Topophrenia and Mapping Fear in Contemporary American and Arabic Poetry: A Spatial Study in Selected Poems by Mark Strand and Mahmoud al-Breikan

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Abstract

Placemindedness, or topophrenia in postmodernist geocritical and spatial contexts, has come to highlight the significance of space, place and mapping in the poetic worlds of Mark Stand and Mahmoud al-Breikan. Not a romanticized landscape or a pacifying setting, places and spaces in both poets are rather charged with fear and apprehensions to extend feelings of uneasiness and fright. Both poets, though different in cultural backgrounds, serve as typical embodiments of and case studies for what Robert Tally Jr. has termed as topophrenia as late as 2020. The present paper investigates and analyzes the dimensions of fear associated with places and spaces in selected poems by the aforementioned poets, with reference to the geocritical and cultural contexts in which they developed, namely the Western US-Canadian and the Eastern Iraqi ones.

Key words: Topophrenia, Spatial Studies, geocriticicm, Mark Stand, Mahmoud al-Breikan.

ملخص

شغل هاجس المكان، أو التوبوفرينيا بحسب ما اصطلح عليه في سياق الدراسات الجيونقدية ودراسات المكان في حقبة ما بعد الحداثة، مكانة كبيرة جسدت أهمية المكان والفضاء وترسيم الخرائط في العالم الشعري الخاص بكل من مارك ستراند ومحمود البريكان. حيث أضحت الأماكن والفضاءات مشحونة بكثير من الخوف والتوجس، لا كمنتجعات رومانسية أو خلفيات تبعث على السكينة والهدوء، بل لتنشر احساسا بالرهاب والخشية والقلق. فكلا الشاعرين المذكورين، ورغم اختلاف مشاربهما الثقافية والاجتماعية، يقدمان تجسيدا مثاليا وأمثلة تطبيقية لما اصطلح عليه الناقد روبرت تالي بـ"التوبوفرينيا" [الرهاب المكاني] مؤخرا عام ٢٠٢٠. تسعى الورقة الحالية إلى استقصاء وتحليل أبعاد الخوف المقترن في المكان والفضاء الشعري في مجموعة منتقاة من قصائد الشاعرين اللذين مر ذكرهما، مستدلة بالسياقات الثقافية والجيونقدية التي نشأ فيها كل منهما، أي السياق الغربي الأمريكي الكندي لستراند، والسياق الشرقي العراقي لمحمود البريكان.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التوبوفرينيا، الفضاء الشعري، المكان، مارك ستراند، محمود البريكان.

1. Introduction

During the period when the Canadian-American poet Mark Strand (1934-2014) and the Iraqi poet Mahmoud al-Breikan (1931-2002) wrote their early poems, i.e., the period from mid-1950s through mid-1980s, they never intend their poems to be so much may comfortably fit for the requirements and contours of geocriticism and spatial-oriented theories. They never meant their poetic oeuvres, written within the contexts of two entirely different cultures, in two divergent – sometimes conflicting – parts of the world, to be vivacious embodiments of spatiality, which has come to be a major domain of literary criticism and cultural studies in the 1990s and after. More importantly, there is no evidence that Strand and al-Breikan had any channel of contact with each other; nor knew about one another; nor read one another; so as to share such a wide array of place and space-related notions, themes and images as those discussed below. Being not so much determined to write within the parameters of geocriticism and spatial literary studies does not make an issue in the case, since this inter-disciplinary, trans-disciplinary and multi-disciplinary field can be reasonably working retrospectively, applying to literary works of previous ages, as with most of modern and postmodern theories.

1. Geocriticism: Coming into Being

Geocriticism, as a term, is said to be first used and propounded in France by Bertrand Westphal in an article published in 2000 (Westphal, "Pour une approche géocritique des textes: esquisse" 2000), and a full-length book titled *La Géocritique: Réel, fiction, espace* (Westphal, La Géocritique: Réel, fiction, espace 2007) published in 2007. However, Robert Tally Jr. of Texas University, as largely established, is the first to coin and promote the term in English language in a series of critical articles and books he authored and/or edited since the early 1990s, till geocriticism and spatial studies have come to be a predominant terrain.

As broadly defined by Tally, geocriticism encompasses an array of "spatially-oriented" critical approaches and practices in the humanities in general, and it is by no means exclusive to literature. In a very well-informing article entitled "On Geocriticism," Tally stated that when he started using the term geocriticism in the early 1990s, he aimed "to bring a greater emphasis to space, place, and mapping in literary studies" (Tally, "On Geocriticism" 2011, 1). He perceived geocriticism as being the equivalent used by critics to the literary cartography used by writers. When a writer maps the social spaces depicted in his/her world by means of literary cartography, the role of the geocritic then comes to read the maps so drawn

by creative writers highlighting the significance of otherwise overlooked spatial practices therein (ibid, 1-2). Though Tally contributed to the formation and promulgation of the term, he boldly acknowledged the role of several critics, thinkers and theorists who preceded him in underlining the importance of place and space in their practices, albeit under other names and labels, though their works can contentedly be called geocritical. Among them are Edward Said, Kristen Ross, Fredric Jameson, Raymond Williams, Walter Benjamin, Mikhail Bakhtin, Gilles Deleuze and others (Tally, Melville, Mapping and Globalization 2009, 3-5).

