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Fever Dreams: Narrative (De)structuring in Arabic Literature

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Dedication

This report is dedicated to my mother, Hoda Nader Wehbe.

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Abstract

Fever Dreams: Narrative (De)structuring in Arabic Literature

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In Arabic literature, fever has been the subject of several literary works including that of the Abbasid poet al-Mutanabbī to which he dedicated an entire poem. This essay argues that, far from being a mere poetic description, al-Mutanabbī's fever structures the poetic narrative. The pathological and metaphorical structure of fever, which contains a narrative of illness and recovery, mimics a traditional *bildungsroman* or *rite de passage* narrative. However, al-Mutanabbī's poem challenges the linearity of fever's narrative and the duality of poison and cure. Drawing on a close reading of the poem, an etymology of *ḥummā*, and Derrida's analysis of the *pharmakon*, a theoretical framework emerges through which fever is conceptualized as a mode of literary narration that is non-linear, erratic, and repetitious. This theoretical framework opens up new ways to read narrative in contemporary Lebanese Civil War fiction. In both Hudā Barakāt's *My Master and My Lover* and Rashīd al-Ḍa'īf's *The Tyrant* fever is not only revealed as a liminal space, mediating between death and recovery, but also shown to permit momentary intervention where movement can be imagined and narrative can be generated. In this essay pre-modern and modern literature are read side-by-side, with a focus on the linguistic and philological threads that tie these bodies of literature together, while respecting their independent historical contexts.

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Introduction

In line with recent Arabic literary scholarship's attention to questions that pertain to the body and affect, this essay recognizes fever's potential to generate narrative that links physical bodies to bodies of text. The Persian physician and polymath Ibn Sīnā provides a description of the bodily condition: "Fever is a strange heat that burns in the heart and spreads from it through the mediations of the pneuma and the blood through the arteries and veins in the whole body."¹ This description captures the interiority and exteriority of fever as well as the danger to which it subjects the body. More recently, fever has been employed to metaphorize ills that afflict the human condition. Writing in the late 19th century, Frederic Nietzsche diagnosed Europe with a "consuming fever of history" in which the mad obsession of retrieving the past culminated in the degeneration of life after the act of historicization had reached "a certain degree of excess."² When humankind is overburdened by history, it ceases to benefit from the act of historicizing:

This meditation too is untimely, because I am here attempting to look afresh at something of which our time is rightly proud—its cultivation of history—as being injurious to it, a defect and deficiency in it; because I believe, indeed, that we are all suffering from a consuming fever of history and ought at least to recognize that we are suffering from it.³

History that consumes humankind can be ameliorated by that which history initially sought to prevent: forgetfulness. Nietzsche argues that active forgetfulness, fostering an

¹ Gerrit Bos, *Ibn al-Jazzār on Fevers: A critical edition of Zād al-musāfir wa-qūt al-hādir* (London: Routledge, 2011), 5.

² Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life," in *Untimely Meditations*, ed. Daniel Breazeale, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 67.

³ Nietzsche, 60.

anti-historical power, is necessary for the health of the individual and collective.⁴ By the same token, writing in the context of recent technological developments for recording and inscribing, Jacques Derrida identifies a certain “archive fever” which he also defines as both an illness (*mal*) and a state of burning passion:

It is never to rest, interminably, from searching for the archive right where it slips away. It is to run after the archive, even if there's too much, right where something in it [unarchives]. It is to have a compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire for the archive, an irrepressible desire to return to the origin, a homesickness, a nostalgia for the return to the most archaic place of absolute commencement.⁵

For Derrida, the archive contradicts itself insofar as the compulsive obsessive act of including something within the archive means to exclude something else. If the archive is imagined as a physical extension of public memory, what falls outside the walls of the archive is forgotten. Such a process of inclusion and exclusion raises the issue of selection and curation, what Nietzsche calls “active forgetting.” Though Nietzsche and Derrida are preoccupied with questions of historicizing, documenting, and recording, what is of significance here is the use of fever as a metaphor to describe these collective states of compulsion, repetition, and nostalgia. Fever embodies the process of recovery and death depending on one's point of view. In both examples of Nietzsche's consuming fever of history and Derrida's archive fever, the remedy disturbingly transforms into the illness.

⁴ Nietzsche, 63.

⁵ Jacques Derrida and Eric Prenowitz, “Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression,” *Diacritics* 25.2 (1995), 57.

This fever of narrativizing and archiving the past has emerged repeatedly in literary works. A classic example, William Faulkner's *Absalom! Absalom!* is a chilling narrative about piecing together a chapter in the dark and troubled history of the American south. Repeatedly throughout the novel, characters struggle with and combat the act of retelling the past because of the dangerous consequences acknowledging their past would entail. In the course of their struggles, fever emerges as both a purifying and a destructive force:

He was a barracks filled with stubborn back-looking ghosts still recovering, even forty-three years afterward, from the fever which had cured the disease, waking from the fever without even knowing that it had been the fever itself which they had fought against and not the sickness, looking with stubborn recalcitrance backward beyond the fever and into the disease with actual regret, weak from the fever yet free of the disease and not even aware that the freedom was that of impotence.⁶

Fever, interpreted here as the American Civil War, expunges the moral and ethical illness rooted in the seizure of indigenous land and the enslavement of African peoples upon which the American economy was founded. Here, Faulkner invokes the pathology of fever to represent a self-destructive force—those who had fought against the fever and “not the sickness” unknowingly sow the seeds of their own destruction.

Equally, in a European context, fever has figured prominently in the rhetoric of the First World War. Fanning the fires of war, French modernist sculptor Henri Gaudier-Brzeska extolled the war as a moral purging of Europe, likening it to a “a great remedy.

⁶ William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (New York: Random House, 1936), 12.

In the individual it kills arrogance, self-esteem, pride.”⁷ In contrast to this pro-war sentiment, Siegfried Sassoon’s protested against the war that had deteriorated from “defense and liberation” to “aggression and conquest.”⁸ Like fever, the rhetoric of war depicts its violence as purifying remedy, on the one hand, and a force of self-destruction, on the other. This duality of recovery and destruction, better identified as “ambivalence” by Derrida, embodies the substance of the fever.⁹ Derrida argues that the term *pharmakon* is the epitome of an “anti-substance,” for it is ambivalently the poison and the cure:

This *pharmakon*, this ‘medicine,’ this philter, which acts as both remedy and poison, already introduces itself onto the body of the discourse with all its ambivalence [...] the *pharmakon* would be a substance [...] if we didn’t have eventually to come to recognize it as antisubstance itself.¹⁰

According to Derrida, the *pharmakon* bears qualities that prevent it from simply inhabiting a single definition. Instead, like fever, it is ambivalent, perpetually shifting from one definition to another. In other words, the *pharmakon* inhabits a perpetual state of liminality whose identity relationally depends on viewpoint and perspective.

In Arabic, words that simultaneously and alternatively mean their opposites, constitute their own linguistic category. This phenomenon is called *al-aḍḍād*, which is

⁷ Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, “Vortex Gaudier-Brzeska,” *Modernism and Literature: An Introduction and Reader*, eds. Mia Carter and Alan Warren Friedman (London: Routledge, 2013), 270-71.

⁸ Siegfried Sassoon, “Finished with the War: A Soldier’s Declaration,” *Modernism and Literature*, 272.

⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 70.

¹⁰ Derrida, *Dissemination*, 70.

defined as “an opposite, a contrary [...], a word with two opposite meanings, an antidote.”¹¹ In his article on the subject, Nasr al-Dīn al-Baḥrah defines the linguistic phenomenon:

However, the important opposition in the Arabic language is that which creates two different meanings, at times multiple, latent within a single word. For example, *al-jawn* means both the color white and black; *al-qanīs* means both predator and prey; *al-karī* means both lessor and lessee; *al-ṭarab* means both happiness and sadness.

This dialectical feature encourages tracing etymologies of certain terms in Arabic lexicons and investigating how certain words, like Derrida’s *pharmakon* have been treated, particularly in literature and translation. Tying fever to the *pharmakon*, this essay asks how *ḥummā* and the pathology of fever structures a literary narrative. While fever as narrative form has yet to be treated as an object of study in Arabic literary studies, Arabic literature and cinema have been read through the interpretive lens of Nietzsche’s “consuming fever of history.”

In his dissertation, Nezar Ajaj Andary, reads the literary and cinematic production of modern and contemporary Arab writers/artists through a cathartic lens of Nietzsche’s “consuming fever of history.” Spanning multiple genres, Andary identifies five works that contribute to the “consuming fever of history,” but also confront history and prescribe a dose of *catharsis* to alleviate the devitalizing production of historical “excess.” Through the use of “flashback,” these works “create a subjective relationship between the actual historical event and the audience” that allows the past to be

¹¹ Hans Wher “d/d/d,” *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic: (Arabic-English)*, ed. J. Milton Cowan, 4th ed., 628.

communally processed “not only because they replicate painful moments, but also because they give form to these tragic moments.”¹² Drawing on the metaphor of fever for its purifying qualities, Andary develops an analytical lens through which audiences cathartically engage with history as the object of literature and cinema historical. But he does not, however, engage with how fever *structures* narrative in a literary text—historical fiction or fiction in general. Complementing Andary’s foregrounding work on Arabic literature and film that are complicit in the “consuming fever of history,” are the material manifestations of fever in Arabic literature that explicitly and implicitly create a narrative structure that is erratic and repetitive. Fever is a narrative to be read and analyzed, a condition to be diagnosed, and a theoretical framework that has the potential to intervene in how literary genres are conceptualized and to challenge historical delimitations, such as pre-modern and modern, within Arabic literature specifically.

The first section of this essay focuses on al-Mutanabbī’s canonical poem wherein he describes a consuming fever of his own. In al-Mutanabbī’s poem, fever is depicted as a state of perpetual liminality in which the poet imagines the *raḥīl* (journey) which he believes will mitigate his suffering as he is immobilized in Egypt against his will.¹³

¹² Nezar Ajaj Andary, “A Consuming Fever of History: A Study of Five Urgent Flashbacks in Arabic Film and Literature,” (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2008), 9-11.

¹³ Al-Mutanabbī (AH 313/915 CE-AH 354/965 CE) was a major Abbasid poet whose place within the Arabic literary tradition has been immortalized by literary critics and other poets for his valorizing panegyrics and his fierce invectives. His full name was Abū al-Ṭayyib Aḥmad b. al-Ḥusayn, but he is more commonly referred to as al-Mutanabbī (he who professes to be a prophet), an epithet attributed to the poet for his leading a political and religious rebellion in the Syrian coastal city of Latakia (*al-Lādhiqīyah*). For more on

Reading both fever and the *raḥīl* against the *pharmakon* reveals their structural similarities and differences. The associative links between fever and *pharmakon* is charted through a semantic map of *ḥummā* in Arabic lexicons. A close reading of al-Mutanabbī's poem juxtaposes the poet's immobilized state against the motion and liminality of the *raḥīl*, on the one hand, and the fever on the other. If the former is structurally located between a state of separation and aggregation, then the latter is enacted and embodied by al-Mutanabbī's tossing and turning in the bed, afflicted with fever. This thematized fever produces a narrative form that mimics the erratic, repetitive, ambivalent nature of the *pharmakon*, connecting physical condition and literary development, movement and narrative. Moreover, examining the fevered body in the fevered text expands our literary critical scope by using al-Mutanabbī's poem to create a theoretical framework through which contemporary fiction can be read.

The second section of this essay uses the theoretical framework of fever to open up a discussion of contemporary Lebanese Civil War novels. The two novels discussed in this essay are Hudā Barakāt's *Sayyidī wa-Ḥabībī* ("My Master and My Lover") (2004) and Rashīd al-Da'īf's *al-Mustabidd* ("The Tyrant") (2001). The civil war is present in both novels which share a preoccupation with issues of memory, fragmentation, transgressions, and trauma. Their works sit along side the works of other authors who write on Beirut and the civil war such as Elias Khoury, Etel Adnan, and Hanan al-

al-Mutanabbī, see R. Blachère, "al-Mutanabbī," *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., eds. P. Bearman, T. Bianquis, C. E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, and W. P. Heinrichs (Leiden: Brill, 2012). Brill Online. http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/al-mutanabbi-COM_0821, and also see Margaret Larkin, *Al-Mutanabbī: Voice of the 'Abbasid Poetic Ideal* (Oxford, UK: Oneworld Publications, 2008).

Shaykh, just to name a few.¹⁴ Written against the backdrop of the civil war, the themes of liminality and transformation resonate with the theoretical framework of fever developed in regard to al-Mutanabbī. Reading narrative as fevered, or rather fevered narratives, opens new narratological questions and that query both linear and non-linear forms of narrative. Talking about her own work, Barakāt writes, “I do not trace events. I speak about tiny fragments, about the distance echo of what occurs. I begin where the event ends, because literature has nothing to do with newspaper reports.”¹⁵ In *Sayyidī*, fever constitutes the event that generates narrative; fever explicitly structures narrative. As for *al-Mustabidd*, fever implicitly structures a narrative that mimics the peripatetic nature of the novel’s protagonist who is locked in a repetitious and erratic cycles as he seeks his lost love throughout the city. Hallucination, reality and fantasy, exile and displacement invite an investigation of fever both as physical and a literary condition, as the literary genre reflects symptomatically an actual state of confusion and war.

¹⁴ Ghenwa Hayek writes that “the fiction of Hoda Barakat, Rashid al-Daif and Hanan al-Shaykh confronts personal and public memory and the rewriting and revision of personal history while also emphasizing the alienation their characters feel from an urban space being rebuilt,” Ghenwa Hayek, *Beirut, Imagining the City: space and lace in Lebanese literature* (London: Tauris, 2015), 25. For more on these authors and their contributions to Lebanese literature see also, Angelika Neuwirth, Andreas Pflitsch, and Barbara Winckler, *Arabic Literature: Postmodern Perspectives* (London: Saqi, 2010).

¹⁵ Barbara Winckler, “Androgyny as Metaphor: Hoda Barakat and *The Stone of Laughter*,” *Arabic Literature: Postmodern Perspectives*, 384.

Al-Mutanabbī's Ambivalent Fever

1.1 A Semantic Map of *Ḥummā*

Tracing the etymology of the word fever (*ḥummā*) in Arabic lexicons creates a complex linguistic map of its wide-ranging and overlapping definitions, while at the same time it plots its metaphorical and semiotic potentialities on a semantic plane. Such a map highlights the morphological relationships between derivatives of the same root, in this case *ḥ/m/m*, and other nearby roots, such as *ḥ/m/y*. This process moves our understanding beyond a singular or literal definition or even translation of *ḥummā* to uncover the semantic field it occupies. Though returning to dictionaries of classical Arabic and looking up *ḥummā* is not enough to understand how fever functions in a literary text, as it provides only semiotic nodes, it does, however, allow us to appreciate the versatility and depth of the term in al-Mutanabbī's fever poem, as well as in the contemporary works of Hudā Barakāt and Rashīd al-Ḍa'if.

