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The Absent Self: Alienation as Identity in Mark Strand and Raad Zamil's Poetics.

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how Raad Zamil, an Iraqi poet, and Mark Strand, an American poet, both employ alienation as a constitutive element of their poetic identities, turning existential exile into a defining characteristic of selfhood. Despite their differences in language, geography, and cultural background, Strand and Zamil share preoccupations with the themes of absence, shadow imagery, and the fragmented self. Through close reading and comparative analysis, this study demonstrates how alienation serves as the foundation for poetic identity rather than merely a condition to be overcome. Zamil's work reflects the particular traumas of war-torn Iraq and exile, where physical displacement corresponds to psychological fragmentation. Strand's poetry, conversely, negotiates metaphysical estrangement within American postmodernism by portraying the self as unknowable and alienated. To express identities that exist in negation and doubt, both poets utilize shadow metaphors, mirrored selves, and intentional absences. This comparative research demonstrates that the shadowy, alienated self represents a crucial mode of contemporary identity construction in poetry, revealing how alienation functions as a generative poetic force across diverse literary traditions. The findings contribute to current debates concerning identity theory, displacement literature, and the function of negative space in meaning construction.

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الذات الغائبة: الاغتراب بوصفه هوية في شعرية مارك ستراند ورعد زامل

الملخص:

تتناول هذه الدراسة الكيفية التي يوظّف بها كلٌّ من رعد زامل، الشاعر العراقي، ومارك ستراند، الشاعر الأمريكي، الاغترابَ بوصفه عنصرًا تكوينيًا في هويتهما الشعرية، حيث يتحول المنفى الوجودي إلى سمةٍ محدِّدةٍ للذات. فعلى الرغم من اختلافهما في اللغة والجغرافيا والخلفية الثقافية، يتقاسم ستراند وزامل الانشغال بموضوعات الغياب وصور الظل والذات المتشظية . ومن خلال القراءة الدقيقة والتحليل المقارن، تُظهر هذه الدراسة كيف أن الاغتراب يشكّل أساس الهوية الشعرية بدلاً من أن يكون مجرد حالة ينبغي تجاوزها. تعكس أعمال زامل الصدمات الخاصة بالعراق الممزّق بالحروب والمنفى، حيث يتقابل الاغتراب الجسدي مع التمزق النفسي. أمّا شعر ستراند، فيتناول الاغتراب الميتافيزيقي ضمن سياق ما بعد الحداثة الأمريكية، مصوّرًا الذات بوصفها غامضة ومنفصلة. وللتعبير عن هويات قائمة على النفي والشك، يستخدم الشاعران استعارات الظل، وصور الذات المنعكسة، والفراغات المقصودة. تكشف هذه الدراسة المقارنة أن الذات الظليلة المغتربة تمثل نمطًا جوهريًا في بناء الهوية المعاصرة في الشعر، موضحةً كيف يعمل الاغتراب بوصفه قوةً توليدية في الإبداع الشعري عبر تقاليد أدبية متنوعة. كما تُسهم النتائج في إثراء النقاشات الراهنة حول نظرية الهوية، وأدب المنفى، ووظيفة الفراغ السلبي في بناء المعنى.

الكلمات المفتاحية: رعد زامل، مارك ستراند، الاغتراب، الهوية، الأدب المقارن، شعر المنفى، الشعر العراقي .

Introduction:

Within the poetry of Mark Strand and Raad Zamil, the search for the absent self—what might be interpreted as "a form of alienation"—occurs frequently. Far from being a surface-level sensation of displacement, the absent self arises through profound trauma, loss, and absence rather than through self-assured assertions. It implies that the self is not entirely present but rather absent and disjointed, estranged from a steady sense of identity. From an existential standpoint,

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philosophers such as Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre contend that the self is a dynamic process rather than a static entity (Heidegger 174; Sartre 86-116). Because of this ontological instability, a person's sense of self may cause them to feel perpetually lost or unfinished. According to Fredric Jameson's analysis of postmodern culture, the modern state is marked by "a new depthlessness" and "a consequent weakening of historicity" (6). These factors contribute to the deterioration of social relationships between people, making them feel unimportant and undefined, rendering the absent self a symbol of identity breakdown. Jameson further argues that postmodern subjects experience a "fragmentation of the subject" (14) that results from structural conditions rather than individual pathology. This fragmentation manifests in what he terms "the dissolution of an autonomous sphere of culture" (48), where traditional boundaries between self and society collapse.