Westphal, and Tally as well, intended geocriticism to be broad enough to include multifarious practices, spatial and critical, engaging a wide spectrum of disciplines. This makes it a postmodernist and poststructuralist approach as it seeks to deconstruct the literary language and investigate the representation of place and space in literary works. However, in essence, geocriticism is basically criticism of literary works whose main focus is given to the places and mapping the spatial relations as featured in literature. In *Spatiality*, Tally accentuates the function of literature as being a form of mapping which usually describes to the reader places, real or imaginary, and engages the reader in such places and helps him/her make mental maps to figure out such places. Literature, says Tally, "helps readers get a sense of the world in which others have lived" and helps the author by providing "a way of mapping the spaces encountered or imagined in the author's experience" (2) as well. As the emerging geocriticism and spatial studies provide literary critics with new perspectives, methodologies and a range of technical terms to apply to literature, the latter in fact provides rich terrains for geocritics to map and practice their literary cartography on them. In our case, it is the poetry of Strand and al-Breikan that allures the researcher to investigate it from a spatially-oriented approach due to the overwhelming presence of place and space in their poetry which incarnates most of the concepts spatial and geocritical theorists have brought about.

Spatiality and geocriticism are believed to be direct descendants of the significant Spatial Turn heralded by Michel Foucault, who in a lecture delivered in 1967 and published as an essay 1984, made his very famous declaration that, in contrast to the nineteenth century which had been time-oriented and so much obsessed with history, the present age is an age of space:

> The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed. We are at a moment, I believe, when our experience of the world is less

that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein. (Foucault 1986, 20)

This declaration marked a significant turn, a shift in the critical paradigms from focusing on temporality and time as being the locus of study, to spatiality and place, or at least spatiotemporality as being the most crucial dimension that shapes, governs and creates more complex spatial relations between the characters and events of literary works and their surroundings. The spatial turn of the 1960s and after witnessed a recognizable proliferation of critical works that concentrate on the spatial--rather than temporal-- dimension and all related aspects of space, place and mapping in literature and cultural studies, let alone a large spectrum of walks of life such as philosophy, geography, politics, religion and other disciplinary fields which are sufficiently discussed in *The Spatial Turn Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (Warf and Arias 2009, 1-11). Foucault's above-cited monumental article, triggered many theorists and scholars to write a bundle of significant works that formed the so-called spatial turn. Among them are Yi-Fu Tuan, Edward Soja, Henry Lefebvre, Denis Cosgrove, Fredric Jameson, David Harvey, Edward Relph and others, who stressed the significance of space as vital drives in literary and culture criticism. Each one of them takes geocriticism and spatiality to a specific realm, and for that purpose, devised some neologisms and defined some concepts, hence established a full-fleshed body of theories and applications. Not all spatial related terminology and concepts are relevant to the purpose of the present study, therefore it shall limit itself to the ones most relevant to, and most frequently used in the exploration of the representation of space, place and mapping in the poems of Mark Strand and al-Breikan discussed below.

Space is not an 'innovation' to be considered in separation of time, and what he named "fatal intersection" of both time and space, which comes to be termed as spatiotemporality, provides new ways of reading literature, and brings the spatial relations to the forefront of concern by many critics and theorists, phenomenologists and poststructuralists alike.

2. Outlining Terminology

Before discussing Strand's and al-Breikan's poems that best exemplify the spatial-oriented practices where place and space conspicuously feature, it is rather necessary to outline the most relevant and most frequently used geocritical and spatial terms and tools, along with their simplistic meanings. The use of such key terms like *place, space, mapping, topopoetic topophrenia, topophilia, topophobia, Thirdspace*…etc., is largely based on the significant body of critical legacy of the theorists and critics mentioned

earlier, with particular reliance on Westphal and Tally's geocritical and spatial theory. With the emergence of geocriticism and spatial studies, place has acquired a growing importance in literary criticism. It is no longer a mere setting where action takes place in fiction, or a landscape where the poet passes by to contemplate and seek inspiration from a flower or a tree in poetic works, or a verbally deciphered scene in drama.

According to geocritics, the place is not "merely coordinates on a map but the living embodiment of the polysensory experiences of those many people who attempt to represent both it and the experiences associated with it" (Tally, *Topophrenia* 2019, 67). Place has transcended the geographic limitations of the here, there and other traditional spatial deixes towards more dynamic influences not only on the presenter or the articulator of the experience—the poet in our case—but on the readers who are exposed to that experience, as they are engaged in a cartographic map reading process. Sten P. Moslund, in a significant article on what he calls "topopoetic mode of reading" gives prominence to place-related matters over all other cultural or temporal ones. According to his sophisticated topopoetic reading, literature can be read as geography. *Topopoetics* encompasses "a mode of reading that moves away from the representation of place in literature to a *direct presencing* of place or *sensation* of place [emphasis added]" (Moslund 2011, 31). The presence or making present a place, or one aspect of the place, in a poem would have more than the traditional symbolic or emotive signification as in the setting of Tennyson's "Mariana"; or to function as an objective correlative for the poet's -- or his persona's – inner currents of feelings as in de la Mare's "The Listeners"; or to show sympathy with the poet as in numerous romantic poems. As Moslund puts it "[t]he physicality of place in this mode of reading is not something absent to the reader, some passive 'out there' that is only textually represented (Moslund 2011, 31), the reader would not miss the presence of any aspect of the place in the poem, that piece of creative writing in which any single word counts. Also significant in the presence of this physical element, being a natural or man-made construct, in the landscape may change it from an abrstact space into a memorable place with pressing phyical presence.

In the same vein of place and space dichotomy, two paramount pronouncements by two much celebrated thinkers are worth citing. In differenciating place from space, Yi-Fu Tuan, a geographer and urban planning critic, opens his *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* with the declaration that " 'Space' and 'place' are familiar words denoting common experiences" and that "[p]lace is security, space is freedom" (Tuan, Space & Place: 1977, 3). Also, Tuan differentiates between them in terms of mobility versus immobility, as he concludes his aforementioned book saying

that place is conceived in terms of pauses, moments of rest, whereas space is associated with movement; place is rather fixed and stable whereas space is dynamic and swinging (Tuan, Space & Place: 1977, 198); place is security and feeling home whereas space is freedom and taking risks. Such dichotomies find vivid representations in the selection of poems tackled hereunder.