The two nodes central to my argument are poison and antidote. Since both of these nodes appear in both sections *ḥ/m/m* and *ḥ/m/y*, tracing the threads that tie these two different roots together strengthens the dialectical fabric between poison and antidote that resides within the concept of fever. Beginning with *ḥummā/ḥummah*, *Tāj al-'arūs* defines the entry as a pathological fever and provides the following explanation:

Ḥummā: an illness in which the body burns and perspires (*ḥamīm*), named such because of its hot temperature. The *ḥadīth* regards *ḥummā* as hellfire, perhaps because one of its symptoms is perspiration, or because it bears

the signs of death (*ḥimām*). For it has been said that *ḥummā* is the patron of death, the messenger of death, and death's gate.¹⁶

The base meaning of the word's root, *ḥ/m/m*, is primarily to heat water or to burn an object until it becomes black, usually charcoal or fat.¹⁷ When used in the passive, the root's most basic verb form means "to become afflicted with a fever." *Tāj* provides three separate explanations of *ḥummā*'s connection to a pathological fever. Firstly, fever is characteristic of the intense heat and temperature produced by the body. Secondly, in response to the intense heat, the body is known to begin to sweat (*ḥamīm*), producing one of fever's most prominent symptoms. Lastly, fever, an autoimmune reaction in the body to the infiltration of foreign bodies, bears signs of death (*ḥimām*) and inscribes them onto the afflicted individual. The concepts of fire, sweat, and death come together to imbue fever with a profound pathological severity, despite the fact that the entry does not say anything beyond this most literal consideration of the word's potential. All of these explanations, however, share one thing in common. They are all, in one way or another, related to *ḥamīm*, a word with a multiplicity of different meanings. While the concept of "heat" is at the word's core, it can refer to the blistering summer heat, earth or water heated by the sun, sweat, and a close relationship. Though the last definition appears to oddly stick out in comparison to its other meanings, *ḥamīm* takes on the synonymous meaning of *qarīb* (relative) and *wadīd* (friend) because they are someone who hastily rushes to protect (*ḥimāyah*) someone else out of concern, pity, or anxiety. The

¹⁶ Muḥammad Murtaḍā al-Ḥusaynī al-Zabīdī, "*ḥummā/ḥummah*," *Tāj al-ʿarūs min jawāhir al-qāmūs*, ed. ʿAbd al-Karīm al-ʿAzbāwī, vol. 32. (Kuwait: Maṭbaʿat Ḥukūmat al-Kuwayt, 2000), 17.

¹⁷ Al-Zabīdī, "*ḥ/m/m*," vol. 32, 5.

thermodynamics involved created by kinetic energy of movement when rushing to the aide of a loved one is one way to draw the link between fever (*ḥummā*) and protection (*ḥimāyah*). Another porthole would be through the homonymous term of *ḥummā/ḥummah* found under both the *ḥ/m/m* and *ḥ/m/y* entries in the dictionary.

Adjacent to the entry of *ḥummā* as fever, the same word appears under a different entry as scorpion venom.¹⁸ The semantic connection between fever and venom is convincing, when considering the pathological similarities between *ḥummā* and a scorpion sting. Tracing the thread of the scorpion’s sting, the same definition reappears again under a different but closely related root: *ḥ/m/y*. Here, the definition of *ḥumā/ḥumah* (note the disappearance of the word’s geminate feature) means the stinger, fangs, or tail with which the hornet, snake, or scorpion strikes.¹⁹ The word’s direct relationship to poison represents the infiltration of a hostile foreign substance into the body, bringing us back to the same literal characteristics of fever. The link between these two words, fever and poison—and perhaps their shared implication of an anticipation of death—is critical because it draws the bridge between the shared roots of *ḥummā*, *ḥ/m/m* and *ḥ/m/y*, allowing the possible conceptualizations of fever to proliferate into new contexts. In the scorpion poised to strike, brandishing its stinger in the air, all the meanings of *ḥummā* gather together in a single unified image. Thus, fever appears as a double-sided coin: the venomous stinger, on one side, that strikes and releases poison into the body of its victim, tossing them into the throes of death; and on the other side, the

¹⁸ Al-Zabīdī, “*ḥummā/ḥummah*,” vol. 32, 17.

¹⁹ Al-Zabīdī, “*ḥumā/ḥumah*,” vol. 37, 480.

protective stinger that guards the scorpion against those who might tread on it. Akin to the scorpion's stinger, fever entails similar offensive and defensive elements. Fever simultaneously threatens the life of the afflicted while it serves as the body's mechanism of defense. To lay out these contexts we must also look at this new root and its derivatives of protection.

In Arabic, the basic meaning, or essence, of certain three-letter roots overlap and intersect with others. This is the case with roots *ḥ/m/m* and *ḥ/m/y*. Laying out the similarities and differences between these two distinct yet connected roots demonstrates how they inform a semantic understanding of fever. Beginning with their similarities, they both share words that refer to heat, temperature, and anger. However, one distinct meaning associated with *ḥ/m/y* and, as I mention above, intersects with *ḥ/m/m*, is the notion of protection (*ḥimāyah*). The definition provided is *ḥamā aṣ-ṣay'u yāḥmīhi ḥamīyan* (protected, protects, protection of something).²⁰ In addition to protection, the root morphs into words that mean to prohibit, defend, and to guard an object from encroachment, invasion, and attack. The meaning of some words can be as specific as prohibiting a sick person from consuming food, drink, or a harmful substance. While other entries expand on the idea of protection and prohibition to broadly connote notions of refuge (*ḥimā*) and refugee (*ḥamī*). The former was a place of herbage (*kala'*) and pasture, the use of which was prohibited to the public. According to one of the prophetic *ḥadīth*, interpreted by the Muslim scholar al-Shāfi'ī, there is no refuge, of this sort, except for God and his prophet (*lā ḥimā illā lil-lāh wa-li-rasūlihi*). The tradition tells us that

²⁰ Al-Zabīdī, “*ḥ/m/y*,” vol. 37, 477.

nomadic Arabs would use the barking of their dogs to etch out a radius measured by the distance traveled of the dog's barking. Any space within which the dog's barking could be heard was off limits to other herders and travelers, while the individual setting up the boundaries of the refuge/reservation (*ḥimā*) was free to indulge in public land as well.²¹ With *ḥamī*, the reference is to a sick individual in someone else's care.²² This inclusion of a social and therapeutic connection resonates with the word discussed above, *ḥamīm*: a relative or friend protected out of care and concern. The proverbial "sick/protected" individual cited and memorialized in the tradition was 'Āṣim ibn Thābit al-Anṣārī who had fallen in battle.²³ As his corpse lay on the ground, his enemies were unable to reach and decapitate him, because a swarm of hornets protected him with their stingers.

The word we have identified thus far to mean fever, *ḥummā*, appears within two different but interrelated roots of the Arabic language. The purpose of emphasizing this connection is to show how fever simultaneously contains components of poison and cure. The image we are left with is a depiction of poison entering the afflicted body, on the one hand, and as something that provides a vulnerable person and place with reciprocal protection, on the other. Placed next to one another, these diverse but interconnected definitions shed light on how fever operates in Arabic where each letter and in turn each root is part of a complex and pre-existing network of semantic potentialities. From the semantic field mapped above two central semantic networks emerge from the root *ḥ/m/y*. Firstly, there is the associative field of defending, protecting, and expelling—perhaps

²¹ Al-Zabīdī, "*ḥimā*," vol. 37, 477-8.

²² Al-Zabīdī, "*ḥamī*," vol. 37, 477.

²³ Al-Zabīdī, "*ḥamī al-dabr*," vol. 37, 485.

even therapeutically treating. Secondly, there is the field of a foreign body penetrating the victim and inflicting them with a poison that destroys their health. Construed in a more somatic and even medical context we might think of the first element as an antidote, or prescription, and second brings us close to a medical definition of how a fever behaves and can thus be treated homeopathically. Like any other space, fever invades the body which in turn reacts to that invasion of any foreign bodies, be it a virus, infection, or disease. The heat that is generated by white blood cells is a result of the work of antibodies that rush to defend against the invaders and protect the body. If the invaders are expunged, after their temporary inhabitation of the body, and if the body survives the fever, a period of cooling and healing can be anticipated to come after. The semantic map charted above will be referred to throughout the essay to draw associations between the etymology of *ḥummā* alongside the fever in al-Mutanabbī's poem.

1.2 Al-Mutanabbī's Fever Poem

1.2.1 Historical Background and Criticism

Al-Mutanabbī's poem on fever contains several layers of metaphor. The most obvious metaphor is the fever disguised as the beloved. This reversal of the metaphor's internal relational structure within the poem, known as *badī'*, was a style of poetic composition characteristic of al-Mutanabbī and his contemporaries, the *muhdathūn*. In addition to metaphorical depth, the poem is also rooted in the historical context of al-Mutanabbī's biography. Rather than considering the important metaphorical and historical significance, an analysis of fever's pathology in the poem contributes to a

working theoretical framework of fever as narrative. A close reading of the poem uncovers the implicit narrative structure that lies within the notion of fever, one which comprises two major themes that emerge throughout the poem. Firstly, fever and *raḥīl* constitute a *pharmakon*, an antidote (*aḍḍād*) that ambivalently functions as a poison and/or cure depending on viewpoint. Secondly, fever is a liminal space characterized by an erratic back-and-forth motion embodied by al-Mutanabbī's tossing and turning in bed. While fever renders the poet motionless and inebriated, it also allows the poet to imagine the *raḥīl*, which generates movement through flashbacks, visions, and fever dreams. This bipartite theoretical framework of fever structures al-Mutanabbī's poetic narrative. Considered within its historical context and critical reception, al-Mutanabbī's poem can be read closely to unpack the themes of fever as poetic narrative identified above.

According to the poet's biography, al-Mutanabbī writes a poem about a fever "that laid him up in Egypt for a long time."²⁴ Whether material or metaphorical, the fever is at the center of the poem he composed sometime around 960 AD, which is widely recognized as *qaṣīdah al-ḥummā* (the fever poem). Biographers of the poet and literary critics have focused on both the material and metaphorical significance of the fever in the poem. Margaret Larkin acknowledges the praise bestowed upon the poet for his fever poem²⁵ and cites the literary critic al-Qāḍī al-Jurjānī (d.1001) who lauds the poet for his unique and unparalleled description of a fever, extolling the rhetorical capacity of the

²⁴ Margaret Larkin, *Al-Mutanabbi: Voice of the 'Abbasid Poetic Ideal* (Oxford, London: Oneworld Publications, 2008), 76.

²⁵ Larkin, 105.

metaphor (*ikhtara‘a akthar ma‘ānīhā*).²⁶ Ibn Jinnī, a close friend of the poet, was the first literary critic to compose a commentary of al-Mutanabbī’s poetry while he was alive.²⁷ In his commentary of the poet’s fever poem, he identifies the lover that visits al-Mutanabbī in the night as a metaphor for fever.²⁸ Above all, biographers and literary critics were interested in either the historical significance of the fever, and how it relates to al-Mutanabbī’s imprisonment in and escape from Egypt, or the metaphorical capacity of the fever insofar as it related to the poetic motif of the beloved. While both elements contribute significantly to an understanding of the poem, they tend to ignore how the fever figures into the rest of the poem. Also, they neglect to address the semantic value of the term fever external to the poem, as well as the poem’s relationship to the poetic tradition in which al-Mutanabbī was composing. The details of this chapter of al-Mutanabbī’s life contextualize the poem historically.

After leaving his previous patron Sayf al-Dawlah in Aleppo, al-Mutanabbī had since relocated to Fustat and composed poetry under the patronage of Kāfūr, the ruler of Egypt, in 957 CE. However, al-Mutanabbī grew tired of composing poetry for Kāfūr, a

²⁶ Al-Jurjānī admires the poet for exhausting the rhetorical capacity of the fever. Al-Qāḍī al-Jurjānī, *al-Wasāṭah bayna al-Mutanabbī wa-khuṣūmihi* (Cairo: Dār iḥyā’ al-kutub al-‘Arabīyah), 117.

²⁷ Johannes Pedersen mentions the friendship between Ibn Jinnī and the poet. Ibn Jinnī wrote two commentaries on al-Mutanabbī’s *Dīwān*. For more on Ibn Jinnī, see J. Pedersen, “Ibn Djinnī,” *Encyclopedia of Islam*, Brill Online. http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/ibn-djinni-SIM_3144.

²⁸ Ibn Jinnī compares al-Mutanabbī’s fever metaphor to that of an anonymous poet found in *al-Ma‘ānī al-Kabīr*, an Arabic lexicon attributed to Ibn Qutaybah. Abū al-Faṭḥ ‘Uthmān Ibn Jinnī, *al-Faṭḥ al-wahbī ‘alā mushkilāt al-Mutanabbī*, ed. Muḥsin Ghīyāḍ, (Baghdad: Dār al-Ḥurrīyah, 1973), 158-60.

patron whom he did not consider worthy of his praise. Furthermore, Kāfūr refused to confer on the poet the governorship of Sidon he had promised him before.²⁹ Fearing al-Mutanabbī's invectives were he to leave Egypt, Kāfūr effectively places the poet under house arrest, where al-Mutanabbī composes his fever poem. In his two volume biography of the poet, Maḥmūd Muḥammad Shākīr goes as far as to say that certain lines in the poem allude to al-Mutanabbī's actual escape from Egypt two years later around 962 CE.³⁰ Thus, al-Mutanabbī's fever has been interpreted as a reaction to his condition of being held in Egypt against his will.

In a creative literary work that fictively claims to be an authentic autobiographical account of al-Mutanabbī's residence in Egypt, Muḥammad Jibrīl renders history from the poet's perspective.³¹ The account features an abridged reproduction of the fever poem and situates it as the penultimate scene before al-Mutanabbī decides that he has no choice

²⁹ Sidon (Ṣaydā in Arabic) is located in the south of modern day Lebanon. It was an ancient commercial city of the Phoenicians that was captured by the Arabs in 637 CE and reached prominence during the Crusades. In 1920, the city was incorporated into Lebanon under the French mandate. M. Lavergne, "Ṣaydā," *Encyclopedia of Islam*, Brill Online. http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/sayda-SIM_6678. Margaret Larkin speculates that al-Mutanabbī was likely promised the governorship in Sidon. Larkin, 63.