Both Strand and Zamil examine this state through their unique yet poignant poetic vocabularies. Contemporary postmodern theorists argue that fragmentation reflects "societal upheaval, psychological distress, or existential uncertainty" (Akbar and Yavari 3). Two of the most significant poets of the 20th century write poems that depict their experiences of alienation in various historical and cultural situations, relating their personal, societal, and political circumstances to their sentiments of alienation, fragmentation, and isolation (Abd and Fattah 514). Both Strand and Zamil attempt to portray dimensions of their traumatic experiences in their poetry. Though emerging from different cultural roots and poetic traditions, they share significant convergences in their exploration of the themes of alienation, loss, and silence. Akbar and Yavari note that in modern literary practice, characters and poetic speakers "are no longer seen as coherent and unified entities" (3), reflecting this broader disintegration of stable identity. They reflect a world in which the quest for identity is shaped by internal self-struggle, displacement, and cultural

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fragmentations—a state of ongoing remembrance and survival. Such fragmented representations respond to the specific conditions of late modernity, where subjects experience profound disconnection from traditional sources of meaning (Akbar and Yavari 4).

Strand is recognized for his introspective and melancholic poetry that explores the challenge of maintaining a distinct self-image in an alienating society. Harold Bloom observes that Strand's poetry consistently challenges the distinctions between self and absence, exhibiting "the American Sublime in its negative or nihilistic phase" (qtd. in Gregerson and Jarman 45). Strand himself stated in a 1971 interview: "I feel very much a part of a new international style that has a lot to do with plainness of diction, a certain reliance on surrealist techniques, and a strong narrative element" (Vine and von Hallberg 348). His well-known poems, including "The Man in the Mirror" and "Eating Poetry," deal with loneliness and self-discovery.

Similarly, Zamil conceptualizes alienation as a manifestation of his feelings of powerlessness and dissatisfaction with the world around him. Much of his suffering comes from external forces that compel his "self" to become absent and powerless. He is estranged from his sense of time, his authentic self, his desires, and aspirations. Nadia Khaza's analysis of alienation in Raad Zamil's poetry identifies it as one of the most common psychological crises that people, particularly artists, face (Khaza 1). This estrangement results from their visions, dreams, and explosive energy being crushed in the face of repressive reality (Khaza 2). Khaza further argues that this alienation leads to "a state of frustration and despair, which ultimately leads to self-sufficiency and surrender" (3), a pattern clearly visible throughout Zamil's oeuvre. The poet's marginalization reflects what Khaza identifies as "the breakdown in the creator's relationship with systems and all of their symbols, which plunges him into a whirlpool of loneliness" (5). Thus, Zamil's poetics align with

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broader trends in Iraqi exile poetry, where psychological and physical dislocation combine.

Theoretical Framework: Alienation, Identity, and Postmodern Subjectivity

Placing Strand and Zamil's work within pertinent theoretical frameworks proves essential to understanding their poetics of absence. Existentialist philosophy, especially that of Jean-Paul Sartre and Martin Heidegger, facilitates understanding of the absent self. While Heidegger's concept of "thrownness" (Geworfenheit) addresses the basic state of being cast into existence without inherent meaning or predetermined essence (Heidegger 174), Sartre's concept of "bad faith" (mauvaise foi) describes the human tendency to escape from authentic existence by adopting fixed identities (Sartre 86-116). According to both philosophers, selfhood is essentially erratic, always subject to negotiation, and formed as much by absence as by presence. Sartre particularly emphasizes how individuals flee from the anxiety of freedom by constructing false, stable identities (Sartre 102), while Heidegger describes how humans find themselves "thrown" into a world not of their making (Heidegger 180). These existential conditions create what Sartre calls the "nothingness" at the heart of human consciousness (Sartre 96), a void that both poets explore through their distinctive imagery.

Furthermore, postmodern theories of subjectivity reveal the fractured selves that appear in the works of both poets. The postmodern condition is characterized by "the dissolution of an autonomous sphere of culture" and "a prodigious expansion of culture throughout the social realm" (Jameson 48), leading to what Jameson refers to as "the fragmentation of the subject" (14), as he argues in his groundbreaking work *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. The structural circumstances of late capitalism and the associated modalities of experience

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produce this fragmentation rather than psychological disease. The "disintegration of coherent subjectivity," as defined by Akbar and Yavari, appears in modern literary practice when characters and poetic speakers "are no longer seen as coherent and unified entities" (3).

In his seminal work *Alienation*, Richard Schacht distinguishes four main types of alienation important to comprehending contemporary poetry: alienation from oneself, from others, from one's own work, and from the world (148–203). Both Strand and Zamil's works contain all four forms, but in various ways depending on their unique historical and cultural settings. Schacht argues that self-alienation involves "the experience of oneself as a stranger" (Schacht 156), while alienation from others creates "a sense of isolation and disconnection from human community" (Schacht 168). These forms intersect in both poets' work, though manifested differently. Schacht's analysis of alienation from one's work—the experience of one's creative labor becoming foreign to oneself (Schacht 182)—proves particularly relevant to understanding how both poets represent the act of writing as simultaneously constitutive and destructive of identity. Strand's alienation mainly manifests as a basic detachment from existence itself on a metaphysical level. Zamil's alienation arises from specific historical circumstances—war, authoritarianism, and exile—while also resonating with universal existential concerns. This experience of displacement relates to broader questions of cosmopolitan identity, where the self exists simultaneously inside and outside cultural boundaries, feeling both belonging and estrangement (Mohammed and Mohammed 165).