The second remark on the distinction between place and space is made by Edward Relph, a Canadian geographer, who states that when human subjectivity is introduced to space, place shall come into existence. Places, says Relph,

> are fusions of human and natural order, and are the significant centres of our immediate experiences of the world. They are defined less by unique locations, landscapes, and communities that by focusing of experiences and intentions onto particular settings. Places are not abstractions or concepts, but are directly experienced phenomena of the lived-world and hence are full with meanings, with real objects, and with ongoing activities. (Relph 1976, 141)

Hence, the place is space charged with some unique personal experiences, apprehensions, memories –pleasant or unpleasant—and subjective associations. A key point contained here is that spaces and places are represented and perceived, by both the poet and the reader, from a largely subjective perspective. Relph states that they are subjected to "our immediate experiences" to the extent that they are defined not by some peculiar landmarks or specific concrete constructs, but rather by the bulk of condensed personal experiences and emotions, pleasant, unpleasant or harmful, associated with them. That justifies Relph's remark that places are not abstract concepts, they are directly lived phenomena which definitely constitute the human mind and psyche, based on the states of feelings, connotations and experiences contained therein.

Being so much a spot that is charged with egocentric emotional content, place has been viewed and approached from multidimensional outlooks, analyzed and dissected by various specialists belonging to a wide range of disciplines, and coining a new term to label a specific point on the grid of place. Among the other *topo*-related and largely used terms is '*landscape*' which means, from a spatial geocritical view, "an optical phenomenon relating to the perspective afforded of a certain place by a particularly perceiving subject position: what we can see from where we stand" (Thomas 2018, 12). Again, it is a subjective perception in which not only the optical, but all senses and emotional experiences are involved. Still in the same vein,

places create, engulf and invoke a variety of actions and reactions, conscious and subconscious, due to the experiences archived therein. *Topophilia* is a concept developed by Tuan in the 1970s, to describe a sweet, safe and delightful place which engraved pleasant memories in the person, (Tuan, *Topophilia* 1990 [orig. 1974], 5-12) and it applies to the romanticized yearning for some places as being 'Home! Sweet Home!' On the other end, there is *topophobia* which denotes the fear and anxiety associated with certain places at specific moment which Dylan Trigg demonstrates as being responsible for much of the individuals' understanding of their identity and their nexus with others and with the world (Trigg 2016, xiii-xxi).

Still in the same regard, another substantial term for the purpose of this study is *topophrenia*, another coinage by Robert T. Tally Jr. to mean a predominant obsession with a specific place to an extent that may symptomize, as the suffix 'phrenia' suggests, a sense of disorder, illness and malfunction (Tally, Topophrenia 2019, 47). An elaborate discussion of all aspects of this term as presented by Tally in his *Topophrenia Place, Narrative, and the Spatial Imagination* (2019) is beyond the scope of this study. However, being a key term around which the present study revolves, an outline of its basics is rather necessary.

In Tally's words, *topophrenia* means "a constant and uneasy 'placemindedness' that characterizes a subject's interactions with his or her environment" (Tally, Topophrenia 2019, 5), and this placemindedness impacts and shapes the individual's feelings throughout time, now or in the future, whether in his/her real actual presence in that place, or in reading the representation of the place via any medium. It characterizes almost all human activity and interaction of the person with his/her environment, but its degree may vary from one person to another, depending on the intensity of emotional experiences and attachment associated with the place, among other things. In this regard, Tally says:

> What I have been referring to as topophrenia, an intensive and extravagant place-mindedness, connects the characterizing consciousness to the spaces and places that, in their interrelations, give form to the world, defining its contours and disclosing its potential alternatives. The project of limining the liminal is perhaps especially well suited to literature, which is the art form most closely associated with the faculty of the imagination. (Tally, Topophrenia 2019, 89)

Topophrenia is evident in many literary works, narratives or lyrical poems, and it characterizes the works of some writers and poets to such an extent that

they ground most of their works on one specific place, urban or rural, historical or contemporary, real or imagined. Examples can be found in Thomas Hardy's Wessex novels, or in Robert Frost's poems on New England, or in Mairian O Direan's poems on Inishmore (Ryan 2002, 267-275), or in our case Mark Strand's and al-Breikan's poems. This topophrenia sometimes overlaps with and derives from other spatial concepts such as Foucault's 'heterotopia'; Edward Soja's 'Thirdspace'; and Henry Lefebvre's absolute space and social spaces.

'Heterotopia' is a term introduced by Foucault in the same article cited earlier entitled "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias" to denote spaces that are capable of generating various layers of meanings, references and relations with other places, real or imagined, when they are perceived or seen. In contrast to utopias, heterotopias have material existence, they "real places—places that do exist" and they are more like counter-sites, some kind of "effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality" (Foucault 1986, 25). As an example, he gives the relationship between the reflection in the mirror, which is utopian, with the mirror as a real object which is heterotopian. If place is 'security' and space is 'freedom' according to Tuan, as shown above, Foucault's heterotopia provides an intermediary space, spaces of juxtaposition of resistance and freedom, in a manner akin to Edward Soja's notion which challanges the dialectic binaries of real versus imaginary places by means of spatial trialectics that he calls "real-and-imagined" places.