³⁰ Maḥmūd Muḥammad Shākīr, *Kitāb al-Mutanabbī: Risālah fī al-ṭarīq ilā thaqāfatīnā* (Cairo: Sharikat al-Quds lil-Nashr wa al-Tawzī', 1977), 367-369.

³¹ While the account is indisputably inauthentic, Muḥammad Jibrīl postures himself as a historian who has discovered a lost manuscript of al-Mutanabbī's diary and claims to not have changed, added, forged, or tampered with the original manuscript. He asks in the introduction, "Did al-Mutanabbī write what he did from the perspective of an author, in which he narrates the events of his journey to Egypt? Or are his papers merely notes, closer to a chronicle or a diary kept by those concerned with political or intellectual life as those do today?" Muḥammad Jibrīl, *Min awrāq Abī Tayyib al-Mutanabbī* (Cairo: al-Hay'ah al-Miṣrīyah al-Āmah lil-Kitāb, 1988), 9.

but to leave Egypt. In the footnote after the poem, Jibrīl writes, “In the year 348/960 he was afflicted by a fever. These verses are a selection of the poem he wrote describing the fever.”³² The scene after the poem depicts al-Mutanabbī as lamenting his departure from Damascus and his decision to leave Sayf al-Dawlah in the first place. While the authenticity is dubious, this literary work captures another way al-Mutanabbī’s fever poem was received. It was a space in which he negotiated and mediated between his decision to leave Egypt or stay—a dilemma that is staged throughout the verses of the poem and enacted through his affliction with the fever.

1.2.2 The *Rahīl* in the Arabic Poetic Tradition

Fever is central to this essay, but must always be understood in relationship to the *rahīl* of the archetypal *qaṣīdah* (ode) and its development in the Arabic poetic tradition.

³³ Jaroslav Stetkevych identifies the tripartite structure of the *qaṣīdah* that consists of the

³² Jubrīl, 124.

³³ *Rahīl* means “traveling by camel” which derives from the verb *raḥala*, which means, to saddle or mount a camel. In Arabic poetics, it refers to the section between the *nasīb* and the *gharaḍ* of the polythematic *qaṣīdah*. In the pre-Islamic age, the *rahīl* alluded to the hero-poet’s perilous journey into the desert after being separated from the beloved. This section of the *qaṣīdah* included descriptions of the poet’s mount, desert landscape, and other beasts encountered on the journey. In the Umayyad period, the elaborate camel description is replaced with the dangers and hardships encountered on the poet’s journey to curry favor with the patron (*mamdūh*) to whom the poem was addressed. By the time of the Abbasids, the *rahīl* was reduced in length, omitted altogether, or featured original variations. Recent scholarship sheds light on the nature this development and argues that *rahīl* did not disappear from Abbasid poetry, but was transformed to engage meta-poetic commentary that questioned the relationship between poetry and tradition. For more on the *rahīl*, see R. Jacobi, “Raḥīl,” *Encyclopedia of Islam*, Brill Online. http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/rahil-SIM_6194.

following sections: the *nasīb*, in which the poet mourns the loss of the beloved; the *rahīl*, in which the poet sets out on the journey; and the *gharaḍ*, or the purpose of the *qaṣīdah*, which is thematically self-praise, praise of others, or invective.³⁴ The movement from one section of the *qaṣīdah* to the next evokes the poet's body at every stage. The *rahīl* poses the largest threat of the three sections, as the poet encounters harsh physical and psychological conditions that transform the body both physically and symbolically. If the dark hours of the night or the scorching heat of the desert sun is not enough to deter the poet from completing his journey, then the remote wasteland, void of all human contact, except for the trusty camel, endangers their humanity. The poet not only encounters the forces of nature but also risks transforming into an "untamed" wild beast.³⁵ By the same token, fever also transforms the poet into a liminal entity which hangs in the balance between death and recovery. Indeed, the most crucial link between the *rahīl* and fever is their shared liminality.

Suzanne Stetkevych discusses the liminality of the *rahīl* at length in her study of the *qaṣīdah* as a ritual paradigm. By drawing the analogy between the *qaṣīdah* and rite of passage, Stetkevych links the *nasīb* to separation, the *rahīl* to liminality, and the *gharaḍ* to aggregation.³⁶ Upon their departure into the desert, poets enter a liminal stage in which they are detached from a larger social structure and transform into "liminal

³⁴ Jaroslav Stetkevych, *The Zephyrs of Najd: The Poetics of Nostalgia in Classical Arabic Nasīb* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 2.

³⁵ J. Stetkevych, 45.

³⁶ Suzanne Stetkevych, *The Mute Immortals Speak: Pre-Islamic Poetry and the Poetics of Ritual* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 8.

entities” that are betwixt two states: separation and aggregation. According to Stetkevych, drawing on the work of cultural anthropologists Victor Turner and Mary Douglas, liminality is not merely a purgatorial condition, but an anti-societal state that risks the life of the individual and threatens the collective health of society.³⁷ In this case, the liminal subject risks two possible outcomes: death or rebirth. Stetkevych presents Labīd’s poem as the archetypal or “key poem” that epitomizes the ritual paradigm of the *qaṣīdah*.³⁸ If Labīd’s poem was the epitome of the archetypal *qaṣīdah* that signified reaggregation after the journey, then that of al-Shanfarā, the rogue poet (*ṣu’lūk*) of the *jāhiliyah*, signifies the archetypal pattern of the passenger manqué, where the poet is trapped in a perpetual state of liminality.³⁹ However, the *raḥīl* underwent a radical change during the time between the pre-Islamic poets and that of the Abbasids.

Despite changes and developments, the *raḥīl* continued to figure prominently in the Abbasid *qaṣīdah*. The poets who initiated the metapoetic reformation of the *raḥīl* were known as the *muḥdathūn* (modernizers) who are credited for introducing the *badī’* (new) style to Arabic poetry in the early centuries of the Abbasid age.⁴⁰ In her study of

³⁷ S. Stetkevych, 7.

³⁸ Labīd b. Rabī‘ah was a poet from the pre-Islamic era (*al-jāhiliyah*) famous for his *mu‘allaqah*, one of seven, sometimes ten, “hanging odes” that are celebrated as the proverbial origin of the Arabic poetic tradition. For more on Labīd, see C. Brockelmann, “Labīd b. Rabī‘a,” *Encyclopedia of Islam*, Brill Online. http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/labid-b-rabia-SIM_4604.

³⁹ Suzanne Stetkevych contends that both al-Shanfarā and his *qaṣīdah*, *Lāmiyyat al-‘Arab*, “are characterized by an archetypal pattern of perpetual liminality, the passenger manqué.” S. Stetkevych, 157.

⁴⁰ The term *muḥdath*, the singular of *muḥdathūn*, and its association with the term modern, or modernist, should be understood as a literary term, instead of a historical one.

the *muḥdathūn*, Huda Fakhreddine argues that what made the Abbasid poets “modern” was not their ability to compose poetry in the tradition of their *jāhilīyah* (pre-Islamic) ancestors that suited their new urban realities, but rather their self-aware engagement with, and response to, the tradition through metapoetic innovations. Fakhreddine traces the development of the *raḥīl* from the time of the *jāhilīyah* poets to that of the Abbasids. She argues that the *raḥīl* did not disappear from the *qaṣīdah*, despite being deciphered differently and abstracted by the Abbasid poets. She writes:

The Abbasid poets were able to lay bare the functional essence of the *raḥīl* motif. They both understood and explained to their audience the poetic function of the journey section. Moreover, they found in the *raḥīl* motif the potential to sum up and comment on the interaction that takes place in the patron-poet relationship. The *raḥīl* is that very journey every artist sets out on from the moment his or her artistic agency is evoked until the moment he or she receives acknowledgement from an audience.⁴¹

Traditionally, the *raḥīl* section of the *qaṣīdah* described the poet’s perilous journey through the desert. By the time of the Abbasids, however, it had taken on new forms. In some cases, the *raḥīl* was apparently omitted from the *qaṣīdah* altogether, but not without leaving traces of its erasure. According to Fakhreddine, “the *badī‘* project did not

Recent scholarship emphasizes the metapoetical characteristics that lie in the core of the *muḥdath* project of the Abbasid poets. The most important of these characteristics was the composition of poetry that was self-aware of its poetic tradition and self-aware its position in relation to that tradition. For more on the *muḥdathūn*, see Huda J. Fakhreddine, *Metapoesis in the Arabic Tradition: From Modernists to Muḥdathūn* (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

⁴¹ Fakhreddine, 138.

aim to create new forms as much as it aimed to revolutionize the already existing ones, to uncover their inner workings and to expose in them an enduring poetic core.”⁴²

In his article on Ibn al-Rūmī, another Abbasid *muḥdath* poet, Geert Jan van Gelder identifies the poet’s “anti-*raḥīl*” motif in a poem addressed to Aḥmad ibn Thawābah. In the poem, Ibn al-Rūmī does not merely dispense with the *raḥīl* but “rejects his rite of passage” and composes a poem expressing his fear of travel. The journey remains central to the poem while the material *raḥīl* is absent. And instead of Ibn al-Rūmī setting out on the *raḥīl*, he sends the poem off instead:

*He sends his favor on a visit to me
While I do not have to make a difficult journey*

*It travels to him who asks him,
Saving a poor man the trouble of traveling.*⁴³

Ibn al-Rūmī protests the *raḥīl*, but he does so without rebuking the tradition. If Ibn al-Rūmī rejected the *raḥīl* in his poem as part of a mandatory requirement for composing poetry, al-Mutanabbī yearns for and dreams of a *raḥīl* when his immediate circumstances deprive him of one. These developments in the form of the *raḥīl* allowed the liminal stage to be re-envisioned by the Abbasid poets, including al-Mutanabbī. In his fever poem al-Mutanabbī also abstracts the form of the *raḥīl*. The journey, which never manifests in al-Mutanabbī’s poem, is relegated to the poet’s imagination, while the fever itself functions as a *raḥīl* that is internalized within the body of the poet. Reading al-

⁴² Fakhreddine, 202.

⁴³ G. J. H. van Gelder, “The Terrified Traveler: Ibn al-Rūmī’s Anti-*Raḥīl*,” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 27.1 (1996): 40.

Mutanabbī's fever as an abstraction of, or tinkering with, the *rahīl* can be read in line with the innovations of the *muhdathūn* of his day.

1.2.3 Reading Fever in al-Mutanabbī's Poem

In the first verse of the poem, al-Mutanabbī dismisses his two anonymous companions who rebuke him for longing to leave Egypt. Remaining in Egypt entails consequences for the poet that are more severe than their rebuking words:

*He you rebuke is above the offense,
And beyond words is its consequence.*⁴⁴

مَلُومٌ كَمَا يَجِلُّ عَنِ الْمَلَامِ وَوَقَعُ فَعَالِيهِ فَوْقَ الْكَلَامِ⁴⁵

In the opening line, al-Mutanabbī already alludes to the impossible *rahīl*. Referring to himself as *malūm*, al-Mutanabbī positions himself as the recipient of rebuke but only to then subvert the accusation. The *malām*, the rebuke, or the thing for which he is blamed, is divided into speech (*kalām*) and consequence (*waq' fa'ālihi*). According to the commentary, the companions rebuke the poet for two reasons. Firstly, they believe the poet should content himself with the position he holds in Kāfūr's court. Secondly, they fear the illness that might jeopardize the poet's life, as well as Kāfūr's wrath were he to

⁴⁴ The translation of al-Mutanabbī's poem are my own. For another English translation, please see Arthur Wormhoudt, *The Diwan of Abu Tayyib Ahmad ibn al Husain al Mutanabbi*, (Chicago: ABC International Group, 2002).

⁴⁵ 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Barquqī, *Sharḥ Dīwān al-Mutanabbī* (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arabī, 2010), 1:409.

discover al-Mutanabbī's plot to escape. The reference to the consequence here foreshadows both the fever that afflicts the poet and the impossible *raḥīl*.

In the second verse, al-Mutanabbī indulges in self-praise (*fakhr*) when he begins to imagine himself undertaking the *raḥīl*:

*Cast me into the desert with no guide,
My face with no scarf beneath the high noon.*

*For I find relief in them both,
While stopping to rest only exhausts me.*

ذَرَانِي وَالْفَلَاةُ بِلا دَلِيلٍ وَوَجْهِي وَالْهَجِيرَ بِلا لَثَامٍ
فَأَنِّي أَسْتَرِيحُ بِذِي وَهَذَا وَأَتَعَبُ بِالْإِنَاخَةِ وَالْمُقَامِ⁴⁶

Here, al-Mutanabbī responds to his companions by reversing the logic on which their concerns are predicated. Because the perils of the journey have the opposite of the anticipated effect on al-Mutanabbī, he commands his companions to cast him away into the desert, bare and alone; the journey breathes life into the poet, while a motionless state brings him closer to ruin. These opening lines are reminiscent of the *istīqāf* and *wuqūf* in the archetypal *qaṣīdah*, otherwise known as the motif of the ruined abodes. In her analysis of Imru' al-Qays's *mu'allaqah*, Suzanne Stetkevych highlights the dialogic exchange of *istīqāf* and *wuqūf* between the poet and his companions in the first and fifth verses of the *nasīb*, respectively. In the *istīqāf* Imru' al-Qays says to his companions:

*Halt, two friends, and we will weep
For the memory of one beloved*

⁴⁶ Al-Mutanabbī, 409.

And an abode at Siq̄ al-Liwā
Between al-Dakhūl, then Hawmal.⁴⁷

قِفَا نَبِكَ مِنْ ذِكْرِي حَبِيبٍ وَمَنْزِلٍ بِسِقْطِ اللَّوَى بَيْنَ الدَّخُولِ فَحَوْمَلٍ⁴⁸

Here, Imru' al-Qays commands his two companions to halt (*istīqāf*) and weep over the ruined abode of the beloved. In the *wuqūf* of verse five that follows, the companions respond to the poet's command:

My companions, halting there
Their mounts for me,

Say, do not perish out of grief,
Control yourself!⁴⁹

وُقُوفًا بِهَا صَحْبِي عَلَيَّ مَطِيئُهُمْ يَقُولُونَ لَا تَهْلِكِ أَسَى وَتَجَمَّلِ⁵⁰

In the *wuqūf*, the companions obey the poet's command but then admonish him for weeping over the ruined abode. Stetkevych lines these verses up side-by-side to emphasize the poet's final response in the next verse:

Surely my cure is tears
Poured forth;

Then, at a worn-out trace is there
A place for weeping?⁵¹

⁴⁷ S. Stetkevych, *The Mute Immortals Speak*, 249.

