THE MISE-EN-SCÈNE OF “WRITING”
IN AL-BAYĀTĪ’S AL-KITĀBAH ‘ALĀ AL-ＴĪN

This living hand, now warm and capable
Of earnest grasping, would, if it were cold
And in the icy silence of the tomb,
So haunt thy days and chill thy dreaming nights
That thou wou[d]st wish thy own heart dry of blood
So in my veins red life might stream again.

(John Keats)

One special quality of writing in general is that it keeps the hand of the writer always alive and thriving, even after his or her passing away into what Keats calls “the icy silence of the tomb.” It has been almost two years now since ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Bayātī’s (1926-99) hand was “warm and capable.” However, his poetry remains a living hand, essentially because his texts, like the mystery of the pyramids, carry their own secrets of signification. If writing a novel, as Walter Benjamin lucidly puts it “means to carry the incommensurable to extremes in the representation of human life,” writing poetry even shatters this manner of representation and delineates the commensurable as essentially imperceptible. It is this insistence on imperception which gives al-Bayātī’s poetry its peculiar quality.

The aim of this paper is to provide a deconstructionist analysis of “writing” in three poems in al-Bayātī’s 1970 poetic collection Al-Kitābah ‘alā al-Ｔīn. (Writing on the Mud). I will argue that the urge behind al-Bayātī’s invocation of the Greek myth of Orpheus rests primarily on a genuine trans-historical attempt to reconcile the past and the present sufferings of man, to smelt them together into an alloy that contains the aches and aspirations of humanity regardless of time and place. Moreover, I will attempt to find out how the symbiotic relationship between writing and myth in the three poems testifies to an inherent wish to transcend the limitations of time and place. The questions I will address are as follows: what is so significant about writing that made al-Bayātī thematize it in Al-Kitābah ‘alā al-Ｔīn? What makes writing a prophecy? What is the connection between the Orpheus myth, sorcery, and writing?

Critically, this study is based on two major French writers. Emphasis is put on the structuralist theory of the "Elements of Narrative Grammar" in Algirdas Julien Greimas's *On Meaning*, and the deconstructionist ideas of Jacques Derrida on "writing." Although Greimas's theories are basically of the narrative and therefore have not been used much in poetic analysis, my contention is that Greimas is nevertheless essential to this study because his semantic theories form a means for grasping the dominant concepts in a poem. Another reason for adopting a Greimassian approach in poetry is that Greimas does not see "narrative structures" as necessarily novelistic ones only, but as he makes it clear, they also "can be found elsewhere than in manifestation of meaning effected through the natural language. They can be found in cinematographic and oneiric languages." Greimas provides a good example not only for this reexamination of a poem's grammar, but also for the general development of a collective system of human thought.

Moreover, a Derridean deconstructionist reading is necessary for this study particularly because al-Bayāṭī's poetry invites this line of critical analysis, as his texts call for a more penetrating criticism to analyze Greimas's structural outcome. I also share with Terry Eagleton his concern about the end-point beyond which structural analysis could not go. Derrida's writing not only redirects poetic reading, but it also reflects on and continues what structuralism in general left incomplete (see below).

Greimas is one of those theoreticians who address the question of literature dispassionately as part of the larger enterprise of restating the relation between the literary text, society and meaning. Greimas's semantic theories form a vital core for what de Man calls "an autonomous discipline of critical investigation." Structural analysis has confirmed the remarkable economy of literary motifs that prevail in mythologies, folk-tales, and are later represented in poetry, drama, and the novel. Like an epiphany, a motif cannot be a beginning; it is the result of repetition, shared by literary works all over the world. Themes of similar root-structures testify to this striking commonality shared by literatures of different cultures and languages. It has even been radically argued that in all literatures there is, as Robert Graves pronounced, "one story and one story only": that of "the Quest," and Greimas is one good example of the development of this tendency towards a collective system of human thought.

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3 For elaboration on what Terry Eagleton calls the act being obliged "to sit back and wonder what to do next" after "having characterized the underlying rule systems of a literary text," see the chapter titled "Structuralism and Semiotics" in *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minnesota: U of Minnesota P, 1983), 79-100.