In a monumental book titled *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (1996), Edward Soja defies the binary divisions of places by presenting his concept of "Thirdspace." He uses the concept of 'Thirdspace' to highlight what he considers "to be the most interesting new ways of thinking of space and social spatiality" and he stated that the term "is purposefully tentative and flexible term that attempts to capture what is actually a constantly shifting and changing milieu of ideas, events, appearance and meanings" (Soja 1996, 2). So he intends the 'Thirdspace' to reconcile or combine the first space, i.e., the real and actual lived place which physical existence, and the second space, i.e., the imagined or imaginary representation of place. So the Thirdspace is the zone where the real place as lived is combined with the imagined place as subjectively conceived. In Soja's words, Thirdspace can be described as

a creative recombination and extension, one that builds on a Firstspace perspective that is focused on the "real" material world and a Secondspace perspective that interprets this reality through imagined representations of spatiality. (Soja 1996, 6)

3. Topophrenia in Mark Strand

The world Mark Strand depicts, particularly in his early poetry, is mostly a world of fear, darkness, anxiety, morbidity, uneasiness, apprehension and anticipation of danger. In this world of fear, the characters, or speakers of Strand, are characterized by multiple concerns with the self, space and place as being markers of the displeasing, or rather disturbing, existence. In fact, this has been identified as one of the recognizable elements of Strand's poetry, namely "the expression of fear toward a malignant world" (Nicosia 2007, 2). Strand's representation of the world and perception of space and place relies on his personal experience of roaming the countries of North and South America because of his father's job. Born in Canada, Prince Edward Island, and grew up in several cities across USA, Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, Mexico, Peru and Italy (Bloom 2003, 14). This experience has enriched his linguistic capacities, exposed him to a variety of geographical terrains, and seems to participate in shaping the landscape of fear and world of anxiety that is evident in his poetry. Such feelings are unmistakably dispersed in Strand poems, in which the natural world is malignant, or apathetic in the best cases. According to James F. Nicosia, Strand's natural world is "a volatile place—either malevolent or apathetic toward humanity within which one can only hope to find short-term shelter" (Nicosia 2007, 2). And even this short-term shelter is not safe enough to give ease to the increasing inner fears that project on the elements of outer world.

Strand's early poetry exposes a constant and uneasy "placemindedness" or a disturbing preoccupation that exemplifies his own, or his speakers' interactions with the place, and their intense concern for the surroundings. This placemindedness, or topophrenia to use Tally's term, is strongly evident in his early poetry, particularly in S*leeping with One Eye Open* (1964) and *Reasons for Moving* (1968). However, this by no means imply that in his subsequent volumes published as late as 2012 are devoid of concern for place, space and landscapes. The present study limits itself to selected poems form the above named books because they the best embody Strand's obsessive fear of places, as they include as many examples as may suffice for the purpose of the study. Strand's concern for the place starts from his poem titles, as most of them either refer to generic geographical places, such as "No Man Is Continent Who Visits Islands", "Sailing to Italy", "Winter in North Liberty", "Walking Around", "In the Mountains" etc.; or to

specific constructs in places, as in "Old People on the Nursing Home Porch", "In the Privacy of Home", "The Room" etc.; or to some means of transition or intermediaries between two worlds or places, as in "The Ghost Ship", "The Kite", "The Last Bus", "The Tunnel", etc. These are some of the titles included in his earliest books named above, and his other books are richer in the same.

In "Standing Still," Strand embodies the above-discussed notion of how the space becomes a place as outlined by Tuan and Edward Relph. The poem begins:

> Someone is always carting
> The scenery off to the wings.
> The thickness of the air,
> Will cover trees that darkness there
> Will cover trees and gardens,
> Waterfront and water.   (CP: 7)

The scenery of the poem is being carried off to the wings of the stage. Then the forefront is left to the abstract thick air of which the poet is most conscious, due to his uneasiness and foreboding. The air is standing still, and the poet as well, and "All the places that have been / With me will wear away." (CP: 7). Those places are the spaces charged with personal experiences, as explained earlier. But they reflect the state of inactivity and fear experienced by the poet who now as still as thick air suspended in the space: "I do not lift my voice / Or raise a hand. I am / Not capable of force, / Feeling myself at stake." (CP: 7). The role assigned to him in the midst of this fear-inspiring stage is that of a witness to a crime, and he has no choice: "My role is forced on me, / It keeps my nerves on edge." (CP: 7). The growing sense of unease, fear and expectation of the worst is heightened by the topo-related sounds and sights, such as "The clicking of switches, / The shuffling behind the scenes" (CP: 8) which all give him the feeling that he is suspect rather than witness. Spatiality and temporality are deeply interrelated here as the scene in which the poet is trapped makes him more conscious of his past, and this interplay of time and place increases the topophrenic sense. Neither the place and its associations, nor the past time memories suffice to rid the poet of this trap and console him:

> My time
> Is spent recalling all
> I can of what has passed.
> I try my best to believe
> That nothing is wholly lost.

> And I don't get anywhere:
> My mind does not support
> My pastime well. (CP: 8)

The inner fears and concerns are instigated and enhanced by the place and the gloomy landscape which functions not to sooth and calm, but to agglomerate the feelings of loss and expectation of tragedy. Also, the poet's use of theatrical references enhance the idea that life is a tragedy which has either arrived, or yet to come, and this world, no matter who beautiful it is, would not be appreciated or seen as such, since it is the stage where tragedies are performed.