⁴⁸ Aḥmad al-Amīn al-Shanqīṭī, "Mu'allaqat Imru' al-Qays," *Sharḥ al-Mu'allaqāt al-ashr*, ed. Muḥammad 'Abd al-Qādir al-Fāḍilī (Beirut: al-Maktabah al-'Aṣrīyah, 2008), 23.

⁴⁹ Suzanne Stetkevych, *The Mute Immortals Speak*, 250.

⁵⁰ Imru' al-Qays, 24.

وَأَنَّ شِفَائِي عِبْرَةٌ مُهْرَاقَةٌ فَهَلْ عِنْدَ رَسْمِ دَارِسٍ مِنْ مُعَوَّلٍ⁵²

The poet who seeks consolation finds relief in the act of mourning and shedding tears. Suzanne Stetkevych argues that the act of shedding tears is akin to shedding blood, or completing blood vengeance, which will cure the poet's condition.⁵³

The exchange between both poets, Imru' al-Qays and al-Mutanabbī, and their respective companions share much in common. Both poets halt their companions but for different reasons. Instead of halting his companions to mourn over vacant abodes, al-Mutanabbī implores his friends to recognize the impossibility of the *rahīl*. Like the shedding tears/shedding blood is the cure for Imru' al-Qays' condition, al-Mutanabbī longs for a *rahīl* to cure him of his. Additionally, several linguistic similarities insist upon the connection between the two poems. For example, both poets address two companions using the dual form in the imperative, a recurring feature of the *nasīb*. Also, while there is no direct reference to the physical abode in al-Mutanabbī's opening verses, the poet does allude to them in his use of the imperative *dharā*. The root of the verb is *dh/r/w* not only connotes dispersing, scattering, and tossing, but also, sheltering and protecting. For instance, *dharān* is "a shelter, or anything by which one is protected."⁵⁴ Al-Mutanabbī commands his companions to release him into the desert because, like an abode, it will provide him with shelter and protect him from danger.

⁵¹ S. Stetkevych, *The Mute Immortals Speak*, 250.

⁵² Imru' al-Qays, 24.

⁵³ S. Stetkevych, *The Mute Immortals Speak*, 260-61.

⁵⁴ Edward William Lane, "dharān" *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, vol. 1 (Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1968), 965.

What allowed al-Mutanabbī to tinker with familiar motifs such as the ruined abodes was the gradual development of the archetypal *qaṣīdah* thanks to *muḥdathūn*, like Abū Tammām, “who were preoccupied with the poetic function of these inherited motifs.”⁵⁵ Fakhreddine acknowledges the extent to which this transformation influenced the compositions of poets like al-Mutanabbī and other Abbasid poets:

The motif of ruined abodes has gone through a process of transformation that gradually took it from being a material reflection of a recurrent scene that might have existed in reality to a poetic metaphor and then eventually to an abstract concept to which a poet can refer in the assumption that his readers and listeners understand the multilayered significance.⁵⁶

Al-Mutanabbī’s abstraction of the ruined abodes as the desert itself allows us to draw connections between the opening verses of the fever poem and the tradition in which al-Mutanabbī composes his poetry. The abode over which al-Mutanabbī weeps is the *raḥīl*, the object of loss that is simultaneously the perilous desert journey and the solution to his predicament in Egypt, his “cure.” If shedding tears over the vacant abode alludes to the blood vengeance Imru’ al-Qays must carry out to cure his condition, then the *raḥīl* is al-Mutanabbī’s antidote for his static and imprisoned state in Egypt.

Though the object of al-Mutanabbī’s poem is the *raḥīl*, the desert journey never unfolds or manifests. He mourns the impossibility of the *raḥīl*. Instead, a fever afflicts al-Mutanabbī and leaves him bedridden. Before the fever is described in the poem, al-Mutanabbī lists the symptoms of his illness, that is his condition in Egypt:

I settled in the land of Egypt, and backward

⁵⁵ Fakhreddine, 131.

⁵⁶ Fakhreddine, 131.

nor forward did my camel move me.

*Of me the bed has tired, when before
Resting my side, for its annual session, would nauseate me!*

*Few are my visitors, sick is my heart,
many the jealous, impossible my goal.*

*Sick body, unable to stand,
completely wasted with no wine at hand.*

تَخُبُّ بِي الْمَطِيَّ وَلَا أَمَامِي	أَقَمْتُ بِأَرْضِ مِصْرَ فَلَا وَرَائِي
يَمَلُّ لِقَاءَهُ فِي كُلِّ عَامٍ	وَمَلَّنِي الْفِرَاشُ وَكَانَ جَنبِي
كَثِيرُ حَاسِدِي صَعْبٌ مَرَامِي	قَلِيلٌ عَائِدِي سَقَمٌ فُؤَادِي
شَدِيدُ السُّكْرِ مِنْ غَيْرِ الْمُدَامِ ⁵⁷	عَلِيلُ الْجِسْمِ مُمْتَنِعُ الْقِيَامِ

The verb al-Mutanabbī uses to disclose his geographical location in the poem is the past tense *aqamtu* (I took up residence). In the third verse, al-Mutanabbī says that *muqām* (residing or standing still) exhausts him. Thus, al-Mutanabbī sets the tone of his listlessness and malaise in Egypt. The use of the past tense verb transports the listener or reader back to when the poet completed his last journey and arrived to Egypt. Since then, however, the poet has not moved an inch, in any direction, on his camel. Indeed, the remaining three verses in this excerpt exude the sense of listlessness, nausea, and ennui. Al-Mutanabbī unfolds a list of ills that plague him. These ills are neither psychological (lonely, estranged, homesick) only, nor are they simply political (goals and recognition),

⁵⁷ Al-Mutanabbī, 411.

but they are also physical and bodily. In fact, every verse evokes the body, as when he mentions the lack of physical human contact (my visitors are few) the malaise is felt through the heart. In the verse after, his sick body is incapable of standing. Even the experience of intoxication, that has been elevated to sublime magnitude by poets like Abū Nuwās, is rendered here as a moment of dull and dry passion, void of life and pleasure.⁵⁸ And finally, he refers to his aims as *marām*, the plural of *marmā*, literally the target toward which a projectile is thrown. While commentators have understood this to refer to al-Mutanabbī's political prospects of becoming the governor of Sidon, another interpretation can be understood al-Mutanabbī's ultimate goal: the *raḥīl*. Al-Mutanabbī first hints at this in the opening verses when he orders his companions to cast him into the desert to take the journey. Here, al-Mutanabbī emphasizes the *raḥīl* again, but this time as his goal—the target which he hopes his body will reach.

All of these complaints, or symptoms, take place on the bed that al-Mutanabbī mentions in the following verses. The bed is critical insofar as it replaces the camel as the poet's mode of transportation, his vessel. Before taking up residence in Egypt, al-Mutanabbī says he would sleep in his bed only once a year. Now, he is so frequently

⁵⁸ Abū Nuwās (AH 139 or 140/756-8 CE-AH 198-200/813-5 CE) was best known for his *khamarīyāt* (songs on wine), or Bacchic poetry. Ewald Wagner points out that “though he was not the first one to compose *khamarīyāt*, it was he who not only exhausted the whole wealth of its themes—colour, sparkling, age, effect on the drinker, the wine-skin, the cup, the cup-bearer (*sāqī*), the tavern and its keeper, the monastery and its novices, the garden and its flowers—but also gave epic or dramatic descriptions of carousals.” Ewald Wagner, “Abū Nuwās,” *Encyclopedia of Islam*, Brill Online. http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-3/abu-nuwas-SIM_0085. For more on Abū Nuwās, see also Philip F. Kennedy, *Abu Nuwas: A Genius of Poetry* (Oxford, UK: Oneworld Publications, 2005).

bedridden that bed has become sick of him. Al-Mutanabbī employs hyperbole to situate his past state of motion in diametrical opposition to his current state of fraught stasis. The only motion, or movement, that can take ever take place is in al-Mutanabbī's bed.

When the fever appears in the poem, one imagines al-Mutanabbī bedridden. In these verses, the fever is depicted through metaphors traditionally associated with the beloved. This way, fever is concealed beneath a layer of erotic imagery.

*My visitor appears looking bashful
She visits only under cover of darkness.*

*I made her a bed
But she refused and slept in my bones.*

*My skin stretched tight to fit us both,
Filling it with all sorts of illness.*

*When she left me, she washed me
As though we were addicted to sacred ritual*

*Or the dawn had banished her, and tears
Streamed down her face*

وَزَائِرْتِي كَأَنَّ بِهَا حَيَاءً فَلَيْسَ تَزُورُ إِلَّا فِي الظَّلَامِ

بَدَلْتُ لَهَا المَطَارِفَ والحَشَايَا فَعَاثَتْهَا وَبَاتَتْ فِي عِظَامِي

يَضِيقُ الجِلْدُ عَن نَفْسِي وَعَنْهَا فَتُوسِعُهُ بِأَنْوَاعِ السَّقَامِ

إِذَا مَا فَارَقْتَنِي غَسَّلْتَنِي كَأَنَّ عَاكِفَانَ عَلَى حَرَامِ

أُرَاقِبُ وَقْتَهَا مِنْ غَيْرِ شَوْقٍ مُرَاقِبَةَ المَشُوقِ المُسْتَهَامِ

وَيَصْدُقُ وَعَدُّهَا وَالصِّدْقُ شَرُّهُ
 إِذَا أَلْقَاكَ فِي الْكُرْبِ الْعِظَامِ
 أَبْنَتَ الدَّهْرِ عِنْدِي كُلُّ بِنْتٍ
 فَكَيْفَ وَصَلْتِ أَنْتِ مِنَ الرِّحَامِ
 جَرَحَتْ مُجْرَحًا لَمْ يَبْقَ فِيهِ
 مَكَانٌ لِلسُّيُوفِ وَلَا السِّهَامِ⁵⁹

Metaphorically disguised as a night-visiting mistress, any direct mention of fever is undetectable in this section of the poem. Instead, the fever/beloved hides behind several facades of anthropomorphic femininity: feminine nouns (*zā'irah*, *bint*), third-person feminine verbs (*tazūr*, *'āfat*, etc.), and the third-person feminine direct object suffix *-hā*. At first, it is not obvious that al-Mutanabbī is describing a fever. Read literally, these verses could be interpreted as an original description of the beloved, a motif traditionally found in the *nasīb*.⁶⁰ For several reasons, however, this is not the case here. Firstly, the description of the beloved in the *nasīb* usually occurs in the opening verses of the *qaṣīdah*. Secondly, the description is anything but flattering. For example, the “visitor” inflicts excruciating pain onto al-Mutanabbī’s body, filling him with disease and illness. Not only does the poet dread the hour of its appointment, which it unfailingly makes, but

⁵⁹ Al-Mutanabbī, 411-12.

⁶⁰ Hoda Fakhreddine describes the *nasīb* as a space in the poem over which the ruins of the monumental past are mourned. “The classical Arabic *qaṣīdah* always begins with the conventional prelude known as the *nasīb*, which has various motifs or subthemes. These various motifs are all means by which the poet reflects upon and reacts to his relationship with a lost past. They range from standing upon the traces of a deserted campsite (*aṭlāl*), to remembering the departing caravan (*za'n*), to conjuring up the ghost of the departed beloved (*ṭayf al-khayāl*). No matter what the eventual purpose or message of the archetypal *qaṣīdah*, it always begins with this flirtation with the past, this courting of memories and loss,” 95.

also he refers to it as *bint al-dahr*, a calamity that found its way to the poet. Thirdly, the erotic description can be read as the ultimate symptom on al-Mutanabbī's list of symptoms in the verses leading up to the description. And finally, the commentators unanimously agree that al-Mutanabbī employs the imagery and motif of the beloved to depict a recurring fever that afflicts him in the night. Combined with the consensus in the commentary (*sharḥ*), the evidence of the poem suggests that al-Mutanabbī is describing a fever using the language of the beloved.

The arrival of the fever signifies both an erotic encounter and a violent struggle. Erotic imagery is juxtaposed against images of illness, disease, and dismay. This struggle creates the image of oscillation, as al-Mutanabbī tosses and turns in the bed: his skin constricts and contracts as the fever spreads; it penetrates his body when he moves to make space; it arrives in the night and leaves in the morning. This back and forth movement is depicted as an erotic ritual that elicits sweat from his pores, leaving him soaked with both the tears of the beloved and the water used to bathe after sexual intercourse. Finally, al-Mutanabbī curses the fever for leaving his body in shambles. From this imagery, it is clear the poet is in the throes of fever. The image of oscillation, the back and forth struggle between the poet and the fever, takes place on the poet's bed. After all, tossing and turning is the only type of movement, or rather a painful and immobilized journey, that he is able to make in his ill and fevered condition. Instead of riding his trusty camel, the poet lies in his sickbed. Rather than crossing the expansive desert, the poet tosses and turns, from one side to the other. In her discussion on al-Shanfarā's perpetual liminality, Suzanne Stetkevych is the first to draw the link between

the metaphor of fever and the *rahīl*. She points out that al-Shanfarā’s incessant return to raid his fellow tribesmen is expressed by the verb “*āda*,” which means both “to return and to visit the sick repeatedly.”⁶¹ This incessant return, which also stands for the anxieties that unfailingly visit upon the rogue poet in his exilic liminality, behaves like a fever:

These attendants are likened to a quartan fever, an often fatal form of malaria in which the fever returns regularly (every fourth day) and with increasing intensity, leaving the victim each time more exhausted and closer to death—a particularly fitting metaphor for the passenger *manqué*.⁶²

In line with this observation, along with Fakhreddine’s metapoetic analysis of Abbasid poetry, al-Mutanabbī’s recurring fever also implies a kind of *rahīl* in the poem. Drawing this link between the fever and *rahīl* is critical to understanding the liminal spaces in the poem.

Thus, the description of the fever in this section of the poem reveals the fever’s liminality as transitory space that endangers the life of the passenger, in this case, the poet. Traditionally, the *rahīl* or the journey that formulaically appears in the archetypal *qaṣīdah* has also been identified as a liminal phase by scholars of pre-modern Arabic literature. The *rahīl* depicts the poet as crossing the expansive desert wasteland on his camel or horse, in order to reach his patron and rejoin human society. While the *rahīl*, as desert journey, does not manifest in al-Mutanabbī’s poem, a fever does. Fever, as liminal stage between life and death, threatens the body like the *rahīl*. At the end of the fever, if

⁶¹ S. Stetkevych, 154.