Thus, the idea of the "absent self" functions at the nexus of postmodern identity theories and existential philosophy. It symbolizes an ontological state—a basic way of being in late modernity marked by temporal and spatial dislocation—rather than

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just psychological displacement. Both Strand's metaphysical detachment and Zamil's bodily and mental displacement manifest symptoms of this condition.

Mirror Imagery and the Fractured Self: Strand's Metaphysical Estrangement and Zamil's Historical Trauma

Both poets employ mirror imagery to examine the split self, yet their approaches differ substantially due to their distinct cultural and historical backgrounds. Where Strand's mirrors reveal metaphysical estrangement rooted in existential skepticism, Zamil's mirrors depict the tangible tragedies of political violence and exile. This contrast illuminates what postcolonial scholar Homi K. Bhabha refers to as the "unhomely" situation of identity—the feeling of being both inside and outside of one's own selfhood (Bhabha 9–13). Bhabha describes this condition as one where "the borders between home and world become confused" (Bhabha 11), creating a liminal space of identity formation. For Bhabha, the unhomely represents "a paradigmatic colonial and post-colonial condition" (Bhabha 13) where subjects exist in perpetual displacement. This theoretical framework illuminates how both poets, despite their different contexts, explore similar territories of existential homelessness through their mirror imagery.

In Strand's "The Man in the Mirror," the poet struggles with perceiving himself and his reflection through a conversation between a man and his mirrored image. The speaker is caught between being afraid of disappearing and staying in the same place. His internal conflict between his desire for self-recognition and his realization that the mirrored image is both a reflection of reality and an illusion denotes a loss of identity and absence rather than true self-recognition:

You stand at the door
with your hand on the light switch.

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The rain pools in the rivulets of your face.
You turn the light back on,
and there I am,
all white, a being without a body,
a presence feeding on your fear. (Strand, *Reasons for Moving* 43)

The poem continues to present an image of a man whose face appears white, unsmiling, and swollen. The face is not familiar; instead, it appears ill and lifeless. The hair is described as fallen and dull, details that suggest the man's neglect and indifference toward himself:

You are there.
Your face is white, unsmiling, and swollen.
The face seems fallen and lifeless, and your hair
is dull and out of place.
Buried in the darkness of your pockets,
Your hands are motionless. (Strand, *Reasons for Moving* 43)

The man's identity seems spectral and blurred, a state of disintegration that stands symbolically for his premonition of death in life. The sense of alienation and the absent self are portrayed in the image of the motionless hands and the implied corporeal numbness. Strand's exploration of the mirror motif aligns with what Linda Gregerson and Jon Jarman describe as his characteristic concern with "the impossibility of locating the self" (46), challenging traditional notions of unified subjectivity.

The mirror in Strand's work functions as a liminal space where identity dissolves into pure negativity rather than serving as a site of recognition. This theme of alienation differs from other writers in that it focuses primarily on the aspect of dispossession,

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reflecting a form of social alienation as it relates the individual to the external world rather than to the inner self (Abd and Fattah 520). The speaker's confrontation with his reflection produces terror rather than integration. The description of the mirrored figure as "white, unsmiling, and swollen" suggests that self-recognition results in confrontation with one's own mortality and absence. The term "another life" implies a break in time, a separation from the continuity of the past that traps the speaker in the eternal present. The verb "founder" encapsulates the ontological crisis of a selfhood detached from fixed coordinates, implying both sinking and failing. Abd and Fattah note that this "dispossession" reflects how alienation "relates the individual to the external world rather than to the inner self" (Abd and Fattah 521), creating a condition where the self becomes unknowable even to itself.

Zamil employs mirror imagery in "Season in Mirrors" to explore the relationship between past trauma and present identity, yet unlike Strand's purely metaphysical mirrors, his reflective surfaces bear the weight of historical memory:

> I gaze in the mirror and laugh
> At the reflection of tear!
> Nothing in the mirror
> still excites the desire to gaze
> Here am I... where ever I gaze (Zamil, *Poetic Works* 142)

Here, the mirror becomes what Pierre Nora refers to as a "lieu de mémoire"—a memory place where individual and social histories meet (Nora 7–24). Nora argues that such sites emerge when "environments of memory" disappear, necessitating "sites of memory" as substitutes (Nora 8). The mirror in Zamil's poem functions as precisely such a site, where personal and collective trauma converge. Nora suggests that memory-sites exist "because there are no longer any environments of

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memory" (Nora 12), a condition perfectly captured in Zamil's Iraqi context of war and displacement. For Nora, these sites serve as "moments of history torn away from the movement of history" (Nora 19), frozen points where the past refuses to pass, much like the traumatic images trapped in Zamil's mirrors.