Another typical example of how space, place and mapping are employed in Strand poetry is presented in "The Map." Cartography, as an art and science, is utilized both to explore the world via maps and to represent the places and natural elements on maps. The point expressed by the poem takes Strand's preoccupation with place being charged with fears and concerns a step further. The map makes the poet ponder over his surroundings, just to find them fading away. The gridded map on which every area is separated by contours and borderlines seems to gather and unite the world, whereas it is only dividing it in a net-like of colored lines and blocks. This imaginary net is also dividing even the air:

> Over the map
> The portioned air, at times but
> A continuance
> Of Boundaries, assembles in
> A pure, cloudless
> Canopy of artificial calm. (CP: 9)

Maps are oversimplifying reality, rendering spaces and places into tiny shapes and vivid colors, outlining continents, oceans and seas, without much attention to the emotional, social, political and psychological dimensions associated with such places. Maps do not show the mist and blurred edges surrounding the world and never represent the fear that overwhelms it: "Lacking the haze / The blurred edges that surround our world, / The map draws / Only on itself, outlines its own / Dimensions, and waits / As only a thing completed can / To be replaced by a later version of itself" (CP: 9). After this long concentration on the map, he turns attention to the world beyond his window, the vivid and clear-cut divisions of the map vanish, and the only things to be seen around are the fields which "tend slowly inland from the breaking / of the fluted sea"; sea-gulls that glide out of sight and

"trees / Cold as stone / In the gray light of this coastal evening / Grow gradually / Out of focus" (CP: 10). Everything he sees in engulfed by a sense of liminality, the coast, the evening and the entire world. The only center stated in the poem is the center of the poet's eyes by which he surveys the landscape, to see nothing but darkness, whereas the world remains beyond grasp, spinning out of reach. Even maps and cartography are seldom useful to make a better understanding of the world. A map, Strand concludes, is only "A diagram / Of how the world might look could we / Maintain a lasting, / Perfect distance from what is." (CP: 10). This definition of the map as being how the world would look from a distance, is most revealing of his uneasiness in such a displeasing world of fear and anxiety as it befits not to look closely and see how much pain lies in it.

In "Old People on the Nursing Home Porch," Strand presents another example of how could a place function as a trap for humans, a harbor for unpleasant memories. Again, spatiality is intermingled with temporality, in an atmosphere of liminality. Time is afternoon, the light is diminishing, and the people engaged in the scene are old, abandoned and let down by their dear ones, if they have any. In other words, liminal time and age, in a heterotopian place that seems a safe harbor at the first layer, whereas it is actually portal for eternal departure of those old people. No matter who nice the place may be, it is presented as a colorless and tasteless place. There is no interest in any specific scenery in the poem; no reference to a garden or flowers, no sounds of birds or cars or anything alive. On the contrary, everything in the place suggests darkness and death, even the trees function only as witnesses for their misery and helplessness. They "sit, gazing / Out between the trees / Until in all the vacant / Wash of sky, the wasted / Vision of each one / Comes down to earth again." (CP: 11). They keep looking up to the sky till darkness comes and they retreat indoors; the day is associated with outdoors and darkness with indoors. The life they lead in this place is dull, insipid and rather painful. In this place, they are given chances to "recall the days it took / To get them here, they sit / On the porch" (CP: 11). Even the place where they sit is liminal; a point of access and exit, between the world of the inside and outside. For those people, this is the last station of life, a very uneasy experience, and it is "too late to travel / Or even find a reason / To make it seem worthwhile." (CP: 11). The poems concludes with sad but expected conclusion that the evening is reaching out to take their aging world away:

> And soon the dark will come,
> And these tired elders feel
> The need to go indoors
> Where each will die alone
> In the deep and sheepless

Pastures of a long sleep. (CP: 12)

Such transitional spaces as the nursing home in the above-cited poem, hospitals, bus and railroad stations, ports, airports are all suggestive of freedom, mobility and movement, not of security, stability and pauses. This assumption of Tuan is exemplified in many of Strand's poems, including "No Man is Continent Who Visits Islands" which includes an open address and a warning to those who quest for some extraordinary islands, to take care, to give up, and not to go there. In every stanza, he concludes with the same message for such constant travelers. According to the poet, no matter how beautiful the islands you reach at, once you are there, they will be common places and you will start looking for a better place

> No matter how the birds
> Flood the empty air,
> The trees tend the shade,
> Or flowers rise to meet you,
> Do not be taken in. (Strand 2015) (CP: 12)

Those who are given to traveling and movement will not find joy in settlement and arrival. It is more like an obsession, not leading anywhere but to more anxiety and desire to go on. Isolated islands will always tempt those who seek comfort and retreat, but in vain. No place is reliable and safe enough to make people feel belong. All places are formed by imagining, by perception which is usually deceptive. This is further emphasized in "Taking a Walk With You" where Strand declares that everything they see in the countryside is not as it seems, and everything in it is being charged with our own imagined associations. Here, Edward Soja's Thirdspace can be called in to describe the combination of the first existing place with the second imagined place as subjectively conceived: "The tree we lean against / Was never made to stand / For something else / Let alone ourselves." (CP: 23). Strand's apprehension of the world is in a sense a Thirdspace, created by imagination, whereas reality is rather hostile or at least indifferent: "We live unsettled lives / And stay in a given place / Only long enough to find / We don't belong." (CP: 23).

Most of Strand's early poem present such characters who are on the move – walking, sailing, traveling, flying—except for the elders of the nursing home, who are no longer capable of physical wandering, so they resort to gazing at the sky. In "Walking Around," he voices his engagement in a continuous quest in spaces for a destination where he can find comfort and safety. Strand's topophrenia is explicitly reflected in this poem, he could not stand one single place, so he keeps moving around:

> Having arrived by the same door

> I left, I left again.
> I knew my reasons by heart,
> And never lost track of where I was going. (CP: 26)

This preoccupation with motion, with travelling without arrival is a typical Strandian motif. He knows his reasons for moving as he says, "To leave and arrive, arrive and leave / Was all I had in mind. / My drives were simple enough --- / I walked for the sake of walking around." (CP: 26). However, this seemingly simple reason is rather philosophical. Walking around enables him to map his own fears and concerns in terms of the terrains and landscapes he wanders around, provides him with presence in the space, and helps him place himself at some coordinates of fear and premonition. David Kirby believes that the justification for the continuous movement is to make sense of the world, "to make it coherent and to create a balancing point for our thought about the world and about ourselves" (Kirby 1990, 13). Strand is conscious of the fact his way is long and tiring to reach a sensible cohesion of his past life and an understanding of his present: "Oh, I was dashing, / Or thought I was, until I saw / The distance I had to go / And began somehow to suspect / That my past was catching up with me." (CP: 26).