⁶² S. Stetkevych, 154.

the illness is expunged, and if the body survives the trial of fever, a period of cooling and healing can be anticipated to come after.

In order to demonstrate the liminality of fever, and complete the connection between fever and *raḥīl* closer, fever should also be understood as recovery. Drawing on the etymology of fever, death and protection are paired. This image is best illustrated by the scorpion's tail (*ḥummā/hummat al-'aqrab*) which functions to inject the victim with deadly poison and to protect the scorpion from predators—the difference is a matter of perspective. In the poem, death and protection also gather together in *raḥīl*. Again, Fakhreddine clarifies that the *raḥīl* “serves as a transition from [arrested development] to the reaffirmation or reestablishment of social bonds.”⁶³ By the same token, fever is a liminal stage that transitions the patient/passenger from sickness to health. But like the *raḥīl*, recovery/aggregation is never guaranteed.

In al-Mutanabbī's case, the actual *raḥīl*, the setting out on the desert journey functions as a cure to his ill and fevered condition. The first hint of the presence of this pair is in the erotic encounter with the fever. Upon her departure, the poet is left with sweat dripping from his pores. The sweat is depicted as the tears of the beloved who cries when separated from her lover. The sweat that pours out from al-Mutanabbī's skin is not only a sign of sickness but a sign of cleansing and purification. It is through the symptoms of the fever, primarily the exuding of water that indicates a healthy reaction to the overheating of the body off sets the images of disease, illness, and suffering.

⁶³ Fakhreddine, 134.

Furthermore, al-Mutanabbī searches for a cure in the poem. A physician tries to diagnose the nature of the illness:

*The Physician tells me: you must have eaten something
And your illness is in your provisions and libations.*

يَقُولُ لِي الطَّبِيبُ أَكَلْتَ شَيْئًا وَدَاؤُكَ فِي شَرَابِكَ وَالطَّعَامِ⁶⁴

The physician’s diagnosis, that his sickness is related to his diet, reflects the medical knowledge of fever in circulation during al-Mutanabbī’s time. The physician mentioned in the verse evokes the personage of Ibn Māsawayh, a predecessor of Ibn Sīnā, both famous physicians who composed separate taxonomies of fever during the Abbasid age.⁶⁵ In his Ibn Sīnā divides fevers into a variety categories: original and accidental fever (*ḥummā maraḍ wa-ḥummā ‘araḍ*); hectic fever (*ḥummā diqq*); humoral fever (*ḥummā ḥalat*); and ephemeral fever (*ḥummā yawm*).⁶⁶ In many instances, a patient’s diet is at the root of their affliction with fever and as a result also holds the key to their recovery. For example, Ibn Sīnā states that ephemeral fever can be caused by “eating

⁶⁴ Al-Mutanabbī, 413.

⁶⁵ Abū Zakrīyā’ Yuḥannā ibn Māsawayh (d. AH 243/857 CE) was a famous physician and served four Abbasid Caliphs in his lifetime. He composed a number of medical monographs in Arabic including his *Book of Fevers (Kitāb al-Ḥummayāt)*, the most relevant to this essay. Though he was not alive when al-Mutanabbī composed his poem, he was “the most typical representatives of the science of his period. His work influenced Ibn Sīnā (AH 370/980 CE-AH 428/1037 CE), also referred to as Avicenna, who also composed a taxonomy of fever in his *al-Qānūn fī al-ṭibb (The Cannon of Medicine)*. For more, see J.C. Vadet, “Ibn Māsawayh,” *Encyclopedia of Islam*, Brill Online. http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/ibn-masawayh-SIM_3289, and A.M. Goichon, “Ibn Sīnā,” Brill Online. http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/ibn-sina-COM_0342.

⁶⁶ Gerrit Bos, *Ibn al-Jazzār on Fevers* (London: Routledge, 2011), 4.

heat-producing foods or drinks” and its cure is to “increase the intake of cold-producing foods and drinks,” such as “tamarind.”⁶⁷ As al-Mutanabbī has been hinting all along, however, the cure is sometimes in the poison. This verse, and the mention of *dā’*, reminds us of Abū Nuwās’ poem on wine that was both cure and poison as well. The infamous verse reads:

*Quit your rebuke, your rebuke is temptation
And heal me with that which is the illness.*

دَع عَنْكَ لُومِي فَإِنَّ اللَّوْمَ إِغْرَاءٌ وَدَاوَنِي بِالتِّي كَانَتْ هِيَ الدَّاءُ⁶⁸

For Abū Nuwās, the illness, or the poison, is the wine for which he is being rebuked by his companions and contemporaries. He orders them to quit their rebuking because it has the opposite effect insofar as it tempts him to indulge his desire to consume wine. Amusingly, he plays on this reverse psychology and orders his companions to cure/heal him with that which is poison, in other words the wine, if they truly wanted him to quit drinking. In other words, the cure to his alcoholism is to be offered more to drink, because being rebuked for drinking makes him want to drink more. The parallels between this opening line and that of al-Mutanabbī are remarkably similar. Both poets are blamed or rebuked for pursuing desires that their companions have deemed harmful and dangerous. Furthermore, both poets view the poison to simultaneously offer the cure for their condition. Al-Mutanabbī turns down the physician’s prescription and reveals what he thinks to be the cure.

⁶⁷ Ibn Sīnā, *al-Qānūn fī al-ṭibb*, vol. 4 (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir), 1175.

⁶⁸ Abū Nuwās, *Dīwān Abī Nuwās* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1962), 7.

*But his practice does not teach him I am a thoroughbred
My body atrophies if it sits idly in the stable.*

وَمَا فِي طَبِّهِ أَنِّي جَوَادٌ
أَضْرَّ بِجِسْمِهِ طَوْلُ الْجِمَامِ⁶⁹

Like Abū Nuwās, al-Mutanabbī shows confidence in that he knows what is best for his body. His response to the physician echoes that to his companions at the beginning of the poem when he tells them that “he is above blame” and orders them to “cast” him into the desert. For al-Mutanabbī, the advice from his companions, and the physician’s orders, will not cure him from a deep seated exilic dilemma that stems from his being in Egypt. Nearing the end of the poem, al-Mutanabbī recalls the *rahīl*, and how it will save him from his condition.

*O will my hand ever know the touch
that manages the reins or the tether?*

*Should I risk what I desire on a camel
whose bridle is silvered with spittle?*

*Perhaps I will heal my chest’s boiling
with a journey or a lance or the sword.*

أَلَا يَا لَيْتَ شَعَرَ يَدِي أَتْمَسِي
تَصْرَفُ فِي عِنَانٍ أَوْ زِمَامِ
وَهَلْ أُرْمِي هَوَايَ بِرَاقِصَاتِ
مُحَلَّاتِ الْمَقَاوِدِ بِاللُّغَامِ
فَرُبَّمَا شَفَيْتُ غَلِيلَ صَدْرِي
بِسَيْرٍ أَوْ قَنَاةٍ أَوْ حُسَامِ⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Al-Mutanabbī, 413.

⁷⁰ Al-Mutanabbī, 412-13.

Here, al-Mutanabbī expresses a nostalgic desire to undertake the *raḥīl*, despite its absence from the poem itself. Instead, the fever creates the possibility to envisage the journey taking place. Reading the verses that follow the fever’s description above as an imagined *raḥīl*, or a fever dream, if you will, reveals that fever is what creates the conditions for the possibility to imagine the *raḥīl*. Again, the reference to throwing or casting is evoked in the use of *armī*, to throw, which is made several times in the poem. In the context here of gambling, al-Mutanabbī contemplates over whether embarking on the journey is worth the risk or not. In the last verse of this excerpt, al-Mutanabbī weighs out the benefits of departing and says that the “*sayr*, *qanāh*, and *husām*” (journey, lance, sword) will heal “the boiling in his chest.” These three items combined construct the image of the *raḥīl*, in which the poet embarks on the journey armed and ready to fend off the dangers he might encounter along the way. In this way, the *raḥīl*, which is both the fever that afflicts al-Mutanabbī’s body, and the space in which he imagines the journey that will resolve his condition, functions both as the poison that harms his body, and the antidote that will cure his illness. The illness which on the surface appears to be the fever is actually something else. Al-Mutanabbī not only recognizes the distinction between the fever and the illness, and in effect, fever’s duality as poison and cure but ends the poem on this note; the fever is a response to the poet’s predisposed condition of stagnancy and stillness, the cure to which is the journey. He says:

*I am ill, not my forbearance,
I am fevered, not my resolve!*

*If I were to recover I would not remain,
I would slip away from one death only to fall into another*

*Enjoy wakefulness and sleep
but expect not sleep beneath the gravestone*

*The meaning of the third state differs
from the meaning of sleep and wakefulness*

فَإِنْ أَمْرَضَ فَمَا مَرِضَ إِصْطِبَارِي وَإِنْ أَحْمَمَ فَمَا حُمَّ إِعْتِرَامِي
وَإِنْ أَسْلَمَ فَمَا أَبْقَى وَكَلِنَ سَلِمْتُ مِنَ الْحِمَامِ إِلَى الْحِمَامِ
تَمَتَّعَ مِنْ سُهَادٍ أَوْ رُقَادٍ وَلَا تَأْمُلْ كَرِيَّ تَحْتَ الرِّجَامِ
فَإِنَّ لِثَالِثِ الْحَالِيْنَ مَعْنَى سِوَى مَعْنَى إِنْتِبَاهِكَ وَالْمَنَامِ⁷¹

Despite the warnings of physicians and companions, remaining in Egypt implies a worse fate than undertaking the *rahīl* for al-Mutanabbī. Remaining would provide no consolation even if he were to recover because even recovery implies death. But even in death there is no recovery because natural states of sleep and wakefulness do not compare to death. In other words, al-Mutanabbī's fevered state, that which traps him inside a liminal space between sleep and wakefulness, can only be remedied by the *rahīl*. Likewise, remaining in Egypt implies false recovery and death, whereas embarking on the *rahīl* implies true recovery and life. What is remarkable, however, is that the duality of life and death, poison and cure, is generated by the same source: the fever. Though the

⁷¹ Al-Mutanabbī, 413-14.

fever is responsible for his physical condition, it is also the space in which the *raḥīl* is imagined.

This is precisely the same duality that emerged in the semantic map of *ḥummā*. The semantic map illustrates how *ḥummā* simultaneously links together two separate chains of significations distinguished by two separate, but related, roots: *ḥ/m/m* and *ḥ/m/y*. Now, by linking these two chains of significations to al-Mutanabbī's poem, fever is not only simultaneously harmful/poisonous and curative/protective, but also alternatively so. Stating that fever is simultaneously and alternatively poison and/or cure, shifting from poison to cure and then cure to poison, emphasizes the repeated back and forth movement, that is also depicted in al-Mutanabbī's tossing and turning in the bed. Not only is a kind of *raḥīl* enacted in the poet's tossing and turning, in response to physical pain and distress, but the purification and aggregation that is promised at the end of the *raḥīl* is already in the works. The *ḥimām* (sweat) exudes from al-Mutanabbī's pores, as he is locked in combat and sexual intercourse with fever, signifies the beginning of recovery. It is the sweat that cleanses, purifies, and cools the body. While the *ḥimām* is a symptom of fever's ills, threatening death, it is also a sign that the fever is at work, purifying and cleansing the body of its viral and bacterial afflictions. However, the fever's therapeutic potential does not absolve the *raḥīl*, the actual journey, of its own dangers and liminality. Instead, it is a reminder of the repeated shifting nature of the fever/*raḥīl* between the duality of poison and cure, life and death. This duality is best illustrated by the model of ambivalence that is central to *pharmakon*. Only the word

“ambivalence” can capture the “play” of the *pharmakon*. Fever, like the *pharmakon*, is also ambivalent.

1.3 Fever as *Pharmakon*

In *Dissemination*, Derrida argues against any translation that erases the ambivalence of the Greek term *pharmakon*, which simultaneously and alternatively means poison and/or remedy.⁷² Derrida deconstructs the archive of the term *pharmakon* as it appears in the authoritative French translation of Plato’s *Phaedrus* by Léon Robin. There, Derrida takes issue with the translation of *pharmakon* into “remedy” because it precludes access to the *pharmakon*’s entire chain of significations:

When a word inscribes itself as the citation of another sense of the same word, when the textual center-stage of the word *pharmakon*, even while it means remedy, cites, re-cites, and makes legible that which *in the same word* signifies, in another spot and on a different level of the stage, *poison* (for example, since that [is] not the only other thing *pharmakon* means), the choice of only one of these renditions by the translator has its first effect the neutralization of the citational play, of the ‘anagram,’ and, in the end quite simply of the very textuality of the translated text.⁷³

Derrida’s deconstruction of the *pharmakon* reveals the productive ambivalence of its meaning.⁷⁴ By liberating the *pharmakon* from its reductive and impotent mistranslation, he regains its “ambivalence” or “play” that permits it to shift back and forth between

⁷² Derrida, *Dissemination*, 70.

⁷³ Derrida, *Dissemination*, 98.

⁷⁴ Ambivalence is employed here as opposed to ambiguous. While ambiguous implies uncertainty or lack of clarity, ambivalence emphasizes how an object can be alternatively and simultaneously one thing or another. Through a model of ambivalence, it can be understood things can be themselves and other things at the same time.

remedy and poison.⁷⁵ Comparing al-Mutanabbī's fever to the *pharmakon*, highlighting both their differences and similarities, traces a web of significations within *ḥummā*.

In the *Phaedrus*, Plato puts writing on trial. The text recreates a conversation between Socrates and Phaedrus wherein the latter recites a speech, previously composed by Lysias, using a written manuscript. Because Phaedrus had not committed the speech to memory, and relied on writing instead, Socrates compares the written manuscript to a *pharmakon* (remedy/poison).⁷⁶ According to Derrida, the interplay between poison and remedy in the *pharmakon* is critical to comprehending Socrates' enchanting wordplay, and the complexity of Plato's diatribe against writing.

Writing is a *pharmakon* insofar as it is external and supplementary, to memory, knowledge, and truth.⁷⁷ In other words, writing is not memory, truth, or knowledge. It only mimics these things. However, writing can either support or corrupt memory, depending on the viewpoint. Socrates illustrates the *pharmakon*'s duality of remedy and poison through the myth of the Egyptian god Theuth and his encounter with the Egyptian king of gods, Thamus. In their encounter, Theuth presents the king with the invention of writing and proclaims it is a "recipe (*pharmakon*) for both memory and wisdom" and "will make the Egyptians wiser and will improve their memories."⁷⁸ However, the king refuses the invention and reverses the logic of the *pharmakon* as remedy, and recasts it

⁷⁵ Foreground play, ambivalence, and difference. Of course, for Derrida, here and elsewhere, difference is the free play among the alternating substances. The alternating free-play of the difference.