The contradiction of laughing at tears points to a damaged mind that struggles to process intense emotion. The speaker's failure to see anything in the mirror that "excites the desire to gaze" reflects what trauma researcher Cathy Caruth refers to as the "unclaimed experience" of traumatic memory—experiences so overwhelming that they cannot be fully absorbed into consciousness (Caruth 4–5). Caruth explains that trauma "is not locatable in the simple violent or original event" but rather in "the way that its very unassimilated nature… returns to haunt the survivor" (Caruth 5). This haunting quality pervades Zamil's mirror imagery, where reflection offers no integration but only the return of unprocessed pain. Caruth's concept of trauma as "a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event" (Caruth 7) illuminates why Zamil's speaker cannot recognize himself in the mirror—the self has been shattered by experiences that exceed the capacity for narrative integration. The "unclaimed experience" remains precisely that: an encounter with horror that resists being claimed, owned, or incorporated into a coherent sense of self (Caruth 10). Zamil's repeated line "Here am I… where ever I gaze" echoes the fractured consciousness of the exile who simultaneously occupies numerous places without fully belonging to any of them, enacting a desperate search for cohesive selfhood across multiple temporal and spatial dimensions.

The disparity between Strand's and Zamil's mirror poems highlights what cultural theorist Stuart Hall refers to as the distinction between identity as "being" and identity as "becoming" (Hall 223–224). Hall argues that identities are "never completed, never finished" but rather "always in process" (Hall 224). For Strand,

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identity crisis arises from metaphysical questioning—the underlying doubt about whether a coherent self exists at all—in the comparatively stable setting of postwar American prosperity. Writing from the midst of devastating violence in Iraq during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, Zamil demonstrates that exile, war, dictatorship, and displacement are tangible historical ruptures that produce identity fragmentation. Hall's distinction between identity as a fixed "being" versus identity as continuous "becoming" (Hall 223) helps explain these different approaches: Strand explores the metaphysical impossibility of being, while Zamil documents the historical forces that prevent becoming. However, both poets concur that modern selfhood exists in a state of constant incompletion, continuously seeking but never attaining solid form. Hall suggests that "cultural identity… belongs to the future as much as to the past" (Hall 225), a formulation that resonates with both poets' attempts to construct selves from fragments and absences.

Shadow Imagery and Spatial Marginalization: The Poetics of Negation in Two Traditions

The shadow and the spatial metaphor of marginalization function as central organizing principles in both poets' work, though they deploy these images from markedly different positions. Strand uses shadow imagery to articulate a poetics of negation rooted in existential philosophy, while Zamil employs spatial marginalization to represent the political and social exclusion experienced by Iraqi intellectuals under oppressive regimes. In Strand's "Keeping Things Whole," the speaker articulates a paradox of presence-as-absence that challenges conventional ideas about identity:

In a field
I am the absence

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of field.
This is
always the case.
Wherever I am
I am what is missing. (Strand, *Selected Poems* 19)

This formulation inverts traditional ontology. The speaker generates holes instead of occupying space; his existence is determined by what he displaces rather than by what he is. Charles Altieri notes in his study of modern American poetry that Strand's work reflects "a poetics of negation" in which "the self is defined primarily through what it lacks rather than what it possesses" (Altieri 127). The speaker attains presence through a sequence of absences that paradoxically constitute his being, rather than through affirmation. Altieri argues that this negative poetics represents "an attempt to recover authentic experience by stripping away false cultural constructions of selfhood" (Altieri 135). Such poetry seeks meaning not through accumulation but through subtraction, creating what Altieri calls "a phenomenology of absence" (Altieri 142). This understanding produces what can be termed a negative dialectic of identity, in which the thesis and antithesis remain suspended in mutual negation without ever reaching synthesis. For Altieri, poets like Strand demonstrate how "the language of negation can paradoxically create presence" (Altieri 151), achieving through denial what affirmation cannot provide.

Zamil, in "As Such the Seasons Take Me Away," employs spatial marginalization to conceptualize alienation as a manifestation of his feelings of powerlessness and dissatisfaction with the world:

And here am I in the footnote, brooding on the egg of patience…
like a blind hen

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whereas the center over there
is overcrowded with its fireflies
I say: As such
Time takes me away, shaggy, shaggy, at every stone (Zamil, *Poetic Works* 87)

The poet feels excluded and alienated, reduced to a minor character in the vast scheme of things. By employing the powerful metaphor—"brooding on the egg of patience"—Zamil implies that he attempts to develop patience to deal with the difficulties he encounters, but his attempts prove ultimately fruitless. The word "brooding," used metaphorically, conveys a feeling of loss and dread. The poet deliberately immerses the reader in his universe, where time—represented by the four seasons—is unrelenting and unstoppable. The changing of the seasons serves as a reminder of how fleeting life is. Then, implying that he lacks focus and direction, he compares himself to a blind hen. While others are warmed by the brilliance of fireflies, implying a core of vitality and belonging from which he is excluded, he feels empty and ostracized.