Such a fragmented, divided and dynamic world of twilight landscape, is always apparent in Strand, and this division and fragmentation, says Kirby, is ascribed to the divided self. Strand's early speakers "seem split between their emotions and their reason, unfocused, uncentered, out of sync with their surroundings" (Kirby 1990, 16). This schizophrenia of persona, assuming that the poet's speakers are independent of the poet himself, is the reason behind the topophrenia that occupies his early poems. The are two worlds in his poems of both S*leeping with One Eye Open* (1964) and *Reasons for Moving* (1968), and between them, there is always an intermediary or a tool the poet utilize to explore the other world, while dangling fearfully in the real world. For this end he uses sometimes a kite, as in "The Kite"; a train as in "Sleeping with One Eye Open" and "The Accident", a ship as in "The Ghost Ship"; a bus as in "The Last Bus"; or a tunnel as in "The Tunnel" which all enhance the sense of rootlessness and overwhelming fear of the surroundings.

4. Topophrenia in Mahmoud al-Breikan
Similarly, the world described in al-Breikan's early poetry, which extends from 1947 till 1969, is extremely fearful and apprehensive. Since his earliest poems of *A Grave in the Meadow* (1947-1957) to those of his second poem collection *The Lighthouse Guard* (1958-196), through all his subsequent poems, al-Breikan has portrayed an extraordinarily depressive and gloomy world, haunted by agonized spirits, wretched persons who are heading to, or

already trapped in, physical and spiritual torture. In his world, an overwhelming sense of fear and foreboding is looming large in the scene where the place is unfriendly, the space is depressive and the people are hostile or at least indifferent.

Al-Breikan is one of the avant-garde poets of modern Arabic poetry, known as *al-Shi'r al-Hurr* [free verse] movement in the early 1950s, along with Badir Shakir al-Sayyab (1926-1964), Baland al-Haidari (1926-1996) and others. However, due to some political and other circumstances, he chose to retreat and keep himself away from the literary circles of his contemporaries and live a solitude life in his home city of Basrah, in the far south of Iraq till his death. This isolation has become his distinctive feature not only in his poetic life, but in his personal life as well. He avoided lights and public life though he was one of the innovative pioneers of modern Arabic verse. Even in publishing his poems, he was rather reluctant, scant and irregular (Mehdi 2005, 56). He is said to be well-versed in music, western culture and philosophy (Sultan 2008, 28). The most common denominator to be traced in his poetry, early and late alike, is the evident uneasy placemindedness or topophrenia that overwhelms his world. As with Strand, his spaces are inseparable from the time element, with a sense of motion rather than static landscapes. Spatial deixes and references are heavily recurring in al-Breikan's poetic world giving uniqueness to the extent that the map of his world cannot be imagined without the lighthouse standing firmly in the midst, and the railroad endlessly extending therein.

Such poem titles as "A Grave in the Meadow", "Dust", "From the Songs of Solitude", "Killed in the Street", "The Surveilled", "An Accident in the Harbor", "Apprehensions of Issa bin al-Azraq en route to Hard Labor", "A Love Song from the Jail of the Forgotten", "Stone-City Man", "The Lighthouse Guard", among others, are most revealing of the overwhelming presence of places in his poetry. These places are all charged with a variety of personal emotions and experiences, almost all revolving around the orbits of fear and anxiety. Each of the aforementioned titles includes a place referent which is modified by or associated with an element of fearful connotations. Even if there is an element of hope or joy, it fails to function properly due to its linkage with the fear factor. Hence, the meadow is subordinated to the grave which takes the forefront; the songs are inspired by and coming from solitude; the street is a crime scene for a murder; the harbor which is supposed to be nice and welcoming is only a setting for a tragic accident … etc.

In "The Surveilled," (1954) the poet depicts the psychological and mental state of the protagonist, supposedly the poet himself, as he feels being followed and surveilled by some fearful sunken eyes which spy on him "From morn to eve / Creep and follow my traces, rising like monsters in my

way" (al-Breikan 2022, 33). Those lifeless, lightless sunken eyes are continuously inspecting him from top to bottom, from without and within, measuring his depth, counting his breaths, and fretting his footsteps. His awareness of being under surveillance makes his days and nights an eternal agony, being trapped in place and space:

> And from morn to eve
> Among such strangled directions, among the city walls
> Like a prey in the trap, trailing my buried burdens
> I disappear in the clouds of invisibility (al-Breikan 2022, 33)

The sense of fear associated with the place, the urban setting of this poem, arises from the fact that he is being under surveillance. In other words, the topophrenia arises from the surveillance of the informant eyes which makes his life an agony. Such a setting is devoid of friendliness but full of hatred, grudge and political suppression which characterized the poetic scene of al-Breikan (al-Salman 2016).