⁷⁶ Derrida, *Dissemination*, 70-1.

⁷⁷ Derrida, *Dissemination*, 105.

⁷⁸ Derrida, *Dissemination*, 75.

into the *pharmakon* as a poison that “will produce forgetfulness in the souls of those who have learned it because they will not need to exercise their memories [...] So it’s not a remedy for memory, but for reminding.”⁷⁹ This myth serves as the foundation for Socrates’ own argument against writing.

Through this myth, Socrates demonstrates how writing, as *pharmakon*, is a poison disguised as a remedy. Plato, whom Derrida argues is suspicious of the *pharmakon*, insists that there is no such thing as a harmless remedy because the “*pharmakon* can never be simply beneficial.”⁸⁰ The *pharmakon* is categorized under the same class of things that can be good and bad in the *Protagoras*; the *pharmakon* sits along side *hubris* and the act of relieving an itch by rubbing:

This type of painful pleasure, linked as much to the malady as to its treatment, is a *pharmakon* in itself. It partakes of both good and ill, of the agreeable and the disagreeable. Or rather, it is within its mass that these oppositions are able to sketch themselves out.⁸¹

Fever, like the *pharmakon*, also possesses a duality of both good and ill; the pain it inflicts on the body also signifies a natural process of purification and treatment of the illness. However, fever differs from the *pharmakon* in a fundamental respect. For Plato is also suspicious of the *pharmakon* because of its artificiality. The *pharmakon* does not only interfere with “natural life”, but it also intervenes in the “natural life” and “normal development” of disease. Fever differs from the *pharmakon* in that it is not external to the body, but rather an internal and autoimmune response that originates from the body. As

⁷⁹ Derrida, *Dissemination*, 102.

⁸⁰ Derrida, *Dissemination*, 99.

⁸¹ Derrida, *Dissemination*, 99.

with al-Mutanabbī, the fever is a bodily response, disguised as a night visitor, to a state or condition of malaise that also originates from within the body. And in this respect, fever is a “natural” intervention and a “normal development” of the disease. Despite its natural and internal origin, however, the *raḥīl*, which never manifests in the poem other than as imagined by the poet in his fevered state, could be understood as external, as a prescription to al-Mutanabbī’s condition, one that will put a stop to his fever. Viewed in this way, the fever does in fact become a *pharmakon* in Socrates’ sense. Thus, the fever is a liminal space even in relationship to the *pharmakon*. But the imagination of the *raḥīl*, that results from the fever, fills that gap.

Derrida does not stop there. So far, he demonstrates that *pharmakon* is not just remedy but also poison. However, he continues follow the chain of significations to show that *pharmakon* can be re-conceptualized as a remedy if one only switches the viewpoint from that of Plato aimed toward the Sophists. In the case of the Sophists, writing is indeed a remedy, or a drug, for their shortcomings in memory, knowledge, and truth. He says, “writing is considered a consolation, a compensation, a remedy for sickly speech.”⁸² But of course, Derrida goes even further. Now taking a new viewpoint, once again, but this time faced toward Socrates (is Plato the onlooker?), Derrida argues that *logos*, Socrates’ most valued quality, is itself a *pharmakon*—a philosophical prescription that remedies “bad” *logos*: Derrida makes the connection exact, saying that “the Socratic *pharmakon* also acts like venom, like the bite of a poisonous snake. And Socrates’ bite is

⁸² Derrida, *Dissemination*, 115.

worse than a snake's since its traces invade the soul.⁸³ Derrida ends the chapter with a mention of another material and natural, albeit external, *pharmakon*. The hemlock that put Socrates to death shifts the vantage point on the *pharmakon*, yet once again, but this time, it seems, in favor of writing.

There are two sorts of alternations associated with the *pharmakon*: one is the self and other, and second is viewpoint on that dyad. It is paradoxical, yet not impossible, to say that there is a journey and there is no journey. Although, how the difference is experienced outweighs the alternation itself. As Derrida argues, point of view determines the substance of the *pharmakon*. And it is also point of view that determines the substance of fever. Al-Mutanabbī—who has already been shown to be tinkering with the form of the *raḥīl* in the *qaṣīdah*—exercises his point of view on what is poison and what is cure, what is *raḥīl* and what is not. Thus, it is his point of view that links poison to cure and fever to journey. The ambivalence of fever in al-Mutanabbī's poem reveals a repetitious and erratic narrative pattern. In metapoetic terms, the *raḥīl* figures into the poem also as commentary on the form and structure of the traditional *qaṣīdah*. This innovation of the *raḥīl* reflects a narrative pattern that is not rooted in the archetypal form of the *qaṣīdah*, but rather in the pathology of fever. With the prompting of this admired and influential poem, a narrative pattern emerges, one that will appear with nearly identical patterning in other genres of literature, such as the contemporary Arabic novel.

⁸³ Derrida, *Dissemination*, 118.

Fever in Lebanese Civil War Fiction

2.1 Hudā Barakāt's *Sayyidī wa-Ḥabībī*: Narrative Structuring of Fever

In *Sayyidī*, fever afflicts the novel's protagonist while he is on a boat crossing the Mediterranean. Leaving Lebanon for the first time, Wadī' flees the country to escape from Lebanese militia groups attempting to assassinate him for his involvement in the murder of a weapons and drug dealer. Having built his own enterprise from the narcotics and weapons trade during the Lebanese civil war, Wadī' is forced to leave everything behind and escape Cyprus with his wife Sāmiyah. After they embark on the journey, Wadī' comes down with an unrelenting fever:

That all happened on the boat; the boat that took us to Cyprus. Sāmiyah thought it was the cold of the ocean, but it was the fever (*al-ḥummā*). The fever that descended upon me me as though it was the voice of God that descends upon saints, instantly transforming them into holy people, as a wreath of fire levitates over their heads, accompanying them until death. The fever did not turn me into a saint. But it changed me in a single night. I became a different man. I don't know how. I entered the boat one man and exited as another. All the strength I possessed, that I spent my entire life building, brick by brick, was apparently destroyed in a single blow by that night on the boat, leaving me in ruins.⁸⁴

Though the fever occurs somewhat late in the novel, it is central to the narrative both chronologically and narratologically. The narrative in *Sayyidī* is non-linear. In the novel's prefatory chapter, Wadī' has already arrived in Cyprus and is narrating the story. Were the story to be organized linearly, then the fever would appear at the beginning of narrative, taking place after a major shift and transformation in the story, linking the

⁸⁴ Hudā, Barakāt, *Sayyidī wa Ḥabībī* (Bayrūt: Dār al-Nahār lil-Nashr, 2004), 121.

novel's past with its present leading up to Wadī's disappearance in the penultimate chapter. In addition to its chronological centrality, fever governs the narrative insofar as it is transitional and transformative. Fever mediates several transitions from one state to another and intervenes in a moment of spatial shift, from Lebanon to Cyprus; a temporal shift, from night to dawn; and a psychological shift, from stability to instability in Wadī's character. The fever transforms Wadī during the journey from Beirut to Cyprus which constitutes a *raḥīl* that is liminal and transformative.

In the excerpt above, the fever transforms Wadī into another person. Fever is compared to the human encounter with the sublime from which saints are born. The fever, depicted here as a wreath of fire (*alsinah min al-lahab*), is inscribed onto the body, resembling the aureole that hovers above the heads of religious icons who have heard the voice of God.⁸⁵ Hearing voices, along with Wadī's other symptoms, is psychosomatic. On the one hand, these symptoms are physically felt as sounds and voices, heat, and burning. On the other hand, they are experienced psychologically as fear, paranoia, and transformation. In Wadī's case, however, fever does not signify the transformation from human to divine, from ignorant to enlightened, but rather it initiates a process of destruction and regression. However, fever is neither restorative nor destructive only. Instead, it is transformative. While fever acts out upon the body, the body also reacts to it. Akin to the *pharmakon*'s ambivalence, determined by viewpoint, fever is simultaneously and alternatively poison and cure. This shift occurs within the object itself, as the

⁸⁵ Barakāt, 121.

viewpoint on and of the object also shifts, as Wadī's fever transforms so as to simultaneously harm and purify.

2.1.1 Crossing into the Liminal: Transformative Fevers

During the fever, Wadī undergoes several levels of transformation. His heart—at once a physical organ and a symbol of strength and resolve—is violently and painfully destroyed. He says, “My steadfast heart slipped from me and shattered to dust, dust sent up to vanish, into the ocean breeze.”⁸⁶ Furthermore, he experiences physical pain through sensations of burning (*ḥarārah*) and shivering (*irtijāf*) that also produce psychological emotions of despair, fear, and paranoia that play out in hallucinations. For instance, Wadī simultaneously feels and imagines his spirit emerging from his body, specifically from his ears. The noise produced is so unbearable that when he plugs his ears, screaming from the pain, he “expected to find his fingers stained with blood.”⁸⁷ His condition degenerates into madness and paranoia when he is overtaken by the thought that his father has been killed:

I told Sāmiyah they killed my father and she backed away from me out of fear, but kept her smile. She smiled strangely, failing to hide her fear. She kept her distance, but checked up on me from afar to see if the fever had receded, if my delirium had passed. [...] They killed my father in revenge. They killed my father because they found money stashed away in his house. They killed my father because they found the body in my room.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Barakāt, 122.

⁸⁷ Barakāt, 122.

⁸⁸ Barakāt, 122.

Here, Wadīʿ reveals information that is never corroborated elsewhere in the novel. In fact, it is impossible to know whether the feverish Wadīʿ conveys the truth about his past or is hysterical and therefore cannot be believed. In any case, the fever marks a distinct break in Wadīʿ’s character. Not only do physical and psychological changes occur but also his entire field of knowledge and truth is reconfigured. With memory and delusion conflated, paranoia transforms his character from this point on. Sāmiyah bears witness to this transformation in the novel. Elsewhere, Wadīʿ contemplates whether Sāmiyah will leave him or not; he rationalizes that if she does it will be because she realizes that he is “no longer the man she fell in love with” and that he is a “different Wadīʿ, empty of all that which was once inside him.”⁸⁹ Additionally, Sāmiyah acknowledges how much he changed since they left Lebanon at the end of the novel.⁹⁰

Finally, Wadīʿ’s transformation influences his grasp of knowledge and truth about the past. His hallucination reveals that his father was murdered after the body was found in Wadīʿ’s bedroom. However, Wadīʿ neither remembers the name belonging to the body, nor does he recall the man’s facial features. Apparently, Wadīʿ believes that if he can remember the man’s name, he will recover from his mad and delusional state. Yet, he cannot do so:

I rack my brain with extraneous effort to remember his name, to recall his facial features. Perhaps that will help me summon back the dead. The headache tosses me around but I persist in search of him. That dead man who I will bring back along with him pieces of my short-term memory, as

⁸⁹ Barakāt, 128.

⁹⁰ Barakāt, 185.

well as distant memories in order to understand what happened to me, so that I can try to put back the pieces in a recognizable form, and put an end to my senseless jabbering, so that everyone, especially Sāmiyah, doesn't think I've gone mad.⁹¹

Here, the physical pain from the headache, the psychological torment, and the degeneration of his intellectual capacity, signify Wadī's transformation by the fever. In the penultimate moment of the fever scene, the disintegration of Wadī's memory extends beyond the events of his recent past and influences the very foundations of his knowledge, beginning with his primary and secondary school education. What he learned in school, truths he had once clung to, is now absent from his mind or unrecognizably fragmented. Wadī's knowledge becomes reconfigured in a way that the opposite of anything he once knew can also be true:

Did subordinating particles in Arabic make the subject accusative and the predicate nominative? Or was it the other way around? Is water two parts hydrogen and one-part oxygen? Or was it the opposite? Was Fakhr al-Dīn al-Ma'anī the bloodthirsty criminal with an ominous mustache? Or was it the other prince, al-Shahābī. What was the younger one's name again?⁹²

Knowledge ceases to form a coherent and connected body of information as more things become uncertain. Knowledge fragments into single-word sound bites of information that flash through his mind. Words like tundra, plasma, Archimedes, and prefix or suffix leap out on the page, empty of meaning. Amidst this transformation, Wadī does not realize night's end and dawn's break because the ocean fog blocks his vision:

⁹¹ Barakāt, 123

⁹² Barakāt, 124.

Slow is the arrival of this sun I cannot see, in a sky I cannot see. The descending fog allows sight only a few meters. Is dawn always like this in the wide ocean? Fog, smoke, mist, and grayish-white haze in the eyes.

At the end of the scene, Wadīʿ acknowledges the blessing of blindness and interprets his lack of vision as invitation from life to enter sleep. The final word in the chapter is an imperative: sleep. As the fever begins to subside, Wadīʿ apparently closes his eyes and falls asleep—he is overcome by a sensation of *nuʿās*: a condition or state that resembles lethargy, sleepiness, tiredness, or somnolence formally.

The role that fever plays in Wadīʿʿs physical and psychological transformation continues to influence him after his arrival in Cyprus can be traced until his disappearance at the end of the novel. Tracing the feverʿs continuity sheds light on the other liminal phases produced by fever that permeate into the rest of the novel. The most important symptomatic liminal phase of fever is *nuʿās*, depicted here as the state between wake and sleep.

2.1.2 After the Fever: Imprisoned Outside Sleep

Now living in Cyprus, Wadīʿ continues to exhibit symptoms of the fever. For example, the figure in the dark—the anthropomorphic manifestation of Wadīʿʿs fear, horror, and paranoia first introduced on the boat—follows Wadīʿ to Cyprus. After wandering into a deserted resort neighborhood in Larnaca, Wadīʿ collapses in horror because he believes a massacre (*madhbahah*) had taken place there. Promising that he

would never wander further than the children's park near their apartment, Wadī' confronts himself:

We have to admit, Wadī', that it's really come to this. It's not a passing fever we'll wake up from the next morning. And it's not a nightmare that we'll emerge from and awake gracefully. It's time to admit that the person I suddenly feel creeping up behind me, raising his fist ready to strike me over the head, will accompany me for the rest of my life.⁹³

Fear, horror, and paranoia consume Wadī'. The figure he repeatedly imagines following him is a physical manifestation of his trauma from the Lebanese Civil War and his longing for his lost childhood friend, Ayyūb.⁹⁴ These psychological experiences take on actual physical symptoms when Wadī' describes the panic attacks (*nawbāt ru'b*) and epileptic seizures (*nawbāt al-šar'*) from which he suffers. These attacks on his body prevent actual rest because even when he is not experiencing an attack he lies awake in dreadful anticipation of the next one.⁹⁵ Trapped between sleep and wakefulness, Wadī' inhabits a perpetual liminal state of *nu'ās*. Sleep is promised, and would entail rest and healing, but it fails to keep its promise.