The marginalization shown in "As Such the Seasons Take Me Away"—being placed in a "footnote" while others occupy the glowing "center"—represents spatial phenomena where poets manipulate spatial environments as portrayals of the real world, using real and symbolic space to communicate and inspire emotions (Al-Zubbaidi and Al-Ani 242). Al-Zubbaidi and Al-Ani argue that spatial imagery in poetry "reflects both physical geography and psychological landscapes" (Al-Zubbaidi and Al-Ani 245), functioning simultaneously as literal description and metaphoric expression. Their analysis of spatial poetics demonstrates how "the rural and the urban, the center and the margin, create hierarchies of belonging" (Al-Zubbaidi and Al-Ani 248), hierarchies that structure not only social relations but also literary

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representation. In Zamil's work, the footnote/center binary encapsulates what Al-Zubbaidi and Al-Ani identify as "the spatial dimensions of power and exclusion" (Al-Zubbaidi and Al-Ani 251), where geographical position mirrors social position.

The contrast between these two approaches reveals crucial differences in how alienation manifests across cultural contexts. Strand's shadow exists in an abstract metaphysical space where the question of identity precedes any particular social or historical condition. His speaker moves through a "field" that could be anywhere or nowhere, articulating a universal condition of ontological displacement. Zamil's marginalization, by contrast, is explicitly spatial and hierarchical: there is a "center" and a "footnote," a geography of power that determines who occupies the illuminated space and who dwells in darkness. This marginalization—being reduced to a "footnote"—reflects what Khaza describes as the breakdown in the creator's relationship with systems and all of their symbols, which plunges him into a whirlpool of loneliness (1).

The metaphor of the "blind hen brooding on the egg of patience" proves especially poignant in Zamil's Iraqi context. The hen's blindness alludes to both confusion and forced inactivity—the incapacity to act or perceive one's environment effectively. The "egg of patience" that she obsesses over will never hatch; it stands for pointless waiting and the loss of agency that defines existence in times of constant crisis. Halim Barakat identifies the experience of marginalization and helplessness in the face of overwhelming external forces as a key component of alienation in modern Arab societies in his thorough study *The Arab World: Society, Culture, and State* (Barakat 112-114). Barakat argues that this marginalization stems from "authoritarian political structures that limit individual agency" (Barakat 115) and "economic systems that perpetuate dependency and powerlessness" (Barakat 118). For Barakat, alienation in Arab societies reflects "the gap between aspiration and

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reality" (Barakat 120), where educated individuals find themselves unable to effect meaningful change. This condition produces what Barakat calls "a culture of silence" (Barakat 125), where creative voices are systematically suppressed—precisely the condition Zamil's "footnote" represents.

Zamil's invocation of the seasons—"Time takes me away, shaggy, shaggy, at every stone"—transforms natural cycles into forces of dissolution and erosion. Here, the seasons serve as unrelenting forces of attrition that erode the self like water on stone, as opposed to the cyclical rejuvenation typical of pastoral poetry. The word "shaggy" is repeated, implying a slow unraveling, a loss of shape and definition. This temporal picture resonates with Jameson's views regarding postmodern fragmentation, in which subjects sense temporal and spatial dislocation rather than developmental advancement (16).

The speaker's place in the "footnote" and the "center… overcrowded with its fireflies" creates a spatial metaphor for estrangement that operates on both political and personal levels. The fireflies, representations of life, light, and group energy, illuminate a center that does not include the speaker. This spatial marginalization reflects both the geographical dislocation of Iraqi exile and the psychological feeling of being shut out of meaningful involvement in one's own historical moment. Sinan Antoon identifies "testimonies of suffering" that turn "personal trauma into collective memory" (Antoon 187) as a defining feature of this era's Iraqi poetry.

Poetry as Consumption and Transformation: Voluntary and Involuntary Metamorphosis

Both poets explore alienation through metaphors of consumption and transformation, yet the agency involved in these metamorphoses differs dramatically. Strand presents artistic engagement as a form of voluntary self-dissolution, while Zamil

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depicts transformation as forced upon the subject by historical violence. Stylistically, storytelling, which weaves together past, present, and myth with no order, is appreciated by critics (Fattah and Al-Ajeeli 70). Strand's "Eating Poetry" presents one of his most vivid explorations of how artistic engagement can dissolve stable identity:

> Ink runs from the corners of my mouth
> There is no happiness like mine
> I have been eating poetry (Strand, *Reasons for Moving* 6)

This surrealist conflation of reading and eating suggests that poetry intake represents active transformation rather than passive reception. The speaker absorbs the text literally, allowing it to change his physical and mental makeup. Marjorie Perloff argues that this exemplifies the "poetics of indeterminacy" that characterizes postmodern American poetry, in which meaning emerges through violent disruption as opposed to coherent communication (Perloff 27–31). Perloff describes this approach as one where "the conventional boundaries between signifier and signified break down" (Perloff 35), creating what she calls "a radical openness to multiple meanings" (Perloff 42). For Perloff, indeterminate poetry refuses "the comfort of fixed interpretation" (Perloff 48), instead forcing readers into active, unstable engagement with the text. The speaker's ink spilling from his mouth alludes to a reversal of creative creation, whereby he relinquishes authorial agency to the text itself and becomes a conduit through which poetry pours. The poem continues with an even more dramatic transformation:

> I am a new man
> I snarl at her and bark
> I romp with joy in the bookish dark

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The poems are gone
The light is dim (Strand, *Reasons for Moving* 6)

The speaker's transformation into a dog-like creature enacts what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari refer to as "becoming-animal"—a process by which stable human identity dissolves into more fluid, non-human forms of existence (Deleuze and Guattari 232-309). Deleuze and Guattari argue that becoming-animal involves "an involution" rather than evolution, "a block of becoming" that moves "between terms that are neither initial nor final" (Deleuze and Guattari 238). This process challenges "the molar organization" of fixed identity (Deleuze and Guattari 245), replacing it with what they call "molecular" flows that resist categorization. For Deleuze and Guattari, becoming-animal represents "a deterritorialization" of the human (Deleuze and Guattari 252), a liberation from the constraints of stable subjectivity. The librarian's distress at this change reveals the social aspect of identity: the speaker's disintegration threatens established norms of polite conduct. The "bookish dark" in which he romps implies that genuine poetry experience takes place in spaces where conventional selfhood cannot endure undisturbed and where there is no rational illumination. The final lines—"The poems are gone / The light is dim"—indicate that this metamorphosis necessitates the destruction of both the consumed books and the conditions of clear vision, leaving only the transformed, animalized self.

Zamil's poetry explores themes of forced transformation grounded in the specific historical violence of Iraq:

I say: As such
Time takes me away shaggy, at every stone
Life drags me behind it with the jot's cod
As if it is a butcher dragging a sheep,

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worried at night in the page of chemistry
I see me as mice running around
in the laboratory of wars (Zamil, *Poetic Works* 87–88)

Where Strand's transformation arises from intentional aesthetic immersion, Zamil's metamorphosis results from forced exposure to historical trauma. The analogy of "a butcher dragging a sheep" conjures images of brutal victimization rather than whimsical metamorphosis. This imagery evokes what Giorgio Agamben refers to as "bare life"—existence stripped of social and political safeguards and reduced to its most vulnerable biological aspect (Agamben 1–12). Agamben describes bare life as "a life that may be killed without the commission of homicide" (Agamben 8), a condition where humans are reduced to mere biological existence without political or legal protection. This concept illuminates Zamil's sheep metaphor: the Iraqi subject becomes "homo sacer," a figure who "may be killed and yet not sacrificed" (Agamben 11). For Agamben, modern politics increasingly creates zones where citizens are reduced to bare life (Agamben 15), stripped of the protections that define human dignity. The comparison of the self to "mice running around / in the laboratory of wars" furthers this dehumanization, casting the Iraqi subject as test subjects in the bloody laboratories of geopolitical struggle.

Ferial Ghazoul observes that Iraqi poetry of this era regularly uses animal imagery to symbolize the devaluation of people as "objects of political experimentation" under successive regimes (Ghazoul 45–47). Ghazoul argues that such imagery reflects "the reduction of human subjects to experimental material" (Ghazoul 46), where bodies become sites for testing the limits of violence and control. She notes that Iraqi poets employ animal metaphors to express "the impossibility of human dignity under conditions of sustained brutality" (Ghazoul 48), creating what she calls "a bestiary of suffering" that documents various forms of dehumanization. For Ghazoul,

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this imagery serves both as testimony to specific historical atrocities and as universal commentary on how power operates through the reduction of subjects to animal status (Ghazoul 50).

In contrast to Strand's playful dog transformation, Zamil's mice possess no agency in their metamorphosis. They are not transformational agents but rather the objects of experimentation. The metaphor of the "laboratory of wars" implies that the violence Iraqis witnessed was not haphazard but rather the result of systematic experimentation—the deliberate use of violence as a social engineering tactic. This picture exemplifies what Achille Mbembe refers to as "necropolitics," the use of sovereign authority to decide who should live and who should die (Mbembe 11–40). Mbembe expands on Foucault's concept of biopower to examine how modern politics operates through "the generalized instrumentalization of human existence" (Mbembe 14). He argues that contemporary sovereignty increasingly expresses itself through "the power and capacity to dictate who may live and who must die" (Mbembe 11), creating what he calls "death-worlds"—spaces where populations are subjected to "conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead" (Mbembe 40). Zamil's laboratory of wars perfectly embodies Mbembe's necropolitics: a space where the Iraqi population becomes experimental subjects in the exercise of sovereign power over death. For Mbembe, such spaces represent "the most accomplished form of necropower" (Mbembe 37), where entire populations exist in zones of perpetual vulnerability to violence.