As with Strand, time intertwines and conspires with place to spread fear in the area. "Night, which brings forth happy mildness and peace / To the exhausted ones, overshadows me with horror. The big gate / Is shut in silence, as a prison, and my room in the midst of darkness / Listens to the beats of the morbid aged heart of the clock." (al-Breikan 2022, 33-34) Even in sleep, nothing but terrifying nightmares are waiting for him. He is much afraid of sleep due to his expectations of being apprehended at any moment. While gazing at the wall, listening to the blowing wind which shakes the heavy iron door, he expects them to come: "(They may knock [at the door] now, they may arrive before the daylight!) / Then manacles and whips and a guffaw of vengeance would overflow) (al-Breikan 2022, 34). In the context of the post-WWII Iraq, and the overwhelming political and ideological conflicts, al-Breikan was known for being independent and not affiliated with any trench (Khudair 2020). Still, he was so much concerned with what happened to his fellow poets and men of letters who were detained, tortured or executed in a series of campaigns in the 1950s and 1960s. The poem above articulates some of the general atmosphere of the country at that time.

In "An Accident in the Harbor," a poem written in Kuwait in 1957, the place is also charged with terror. Unlike the usual depiction of harbors which are always associated with safety, arrival and welcome, al-Breikan's poem presents a fear-inspiring one. The scene starts with ships, noise, a row of heavy containers, and black-armed cranes which produce frightening screeching:

> Horror gleams in the eyes – a scream –and a pointing hand
> The bystanders jostled in horror – it is the arm

> Which falls down – the arm got wild! The screeching got mad
> and explodes
> A two-second nightmare, gazing eyes are moving in fright
> Masses of rusty steel, a structure and flowing blood! (al-Breikan
> 2022, 38)

The rest of the poem unfolds the identity of the victim of the accident, a laborer who is reported to be a foreigner, who has daughters in a faraway place, unknown to others, in whose pocket they found some money and two letters. A very tragic end designed by the blind forces that brought forth such an accident for a wretched soul. Al-Breikan's poetic world is inhabited by acted-upon victims who are doomed to suffer and die.

The same depressing atmosphere continues till al-Breikan's last poem of his first volume. In this poem, titled "Number 96" (1957), he presents a wretched man who is numbered, not named, who at first looks introspectively to reveal his inner pains and misery, referring to his agonized heart which grew old. Then, he surveys the external world around him which is devoid of anything promising:

> I look in the oculus for a hand's span of the sky
> For a drop of the blueness of dimensions and the clarity
> I look for a beam of that light
> I look for a star
> That glimmers to me from the faraway planets. (al-Breikan 2022,
> 41)

The entire world is rendered to a small hole through which he looks for any glimpse of life in this lifeless world. The scene he depicts in the poem is akin to that of prisoners in a jail, though he never states this in the poem. He contemplates the shapes of the digits 96 and how the '6' looks like a yellow noose hanging the '9' and mentions his tough suit of prisoners. This number, it seems, is that written on the prisoner's uniform. The fear that obsesses the protagonist as he has been trapped in this situation for a long time and he does not know till when.

In al-Breikan's second volume of poetry, *The Lighthouse Guard,* the apprehensive and frightening continues to loom large. The most predominant element of space and place in this volume is the train which serves not only as an intermediary between the real and the surreal in al-Breikan's poem, but as a channel to go to a world of agony and torture. In "Apprehensions of Issa bin al-Azraq en route to Hard Labor", the poet introduces the protagonist named in the title, devastated, double-caged and transferred in a train to serve a penal labor sentence. His hands are manacled and two armed guards are escorting him in this cruel railway journey. In addition to the physical

oppression, the man experiences a greater psychological pressure made by the looks of passengers and vendors who see him in such a weird situation. The very fast train is heading to a worse reality than the present moment in which he is trapped, as it evident. However, this does not stop this deep and calm prisoner form contemplating the people, the world and universe:

> The train uproars in its long way
> In the tunnel of darkness towards the daybreak
> I wished the day would die and never comes
> I wished the train would go astray
> From its ominous way. (al-Breikan 2022, 45)

He is seizing this last moment of being with normal people, no matter how indifferent or unfriendly they were to him, to compare his situation with them, completely aware of the fact that they are absolutely better off. "The children" in the train are obsessed with the dancing shadows, and "women sink in silence and men / Sleep indifferently, and dream" (45). They are carefree, or at least they are not heading to jail. Then he thinks of his own situation, with freezing cuffed hands, and with two guards who are ceaselessly gazing at his pale face. However, he stoically sits with no complaint, though his heart is hammered down by the "stone of pain" (46). After surveying the unpleasant indoors reality, seeing the passengers who are busy dreaming with "buying and selling / Poverty and wealth" and their other worldly matters, while is trapped in an existential moment:

> Minute by minute silence chokes me
> Hour by hour I look in demise
> I look through the train window
> At the wildlands, and the intertwining of night with the heaths
> Mysterious stars and dark whirlwinds
> Which feeds on sands. (al-Breikan 2022, 46)

The space, as surveyed by the protagonist at that particular moment, does not entail anything promising, heaths, dark whirlwinds in a liminal moment, when he is in a sense of demise, and when the slowly moving time is entangled with the fearful landscape to render a typical Breikanian spatiotemporality of fear. As the train moves on, and as time passes, he keeps his eyes indoors to see his two guards and the passengers, then outdoors to see the ghostly darkness of landscape which makes him think that he is all surrounded by ghosts. He feels uprooted from his world and brought to a world of ghosts. Even his memories are mere ghosts. Amidst such a frightening atmosphere in a devastating moment and place which both lead to a worse reality as suggested by the title, even the memories of the female

addressee, his beloved, do not provide him with any sense of comfort and condolence.