Wadī' describes *nu'ās* as the threshold between sleep and wakefulness. However, Wadī's own description sheds more light on the condition's pathology:

Sometimes *nu'ās* descends upon me, which I at first happily welcomed as gracious comfort, or a promise of peaceful serenity and sleep. It was true *nu'ās*, I would tell myself, not some heavy exhaustion that wrecks the body after a panic attack or a seizure. But this wasn't the case. It was a *nu'ās* that wrapped me in a giant web of heavy steel, covering my entire

⁹³ Barakāt, 140.

⁹⁴ Barakāt, 139-42

⁹⁵ Barakāt, 154.

body, paralyzing me beneath its weight, restraining my every movement without ever guiding me to the sleep I so desired. The stronger the *nu'ās* was, the further away sleep withdrew, and the more impossible it became [...] Every time I felt sleep come close, *al-yaqdhah* (wakefulness) jolted me awake as if with a slap of cold water that covered me from head to toe. [...] It's a *nu'ās* severed from any sort of pleasure. It resembles that condition that afflicts someone during two states of sleep; they awake only to fall back asleep. But as for me, I remain in the middle between the two, completely miserable and lost, on the verge of tears but never able to cry.⁹⁶

At first, *nu'ās* appears as the state of existence prior to falling asleep, the feeling of tiredness and sleepiness that precedes sleep. Instead, *nu'ās* actually precludes sleep. It imprisons the individual at the threshold; they are neither fully asleep nor fully awake. In other words, Wadī' is trapped within a liminal space of *nu'ās*.

Wadī's *nu'ās* resembles al-Mutanabbī's condition when he was barred from leaving Egypt. In al-Mutanabbī's poem, the poet describes the conditions of his fever using a language of lethargy and somnolence. Like Wadī', he is weak and cannot leave his bed. At night, fever returns and keeps him awake until morning. Al-Mutanabbī defines *nu'ās* as the "third condition" (*thālith al-ḥālayn*), that which is betwixt sleep and wakefulness. Al-Mutanabbī conflates *nu'ās* as a metaphor for his entire being in Egypt; it is a condition that will ultimately lead to death but not death itself. In fact, for both Wadī' and al-Mutanabbī, *nu'ās* is worse than death. Wadī' says that, "it's certainly *nu'ās*, and it has no name other than *nu'ās*, although it resembles death." After acknowledging that he cannot know for certain, since he has never died, he says that it resembles the beginning

⁹⁶ Barakāt, 154-53

of death (*bidāyat al-mawt*), “the slow fall into death, just a little before the end of life.”⁹⁷ If *nu’ās* is what emerges at the end of fever, or at the end the *rahīl*, then the passenger does not arrive to any end. There is no death, no recovery. There is no aggregation, no exile. In other words, *nu’ās* signifies the inauthenticity of the *rahīl* in a traditional sense of leading to aggregation or even exile in a new country. In the same way that *nu’ās* fails to lead Wadī’ to sleep, the *rahīl* to Cyprus fails to conclude in any sort of reaggregation or even exile. Historically, Cyprus took in many Lebanese refugees during the civil war. Wadī’ is a stranger in a foreign country but is eventually part of the Lebanese expatriate community there. As Tarek El-Ariss notes in his article on the violent return of the exile, “the alternative to home is not another home abroad but a position of cruelty and an act of survival emerging from the inability to forget home and from the violence associated with remembering and recalling it.”⁹⁸ Wadī’’s position in Cyprus does not inhabit an authentic exile, and nor does he re-aggregate into Lebanese society. Instead, like the *nu’ās*, his position in Cyprus is caught between two states, exile and return. Like al-Mutanabbī, who viewed recovery as death, Wadī’ is left with no choice but to depart on

⁹⁷ Barakāt, 155.

⁹⁸ Tarek El-Ariss reads al-Shanfarā’s ode, *Lāmiyyat al-‘Arab*, through the contemporary works of Hudā Barakāt, and *vice versa*, to argue that the return of the exile is one characterized by an act of violence. El-Ariss liberates the anti-*rahīl* from being read simply as stasis or arrested development in the archetypal *qaṣīdah* and opens up the exilic return of al-Shanfarā, as well as that of Lebanese expatriates after the civil war, as a space where violence can be confronted in a literary text. Tarek El-Ariss, “The Return of the Beast: From Pre-Islamic Ode to Contemporary Novel,” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 47 (2016): 83.

an impossible journey. Thus, the novel ends with Wadī's disappearance and his whereabouts unknown.

Wadī's absence, and the shift in narrators, also attests to the *raḥīl*'s failure to lead to any sort of resolution. Instead, the *raḥīl* leads to another state of liminality and impotence, epitomized by the *nu'ās* which in turn culminates in yet another *raḥīl* when the novel concludes. This pattern of shifting from one *raḥīl* to another is similar to what Stetkevych calls "perpetual liminality" in her discussion of the anti-*raḥīl* in al-Shanfarā's *Lāmiyyat al-'Arab (Arabian Ode in L)*. El-Ariss, who considers al-Shanfarā's ode "the most powerful *tawaḥḥush*," (becoming beastly) reads the perpetual liminality of the poet's beastly and estranged state as productive and transformative since the passenger of the *raḥīl* "follows trajectories that move inward and outward, turning in and becoming other."⁹⁹ El-Ariss' reading of the anti-*raḥīl* as a state of productive transformation helps situate Wadī's perpetual liminality, moving from fever to *nu'ās* to *raḥīl*, as a productive force.

Far from providing resolution or closure, Sāmiyah's narrative represents a viewpoint that challenges and conflicts with much of the details of Wadī's past. In particular, she questions the true reach of his influence on the gangs and militias during the civil war in Lebanon. Most important, however, is the multiplicity of narratives (*riwāyāt*) that she presents in an attempt to find an explanation for Wadī's disappearance. Searching for an answer, Sāmiyah considers all the possible narratives (*riwāyāt*) that

⁹⁹ El-Ariss, 68.

come from other sources. In one scenario, Wadī' flees Cyprus after the authorities began to investigate his involvement in the embezzlement of company funds. In another, he smuggles weapons into Lebanon to fuel the ongoing civil war. In the next, he is manipulated by Ṭāriq who takes advantage of his naiveté and stupidity. In one particularly farfetched scenario, Wadī' leaves Cyprus to work for the Israeli Mossad after encounters a friend who was an Israeli collaborator all along. Among all the scenarios Sāmiyah narrates, she prefers the one in which Wadī' reunites with Ayyūb, his long-lost childhood friend. Though she acknowledges its impossibility, *annahā riwāyah mustahīlah* (It is an impossible story) Sāmiyah imagines Ayūb sitting in the airport terminal watching the flight numbers flash on the screen—each one a promised or imagined *rahīl* in itself—as he waits for Wadī'. Sāmiyah ends her narrative calling out farewell to Wadī' (*wadā'an Wadī'*) as he embarks on his impossible journey.

In the end, fever effaces Wadī' from the narrative, leaving behind only traces of his departure. Sāmiyah's final words to Wadī', which she speaks in her heart, are revealing. Playing on the shared root of the two words, *wadā'an* and *Wadī'*, she implies a connection between her husband and the act of seeing one off as they depart on a journey: “*bon voyage*,” “farewell.” Indeed, since his departure and transformation, Wadī' only inhabits transitory states, moving from one liminal space to another. The unresolved *rahīl* is irreconcilable and results in another *rahīl*. This pattern that leads from *rahīl* to *rahīl* generates a fevered, erratic, and repetitive narrative.

2.2 Rashīd al-Da‘īf’s *al-Mustabidd*: Fever as Narrative Form

If al-Mutanabbī’s fever creates a poetic narrative that allows him to imagine an impossible *raḥīl*, and Wadī’s fever structures narrative around a moment of transformation that is signified by a journey that leads to perpetual liminality and new narrative threads, then the fever that consumes the protagonist of *al-Mustabidd* sends him on a mad search for the beloved—a fool’s errand that has no clear beginning nor end, but instead is erratic, repetitious, and perpetual.

Al-Mustabidd is narrated by a fictional professor of literature who teaches in a Lebanese college during the 1975 civil war. Despite the regular airstrikes, car bombs, and militia skirmishes that permeate the fabric of the text, the professor’s routine and mundane life is disrupted when he encounters a female student while seeking shelter during an Israeli airstrike. Inside the shelter, the student falls unconscious and leans her weight onto the professor’s body. He is shocked by the student’s behavior and interprets her motive as a sexual advance. Then, the professor has sexual intercourse with the student shortly before the bombardment ceases and emerges from the shelter with the other occupants, who all head in separate directions. Failing to learn the female student’s identity, the professor, claiming to have fallen madly in love with her, undertakes an obsessive and compulsive search. As the novel progresses, however, it is unclear whether the student truly existed or was produced by the professor’s eccentric imagination. The student repeatedly reappears throughout the narrative but only as an apparition and a manifestation of suppressed emotional trauma rooted in past romantic failures, partially

due to distorted beliefs about marriage and sex, and partially due to the horrific conditions of the civil war. The professor fails to find the student but seemingly continues his search even after the novel ends.

The unresolved ending retroactively destabilizes the notion of a clear beginning. While the narrative appears linearly structured around the encounter with and concomitant search for the student in the shelter, it is actually woven around several encounters with and searches for other women throughout the novel by way of flashbacks, visions, and hallucinations. Rethinking the initial encounter in the novel as a stitch woven in a repeated pattern, rather than the originating event that traditionally frames plot and narrative, reveals a different kind of narrative structure. The narrative is generated by an erratic and repetitious pattern of moving back and forth between nodal points in the text that resemble a perpetual *raḥīl*. To locate the *raḥīl* in the professor's search for the student, the beloved over whom the mad poet obsesses, is to locate a perpetual liminal space from which narrative is generated. With al-Mutanabbī's fever and Plato's *pharmakon* in mind, the professor's search mimics al-Mutanabbī's tossing and turning in the bed, and how the kinetic fevered motion generates narrative in the text.

The behavior of the story's protagonist is symptomatic of a fever. He erratically travels back and forth between spaces, primarily the college and his home. Half of the novel's eight chapters begin with a variation of the same sentence: *ḥīna waṣaltū ilā al-bayt* (when I arrived home).¹⁰⁰ The other four chapters begin with the professor either leaving his house or arriving at the college. Since the narration is bound to the spatial

¹⁰⁰ Rashīd al-Ḍa'īf, *al-Mustabidd* (Beirut: Riad El-Rayyes Books, 2001), 29.

movement within the story, the narrative also appears erratic: random, repetitive, and non-linear. This repeated traveling back and forth from one space to another mimics the tossing and turning in al-Mutanabbī's bed when he is afflicted with his fever. *Al-Mustabidd* oscillates between states of waiting and states of transition as the protagonist searches for the student. Within fever as a liminal space which an individual occupies, the repeated oscillatory motion prevents the protagonist from inhabiting a single state entirely and completely. In this fevered state, like in al-Mutanabbī's condition, the protagonist's imagination creates permutations of movement as if to continue the search for the student, even while stationary. Three scenes in the novel best illustrate the pattern of moving and waiting that generates an erratic and nonlinear narrative: the professor sitting in the college cafeteria, the professor waiting in his home, and the professor stopping at the military checkpoint.

2.2.1 Active Imaginations: Crisis and Recovery

While he waits in the cafeteria, hoping for the student to arrive, a thought violently erupts in the professor's mind. The thought—a sequential chain of cause and effect—culminates in the nervous breakdown that paradoxically initiates the sequential chain of events within the thought.

Suddenly, an idea sprang forth in my mind that shook my body, wrecking it. Cold sweat dripped from me until my clothes were soaked. It absolutely looked like I was emerging from a river! I felt my strength begin to dwindle and give out quick. While my face looked pale and ghostlike like that color of the dead. I felt that whoever was going to notice my condition was going to hurry to my rescue before I fell and died. This thought remained erect in my mind like a sharp sword sticking out...or a snake.

Yes! Say like a snake that suddenly found itself in a moment in my brain and bore its way out through my skull (only to stop) not knowing where it is or how it got there!¹⁰¹

When he reaches the end of the thought's description, the professor imagines an elaborately detailed scenario unfolding before him. Reality and imagination are blurred. The professor collapses and the students rush him to the hospital. The vision speeds up clock time and lasts a month during which the professor stays with his mother in his childhood village to recover. It is at this point, temporally and spatially, the vision-triggering thought erupts: the professor realizes that his month-long hiatus has eliminated his chance of encountering the student in the cafeteria. After the thought recedes, the professor stands from his seat by the table and rushes back to his home.

This thought, that produces and is produced by the affect of fever, demonstrates how fever figures into the narrative structure of the novel. On the one hand, the professor's waning strength, yellowing skin, and profuse sweating caused by the thought are symptomatic of fever. On the other hand, the unfolding the vision that reveals the thought at its core, is generated by the nervous breakdown characterized by signs of death (sweating pores and yellowing skin), literally like *himām* produced by fever.

Here, his waiting in the cafeteria produces erratic movement in the imagination and then physical movement away from the cafeteria. The thought, from which the narrative unfolds, is paradoxically located at the beginning and end of the narrative. Like fever, the thought is both the poison and the cure, and like the *pharmakon* it simultaneously, alternatively, and ambivalently inhabits two spaces. The professor's

¹⁰¹ Al-Da'if, 58.

vision is replete with images of protection and healing. The professor imagines that the students run to him, hold him in their arms, and remove his shirt to help him breathe. They use isopropyl and cigarette smoke to help him regain consciousness and transport him to the hospital (*mustashfā*), a place of healing. Stuck in traffic, the students fire bullets to create the illusion of a skirmish to force the nearby pedestrians to seek protection (*iḥtama*) in their homes from the bullets, freeing up the crowded road. The professor's vision of protection and healing continues after he reaches the emergency room as he stays in a hospital bed for a week, and then returns to his village where his mother nurses him back to health before his return to Beirut.

The thought's ambivalent position as generating narrative and generated from narrative, along with its function as poison and cure, embody the novel's fevered narrative. Again, like the scorpion's tail that strikes, it contains within it the antidote for its own venom. The thought which causes the breakdown, leads to the scenario of recovery and then back again to state of despair. Once the professor realizes that his waiting will result in missing the student, he leaves the cafeteria and rushes home. Finally, at the end of the fevered thought, physical movement is generated, and the professor, along with the narrative are in motion. In the next scene, waiting generates another instance of psychological movement in the narrative, but this time the refuge-like quality of the psychological space is emphasized. Like al-Mutanabbī, who finds refuge in his imagination of the *raḥīl*, the professor also seeks refuge within his imagination that sets narrative in motion.

