can make in the face of such indignity, and ends in a reaching out to the other “citizens of the guts of darkness”. For Darwish, it is an epic call to arms and affirmation of eventual success which both speaks directly to his fellow internally exiled Palestinians, and conveys their plight to the world. It is a terrible irony that we read these poems in translation. An extra layer of unintelligibility has been added to our understanding of poems whose impossible is already to communicate the unintelligible. However, more astounding than the difficulty of their task is the way that both Breytenbach and Darwish have managed to allow us through their poetry some insight into the anguish and humanity of the self when stripped to its very core. Darwish would know that we would be right to call it a triumph.

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