The subsequent part of the poem is devoted to this women whose mention serves not to mitigate the protagonist's agonized soul but to intensify his wretchedness. As the train runs the night towards the unwanted destination, he resorts to the memories of the women he loved and planned to marry. He is much disappointed that all their plans would go in vain, as he is heading to the unknown. He surveys his love story since its beginnings, telling the readers that he sings her whenever he misses singing, that he craves to marry her, that she is associated with flowers in his imagination, and that is why he planned to grow flowers all around their house. Still, her memories intensify his pain, and make him lament his dream which is undermined by the jail: "I lament you for the dream that is scattered by the bars / For the faraway hope / For laughter and crying, for health and sickness" (48). After lamenting all that, and exploring all past and present pains, with much emphasis on the seamy aspects of existence, all associated with the sordid setting, both real and metaphorical, the poem concludes with a snapshot of a very hostile place, peopled with very aggressive strangers in a dreary station:

> A dreary station, the train windows
> Open, and vendors display their dishes
> To the eyes. Some Arab passengers
> Rush in now. They look at
> My left eye (which was hit yesterday morning)
> And look with hatred and cruelty
> At my hands (to anything attracting attention in
> The iron shackles?) (al-Breikan 2022, 53)

The poem comes to the end with the guard who is sitting beside the prisoner rudely shutting the train window, hence closing the only channel between him and the outer world, and the shifting spaces that vary and change within the course of the journey and the advent of the daybreak. At the conclusion, his apprehensions make him declare that:

> How long is the road!
> How far is the world! How strange it is!
> . . . .
> . . . .
> I know it well, it is a dreary and deep road
> And the journey has just started. (al-Breikan 2022, 54)

The Breikanian landscape as outlined above is overtaken by an overwhelming sense of uneasiness and obsessive fear. It is not spiritually oriented, as there is no reference to any faith or dogma, rather it is topo-

oriented or originated. The place feeds the inner human psyche with physical incarnation of fear and reflections of hostility in the eyes of the onlookers, or at least Breikan's characters would feel so. This is true, in addition to the poems discussed above, to other ones in *The Lighthouse Guard,* as with the title poem as well as "The Stone City Man" and "The Five Minutes Journey." In the former, the poet presents another image of the world of fear, but this time in an unreal city,

> In the world that is buried underground, in a maze
> That is made of iron, cement and stone
> Where the spider of fear and boredom
> Spreads its strings in the ways of silence, and no way out
> In the "labyrinth" of death, where people decease
> Craving for life. (al-Breikan 2022, 62)

In this nightmarish city, the poet is moving around, bearing all types of agony and loss, looking vainly for anything pleasant, something from spring time, or a serene sky or a "mild and laughing place / washed by the dawn" (62). He locates himself on the map of this city:

> Here are you, in your stony prison, on roads
> Which meander, converge and turn, but he is never back
> Their prisoner, you dream of escape
> From silence the monster, from your exhausted imagination. (al-Breikan 2022, 63)

However, all his endeavors to escape all this are in vain and even his dreams of promising things, no matter how simple they were, are beyond realization. The poem leaves the question of "How could all this desolation creep to your heart?" (65) unanswered, not because it is rhetorical in nature, but in part of the labyrinth nature of the poem. The city in al-Breikan's poetry is more evident than the countryside, but his urban and rural landscapes are equally desolate and fear-inspiring. Such marks as the pavements, stations, prisons, theatres, harbors, cranes...etc., are frequent in his poems. But his city, as shown in the poems discussed above as well as in "Another City", "Unpeopled City" and many other poems, is devoid of any sign of liveliness or at least normality of life. His fear is associated with urban rather than rural spaces, incarnated in man-made rather than natural marks and edifices, as stated above.

5. Conclusions:

The selection of poems discussed above, though limited in number, may serve as a representative sample for the poetry of both poets, and the functionality of place and space therein. The sense of uneasy placemindedness that overwhelms the interactions of the protagonists, assumingly the poets themselves, or what Robert Tally calls 'topophrenia', is

a common ground for both poets. Mark Strand and Mahmoud al-Breikan have a rather unpleasant perception of space, with daunting and portentous associations of place, and both map their surrounding as finding a way out of a labyrinth, of not a minefield. Strand's landscape is rather rural, open albeit malignant and liminal. In Strand's early poetry, there is an overwhelming sense of fear associated with an intermediary, or an element of transition between two worlds, a fearful one of the present and another world of mysterious realities of the future. In al-Breikan's early poetry, there is also an overwhelming sense of fear and nightmarish world that is also divided between the here and the far-off there, between the internal place, which is hostile and oppressive, and the external space, which is ominous, dark and more oppressive.

The fear of the here and now extends to that of the morrow, which insinuates evil, imprisonment or death. In Strand's world, this topophrenia is ascribed to some philosophical and existential concerns, related to the relation of the poet with the natural surroundings, and this relation is governed by concerns, but those concerns are mostly natural, such as the desire to roam, and the anxiety that accompanies such roaming. In al-Breikan's world, the sense of topophrenia is ascribed to some man-made and politically oriented. The protagonists in his scenes are either killed by accidents, or surveilled by inspectors, or guarded by the police, or looked down by passersby.

Finally, the American topophrenia, however annoying and foreboding, is almost devoid of human intervention, more existential and philosophical. In the American case, the fear and obsession with unknown hazards are presented within the context of a threatened cosmos which may encounter a universal catastrophe. In the middle-eastern Iraqi case, being torn by conflicts and coups during the 1950s and 1960s when al-Breikan wrote the poems discussed above, the topophrenic obsession is due to human factors rather than natural ones. Iraqis were oppressed by political and military dictatorships which killed and imprisoned thousands of them with no trials, especially the intelligentsia and men of letters. Though al-Breikan did not encounter such horrible experiences of detention with the prisoners of thought, many of his friends and fellow poets did. Hence, it can be safely concluded that al-Briekan's fears and concerns expositions of some public experiences witnessed by his generation.

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