2.2.2 Journeying Bodies: Seeking Refuge in the *Rahīl*

The movement here is backwards, as a flashback symptomatically reflects the professor's fevered state as he waits in anticipation for the student to show up at his apartment unannounced. As he waits, he recalls the memory of a trip he took by bus, from Beirut to Tripoli, when he was eighteen. His memory of the trip juxtaposes safety and protection against danger with risk. He recalls the cold and rainy weather along with the driver who approached him and held out an umbrella to protect him (*hamānī bimaḏallatihi*) from the rain.¹⁰² The contrast between these two spaces sharpens after he boards the bus. The bus is depicted as a vessel that safely transports passengers from one place to another, and that separates an internal space from an external one. He reflects on the two spaces *en route*:

The radio was on. It was singing. I found all music beautiful on trips like this. Because outside there was cold, rain, wind, and haze. While inside was warm, dark, and silent. And the passengers, every single one, surrendered to their dreams and submitted to the affectionate motion of the car...until they became drowsy and fell asleep, or rest on the edge.¹⁰³

As the excerpt suggests, the bus separates the space between inside and outside, safety and danger, and also lulls the passengers to a sleepy state of *nu'ās*. This state is generated by the inertia of the bus that moves the passengers forward on the road, while they remain still within the bus, which nevertheless rocks them side-to-side. Succumbing to Newton's first law of motion, the passengers in the bus move, and do not move, thanks to inertia, as they teeter on the threshold of sleep.

¹⁰² Al-Da'if, 97-8.

¹⁰³ Al-Da'if, 99

Attempting to maintain proper bus etiquette, the young professor fights the laws of physics by planting his body into the seat and leaning his weight in the opposite direction. However, when he notices that the woman seated beside him shifts her weight with the movement of the bus, leaning her weight against him, the professor does the same. The back-and-forth, and side-to-side, inertia of the car causes bodies to enter into contact with one another. In this case, this contact initiates the intimate and erotic encounter of the flashback. The professor spreads his jacket over both their laps to hide the act of physically pleasuring one another, an act also characterized by back and forth motion. This motionless moving, that combines the motion of masturbation, the motion of bodies, and the motion of the bus, all within a safe and protected space, generates the professor's flashback as he sits waiting for the student in his apartment. The liminality of the flashback is emphasized in the professor's thoughts:

I wasn't going anywhere nor coming from anywhere. I wasn't inside nor outside the car. I was the beginning, but not the end. I was outside life, but not outside death. I was outside repose and anxiety. I wasn't asleep, but I wasn't awake. I didn't feel anything. I felt the opposite of feeling.¹⁰⁴

Inhabiting several liminal spaces simultaneously, the professor is trapped in a back and forth pendulum swing. However, this repetitious movement back and forth is meaningful, in that it permits the entire narrative of the event as the professor relays the story in a flashback. The flashback ends when he reaches Tripoli but forgets to learn the identity of the woman on the bus, a detail that is repeated when he encounters the student in the shelter.

¹⁰⁴ Al-Da'if, 101.

The flashback itself is a refuge, a place of waiting and protection, as the professor sits inside his home anticipating the student's arrival. The flashback also provides refuge from the violence and danger of the civil war outside the walls of his apartment. Like al-Mutanabbī, the professor imagines the journey despite being trapped in his home, unable to venture outside and incapable of realizing his desire. Though the flashback generated by his fevered state is not necessarily a space of healing, it is certainly a refuge in which the professors seeks protection.

The flashback is not simply a memory relegated to the past and recalled at will, but rather it is part of the professor's imagination which transgresses the boundary between material and psychological reality. At the very end of the flashback, the professor assembles the image of the student in his imagination, beginning with a mythologization of her as Eve and him as Adam.¹⁰⁵ The boundary between the professor's imagination and material reality intersect when he hears the doorbell ring and finds the student at the doorstep of his home. Upon entering she says "*shū ḥilweh hal-dinyā*" (what a beautiful world!).¹⁰⁶ It is as if both the professor's home filled with collections of art, literature, and music, and the material world, after having been enclosed within the professor's imagination, have become whole and entire already. The apparition disappears when bullets from a nearby skirmish are heard, abandoning the professor as he barricades himself in the bathtub to avoid physical injury. The end of this

¹⁰⁵ Al-Ḍa'īf, 105.

¹⁰⁶ Rashīd al-Ḍa'īf incorporates Lebanese dialect into his novels, both in the dialogue and elsewhere. For this reason, I have transliterated the Arabic to best depict the pronunciation of the statement. Al-Ḍa'īf, 114.

scene marks yet another shift from material reality to imagination and back to material reality.

2.2.3 Arrested Motion: Fever at the Checkpoint

In the final scene, the professor stops his car in front of a vacant military checkpoint. After he convinces himself that he has spotted the student from the shelter enter a taxi, he drives after her in a frenzy:

As I accelerated, the cars began to mix together. Which car was the girl riding? Perhaps she was too shy to ask the driver to slow down. She didn't even ask him to wait a few minutes for me to arrive. [...] Did I miss this chance? [...] I drove from one street to the next as I realized that I had missed my chance. I was facing the checkpoint! The same exact checkpoint!¹⁰⁷

The chase comes to a halt when he stops at a familiar checkpoint he had encountered one year before. The difference this time is that there is no guard on duty. In fact, the checkpoint is vacant. Though nothing material prevents him from crossing the checkpoint, the professor refuses to cross and demands for his identification to be checked:

I stopped the car in the middle of the road and stepped out. I looked right. I looked left. I turned to look behind me. I found no sign of a guard. I began to burn. I felt the blood pulse through my temples and grow stronger, as though the creatures trapped in my head wanted to escape suffocation. So I took my ID out from my pocket, waved it in the air, and yelled, "Where's the checkpoint? I won't pass until the checkpoint checks my identification! Where is the checkpoint?"¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ Al-Da'if, 176.

¹⁰⁸ Al-Da'if, 177.

The volume of his voice becomes so loud that it reaches his mother tucked away in a village in the mountains, to which she responds “*rū’... rū’...*” (calm down, calm down).¹⁰⁹ Eventually, an off-duty soldier emerges from the crowd to check the professor’s identification and sends him off with an “*Allāh ma‘ak*” (Godspeed).¹¹⁰ The professor drives past the checkpoint into the distance. Though the ending in this final scene of the novel provides no resolution, it implies that the professor continues his search for the student.

The professor was first stopped at the checkpoint a year prior when he was taking a woman he had met at a party home. When the checkpoint guard discovers that the professor and his friend are of two different religious denominations, they send the woman home in a taxi, seize the car, and arrest the professor. Throughout the entire ordeal, other vehicles drive through the barricade unchecked and unquestioned. Out of pent up frustration, the professor breaks from flashback to shout: *Absurde!* He uses the French word because, he says, “there is no word in Arabic, not even in all its dialects, that comes close to this word!”¹¹¹

Here, the professor has Albert Camus’ definition of the Absurd in mind. Early in the novel, the professor gives a lesson on translating an excerpt from Camus’ *La peste* (*The Plague*). Themes from Camus novel and his philosophy, such as the Absurd, permeate the fabric of the text. In his essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus develops

¹⁰⁹ Al-Da‘if, 178.

¹¹⁰ Al-Da‘if, 178.

¹¹¹ Al-Da‘if, 169.

several enumerations of the Absurd in order to get as close as he can to a definition. According to Camus, the Absurd the confrontation between a conscious subject and an ambivalent universe .¹¹² Camus states:

What is absurd is the confrontation of this irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart. The absurd depends as much on man as on the world. For the moment it is all that links them together. It binds them one to the other as only hatred can weld two creatures together.¹¹³

Individually, the world and humankind do not constitute the Absurd, but their interaction does. According to Camus, “the absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world.”¹¹⁴ By the same token, the individual is stopped at the checkpoint for arbitrary reasons and subjected to a series of unreasonable questions to prove his identity.

The checkpoint is an absurd construction among a variety of other absurdities that filled the Lebanese Civil War, according to the professor. His frustration toward the checkpoint hits a fever-pitch when he begins to rant:

What was the checkpoint set up for? What are they all for? Why have a checkpoint? Beirut is a city submerged in firearms. Of all shapes and sizes. It has a cannon that can reach Israel. Anti-air and armor piercing artillery. Rocket launchers. Handguns and sniper rifles. Armed forces patrol the streets, back and forth, day and night. Battles don't cease. Assassinations. Blowing up businesses and stores. Looting. Theft. Car bombs. Private tanks just like private cars. Yesterday's newspaper that I read yesterday! What is the checkpoint for? Why?¹¹⁵

¹¹² Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus: And Other Essays*. Trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage International, 2012), 13.

¹¹³ Camus, 21.

¹¹⁴ Camus, 28.

¹¹⁵ Al-Da'if, 168.

The checkpoint is absurd because it fails to prevent the circulation of firearms in the city, and because the system that governs it is irrational and illogical. The novel depicts rampant explosions and militia skirmishes. Meanwhile, the guard continues to allow cars to pass unchecked and unsearched, further subverting the legitimacy of the checkpoint's purpose. The emphasis on the checkpoint is not solely on its absurd nature, rather on how the checkpoint is an obstruction of motion and movement posing as protection and safety, but is also oppressive, flawed, and a space where violence is acted out against citizens. Most important, the checkpoint, like fever, does not guarantee an individual's safety, survival, or health only until they have successfully crossed over from one side to the other. In this case, attempting to pass through a checkpoint could result in barring of motion and seizure of movement past the checkpoint.

Above all, the checkpoint is an interruption of movement and motion that only permits access if one's papers and documentation are in order. The checkpoint provides, at the same time, the illusions of safety, protection, and order, even when they often do the opposite. Despite their absurdity, checkpoints are nonetheless very real obstacles and obstructions one must face in order to cross them and reach the other side.

The checkpoint scene is significant for two reasons. Firstly, it depicts the absurdity of the checkpoint's logic, rooted in a flashback from the past. And secondly, it is the scene in which the professor internalizes the absurd logic of the checkpoint that stops him in his tracks before setting out into an apparently perpetual state of liminality. He internalizes the absurd logic that is rooted in an experience of the past as reenacted it

in the present. This reenactment of the past as it is linked to the present is governed by the abrupt and erratic stopping and moving. This movement of stopping and moving, governed by the absurd logic, mimics the tossing and turning in al-Mutanabbī's bed. Again, the perpetual state of movement, in which the professor is trapped, simultaneously generates and is generated by his fevered state.

Conclusion

The endings of both novels leave the reader at a loss. Wadī' disappears leaving behind only several fragmented stories for Sāmyah to consider. While in *al-Mustabidd*, the professor also disappears, but this time, off into the distance of Beirut's urban sprawl, ostensibly continuing to search for his phantom lover. These novels insistently resist leaving the reader with a sense of closure. These narratives emerge from fevered bodies that simultaneously and paradoxically inhabit states of stasis and motion. They are liminal bodies in liminal states. Like the works considered, this essay itself does not propose resolution or closure. On the contrary, this essay embraces these narratives that transgress notions of linearity and searches beneath the fabric of the text to read them on their own terms while submitting to their intertextual references to notions of fever and embodiment.

Above all, this essay reads fever as a momentary intervention on two fronts. Fever intervenes in preexisting limitations of genre and periodization in the studies of Arabic literature. By tracing literary and bodily manifestations of fever in the text, this essay contributes to theoretical frameworks that allow reading across genres and periodization specifically pre-modern poetry and contemporary fiction.

The second intervention, central to the scope and thesis of this essay, is the ability to read how fever structures narrative in a literary text. In al-Mutanabbī's poem, fever is not merely a metaphor for the *raḥīl* when it is seen as the cure to al-Mutanabbī's condition, nor when it is the dangerous liminal state that bridges separation and aggregation in the archetypal *qaṣīdah*. But rather, like the *pharmakon*, it is ambivalently

both. Thus, al-Mutanabbī's fever structures the poetic narrative of his *qaṣīdah*. Reading fever across literary periodizations and genres in Lebanese Civil War fiction uncovers other fevered bodies that also produce fevered narratives. Written against the backdrop of the civil war, these novels, and others, depict the erratic and repetitious itineraries of transient characters like Wadī' in Barakāt's novel and the professor in al-Ḍa'īf's. These characters move from place to place, physically or in a hallucination, and transform, physically or psychologically, like Wadī''s affliction with fever and the *nu'ās* that followed it.

This structural analysis of fever and narrative goes beyond a purely formalist project so as to engage with notions of affect and embodiment as they emerge from the text. Theories of affect could expand upon the traced textual connections between literature and feverish bodies in a future project. At its core, this essay situates al-Mutanabbī's fever poem as the centerpiece of literary and theoretical analysis that opened the contemporary novel's discussed here to a reading of fever and narrative. By reconfiguring the archive of this essay to center around the contemporary novels, instead, fever could be read in the context of the Lebanese Civil War as historical experience. Amid the horrors of the civil war, victims sought refuge from bombardments; they fell in and out of dream and reality, illness and recovery; they were stopped at checkpoints and forced into refuge, hiding and exile; and they appeared and disappeared. Recalling Faulkner's fever metaphor for the American Civil War, the professor from *al-Mustabidd* echoes a similar sentiment, expressing his fear of civil wars because "hostility between "siblings" is by far more dangerous—concerning ordinary people—than fights between

enemies. An ordinary person could figure out the enemy's location, but might not when they're swimming like fish in a sea of people."¹¹⁶ A theoretical framework rooted in a liminality that functions like a fever—one that contains the potential of healing and recovery but does not neglect the risk of death and loss—is needed today as global trends of political populism elect regimes that have been described as “fever dreams and “night terrors.”¹¹⁷ Today, new ways of reading liminality are critical as literature attempts to engage a world where humanitarian crises such as civil war in Syria, and fomenting rhetoric of wall-building in the United States and Europe, have led to increasingly porous borders between certain countries and manically fortified ones in others. An attention to the ubiquity of liminality and its implications is an important intervention in our current world where so many undertake the dangers of a *raḥīl*.

¹¹⁶ Al-Da‘īf, 122.

¹¹⁷ Tom Engelhardt, “A Post-Election Fever Dream,” *The Huffington Post*, November 21, 2016, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/a-post-election-fever-dream_us_58334042e4b058ce7aac4cfa.

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