Despite these significant distinctions in context and agency, Strand and Zamil share a common understanding: modern selfhood lives in states of flux so drastic that stable identity becomes unattainable. Whether through voluntary artistic immersion or involuntary historical brutality, the cohesive self vanishes, leaving only traces, shadows, and fragments.

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Temporal Displacement and Historical Consciousness: Time as Destroyer

In both poets' works, time serves as a destroying force, albeit with notable contextual variations. For Strand, time functions as an abstract metaphysical force that progressively blurs the lines separating the self. For Zamil, time remains inextricably linked to specific historical traumas—the decades of occupation, sanctions, and conflict that have defined recent Iraqi history. Historians record historical events, while poets rewrite and retell these historical events with an intention of presenting feelings, and expectations or prophecies (Hasan and Hamad 416). Hasan and Hamad argue that poetry transforms historical facts into "emotional truths" (Hasan and Hamad 418), where subjective experience takes precedence over objective documentation. They note that modern American poets in particular use historical material to explore "the gap between official narratives and lived experience" (Hasan and Hamad 420), creating what they call "counter-histories" that privilege individual perception. For Hasan and Hamad, this poetic rewriting of history serves to "humanize abstract events" (Hasan and Hamad 422), making collective trauma accessible through individual voice.

Strand's temporal alienation in "Keeping Things Whole" operates through problems that are more metaphysical than historical. The poem explores what philosopher Henri Bergson terms "duration"—the subjective perception of time as qualitative flow as opposed to quantitative measurement (Bergson 100–128). Bergson distinguishes between clock time and lived experience, arguing that consciousness experiences time as "a continuous flow" rather than discrete moments (Bergson 104). For Bergson, duration represents "the continuous progress of the past which gnaws into

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the future" (Bergson 115), a formulation that illuminates Strand's temporal poetics. Bergson's concept helps explain how Strand's speaker exists in perpetual present-tense dissolution, where each moment simultaneously creates and destroys identity (Bergson 122). The speaker remains always in the present tense without providing a gradual development of identity. The statement "Wherever I am / I am what is missing" (Strand, *Selected Poems* 19) demonstrates how the speaker simultaneously produces an absence for every instant he exists. According to this notion, identity is continuously hollowed away by time rather than strengthened through cumulative experience.

Zamil's use of seasonal imagery in "As Such the Seasons Take Me Away" proves instructive in understanding how time operates differently within contexts of historical trauma. The seasons, typically thought of as a source of continuity and renewal, actually function as catalysts for disintegration and degradation. The phrase "shaggy, shaggy, at every stone" is repeated, implying a creeping breakdown of distinct edges and boundaries. The pastoral tradition in Arabic poetry, whose seasonal cycles usually represent cosmic order and continuity, contrasts sharply with this presentation. Rather, Zamil's seasons embody what Walter Benjamin refers to as "the storm of progress" that propels history onward while it "piles wreckage upon wreckage" (Benjamin 257-258). Benjamin's famous image of the "angel of history" describes how progress appears from the perspective of its victims: "Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe" (Benjamin 257). This angel "would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed" but is propelled forward by the storm "irresistibly into the future" (Benjamin 258). Zamil's seasonal imagery enacts precisely this Benjaminian vision, where time brings not renewal but accumulated destruction. Benjamin's critique of historicism—his insistence that "the tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of

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emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule" (Benjamin 257)—resonates powerfully with Zamil's Iraqi context, where crisis has become permanent condition.

The poet characterizes himself as ragged and worn down—"shaggy"—not as a result of natural aging but rather as a result of violence that has accumulated over time. This timeline aligns with what trauma researcher Dominick LaCapra refers to as "structural trauma"—the chronic, ongoing trauma brought on by continual oppression and violence as opposed to isolated catastrophic incidents (LaCapra 76–82). LaCapra distinguishes between "historical trauma" (specific events) and "structural trauma" (ongoing conditions of existence), arguing that the latter involves "transhistorical absence" (LaCapra 78). He notes that structural trauma creates "a condition of possibility and a limiting condition" (LaCapra 80) that shapes all subsequent experience. For LaCapra, those experiencing structural trauma face "the problem of a present that seems to be possessed by the past" (LaCapra 82), unable to move forward because the traumatic conditions persist. Time doesn't heal for people with these conditions; instead, it keeps causing new wounds, with each passing instant further fracturing an already damaged psyche.

The idea of "precarious life" as defined by modern philosopher Judith Butler sheds light on the temporal experiences of both poets (Butler 20–49). Butler argues that modern subjectivity is characterized by extreme contingency and vulnerability, where identity is constantly in danger of dissolving. Butler examines how certain lives are recognized as grievable while others are not, asking "what makes for a grievable life?" (Butler 20). She argues that precariousness is "a generalized condition" (Butler 31) but experienced unequally across populations. For Butler, recognizing our shared vulnerability could create "a basis for a community of a complex order" (Butler 40), though this potential remains largely unrealized. Butler's concept of

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precariousness as "a politically induced condition" (Butler 46) illuminates how both poets address vulnerability differently. Zamil perceives this precariousness as a political reality—the genuine susceptibility of Iraqi people to state violence, war, and exile—while Strand examines it as an ontological condition—the essential instability of any claim to cohesive selfhood. However, both acknowledge that modern identity must be viewed as a dynamic, threatened process rather than as a fixed substance.

War, Displacement, and the Poetics of Exile

While Strand's estrangement arises from metaphysical and existential concerns within a more stable American context, Zamil's poetics of absence remain inseparable from the tangible historical traumas of Iraq—decades of war, dictatorship, sanctions, and occupation. Sinan Antoon identifies the "dangerous" nature of poetic practice in contemporary Iraq, where "the popularity of poetry… made it a dangerous practice that carried serious political consequences and grave risks to dissident poets" (Antoon 2). This represents the larger context in which Zamil's work must be interpreted. Antoon documents how "poets were imprisoned, tortured, and executed for their work" (Antoon 45) under successive Iraqi regimes, making poetry "an act of political courage" (Antoon 68). He argues that Iraqi poetry functions simultaneously as "aesthetic expression and political resistance" (Antoon 112), occupying what he calls "a zone of danger where the cultural and political converge" (Antoon 156). In Iraq, poetry has always been more than an artistic endeavor; it constitutes a dangerous form of political participation.

The absent self appears throughout Zamil's poetry collection from 1999 to 2019 as a lived reality influenced by loss, violence, and geographic migration rather than as a merely intellectual idea. Language presentation clarifies the speakers' intentions while using language to justify several attitudes (Fattah and Al-Ajeeli 68). Fattah

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and Al-Ajeeli analyze how "narrative strategies in postcolonial literature reveal power dynamics" (Fattah and Al-Ajeeli 72), demonstrating that stylistic choices carry political weight. They argue that contemporary writers use "cross-cultural imagination" to navigate "survival and harmony" in contexts of displacement (Fattah and Al-Ajeeli 75), creating what they term "liminal narratives" that exist between cultural worlds. The marginalization shown in "As Such the Seasons Take Me Away"—being placed in a "footnote" while others occupy the glowing "center"—represents the experience of Iraqi poets who have been both physically and symbolically uprooted from their culturally prominent places and their homeland. According to Khaza's perspective, Zamil's alienation results from a state of frustration and despair, which ultimately leads to self-sufficiency and surrender (1).

This enforced patience without resolution reflects what Barakat identifies as a key component of alienation in modern Arab societies: the experience of marginalization and helplessness in the face of overwhelming external forces (Barakat 112-114). The speaker's place in the "footnote" becomes a metaphor for the predicament of the artist and thinker in a violent society where innovative voices are marginalized. This spatial marginalization reflects both the geographical dislocation of Iraqi exile and the psychological feeling of being shut out of meaningful involvement in one's own historical moment.

Antoon describes Iraqi poetry of this era as characterized by "testimonies of suffering" that turn "personal trauma into collective memory" (Antoon 187). Zamil's poetry participates in this tradition, yet his approach differs from straightforward testimony. Rather than simply documenting suffering, his work transforms absence itself into a mode of existence, making alienation the very ground upon which poetic identity stands. The poet's portrayal of personal alienation remains inextricably linked to the larger political and social circumstances of contemporary Iraq, yet it

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simultaneously achieves a universality that speaks to broader questions of modern subjectivity.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis of Mark Strand and Raad Zamil's poetry reveals that alienation functions as both a structural principle of modern poetic identity and a thematic element. Both poets create identities based on what they lack rather than what they have by using fragmentation, absence, and negative space as generative forces. Their use of temporal displacement, transformation metaphors, and mirror images demonstrates that the "absent self" represents a key mode of modern subjectivity that recognizes the impossibility of a single, cohesive identity while still seeking ways to express and exist.

Their divergent perspectives—Zamil's historically grounded trauma versus Strand's metaphysical alienation—show how the absent self takes on distinct forms in various political and cultural situations. However, these similarities demonstrate that fundamental issues about selfhood, identity, and belonging cut across specific situations and relate to broader late modern problems. Both poets acknowledge that modern selfhood exists in a state of constant incompletion, continuously pursuing but never quite reaching stable form. Consequently, their poetry supports the understanding that selfhood is not something predetermined but rather requires continuous creation and reconstruction through acts of interpretation and narration. Poetry serves as a vehicle for expressing absent selves that are never completely present, according to both Strand and Zamil. Their research suggests that recognizing one's absence might be the most authentic way to exist in a time of displacement, fragmentation, and uncertainty.

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The results of this study hold wider implications for identity theory and modern literary criticism. First, they demonstrate the necessity for comparative methods that can reconcile specific historical contexts with universal existential issues. Second, they show how absence and negative space serve as constructive factors in meaning-making rather than as voids. Third, they propose that contemporary poetry's focus on broken, absent, and alienated selves responds to real conditions of late modern living rather than constituting solely an artistic experiment.

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