

'THE LOVED ONE ALWAYS LEAVES':
UNCERTAINTY AND THE 'SILENCE OF GOD' IN
PRE-ISLAMIC AND GLOBAL ARABIC POETIC WORLDS

by

Erin Helene Barrentine

(Under the Direction of Alan A. Godlas)

ABSTRACT

This thesis considers the topic of the relevance of the study of pre-modern literature and religion in our global world. Employing Charles Long's concept of the "silent god," it argues that secular and religious experience share a confrontation with the undefined aspect of the divine and uncertainty it evokes. This can serve as a focal point of shared meaning cross-temporally and cross-culturally and between religious and non-religious identifying worlds. The central role of these themes of silence and uncertainty in pre-Islamic Arabic poetry is explored through a survey of the *qaṣīdah* and *rithā'*. The continued presence of the pre-Islamic vocabulary of uncertainty in the works of contemporary Arabic poets (and poets in other languages influenced by the tradition) is then noted. It is suggested that, in addition to shared universal experience, there are similarities in historical contexts that make the literatures of these two periods particularly resonant with each other.

INDEX WORDS: Arabic poetry, Poetry, Pre-Islamic poetry, Qaṣīdah, Elegy, Religion and literature, Silence, Uncertainty, Charles Long, Globalization, Arabic literature, Mobility, Pre-Islamic religion, Pre-Islamic period

'THE LOVED ONE ALWAYS LEAVES':
UNCERTAINTY AND THE 'SILENCE OF GOD' IN
PRE-ISLAMIC AND GLOBAL ARABIC POETIC WORLDS

by

ERIN HELENE BARRENTINE

A.B., Bryn Mawr College, 2003

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2017

© 2017

Erin Helene Barrentine

All Rights Reserved

'THE LOVED ONE ALWAYS LEAVES':
UNCERTAINTY AND THE 'SILENCE OF GOD' IN
PRE-ISLAMIC AND GLOBAL ARABIC POETIC WORLDS

by

ERIN HELENE BARRENTINE

Major Professor: Alan Godlas

Committee: Kenneth Honerkamp
Carolyn Jones Medine

Electronic Version Approved:

Suzanne Barbour
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
December 2017

يَقُولُونَ شَاعِرٌ نَّتَرَبَّصُ بِهِ رَيْبَ الْمَنُونِ

They say, “He is a poet for whom we await fate’s uncertainty.”

— The Qur’an 52:30 (trans. by Arberry)

Dedicated to my sister, Emily, without whose emotional and material support it would not have been finished.

In memory of my grandfather, John Salomone, a self-taught scholar of religions and symbols.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank the University of Georgia Graduate School for their funding which made it possible for me to pursue this degree, and my adviser, Alan Godlas, for his willingness to work with me to finish this thesis after an extended hiatus, as well as the other members of my committee, Kenneth Honerkamp and Carolyn Jones Medine. In addition, although he has not been involved in its completion, I want to make acknowledgement of my undergraduate adviser, Michael Sells, who first encouraged my study and love of Arabic poetry and whose mentorship led me to this point. I am also grateful to my fellow graduate students in the Department of Religion at UGA for their support, in particular Andrea Cluck and Lauren Caruso, and for the stimulating discussions of the members of the two RELI 8510 graduate seminars in theory taught by Carolyn Jones Medine during the fall of 2010 and spring 2011, out of which came the theoretical formulation of this thesis. All shortcomings are my own.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	v
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION: BETWEEN LĀ ILĀHA AND ILLĀ ALLĀH.....	1
2 THE CASE FOR THE STUDY OF PRE-MODERN RELIGION AND LITERATURE IN A GLOBAL WORLD.....	5
The Modern Study of Pre-modern Religion.....	9
The Western Study of Arabic Literature.....	13
Charles Long on Religion as Signification and the “Silent God”.....	18
3 AN OVERVIEW OF PRE-ISLAMIC POETRY AND ITS CONTEXT.....	31
Pre-Islamic Religio-Historical Context.....	32
The Pre-Islamic Poetic Tradition.....	39
The <i>Qaṣīdah</i> & Uncertainty: A History of Western Scholarly Perspectives..	42
Conclusions.....	45
4 AN ANALYSIS OF UNCERTAINTY IN THE PRE-ISLAMIC POETIC TRADITION.....	47
Uncertainty, Ephemerality and Silence in the <i>Qaṣīdah</i>	48
Uncertainty, Ephemerality and Silence in the <i>Rithā</i> ’.....	94
Conclusions.....	102

5	PRE-ISLAMIC SITES OF UNCERTAINTY IN TWO MODERN	
	ARABIC POEMS.....	106
6	CONCLUSIONS: AGHA SHAHID ALI RETURNING.....	114
	BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	119

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: BETWEEN LĀ ILĀHA AND ILLĀ ALLĀH

In a poem on the Islamic *shahādah*, or statement of witness (as the poem is also titled), contemporary American Sufi poet Daniel Abdal-Hayy Moore¹ contemplates the space between the negation and affirmation of the presence of God hidden within the pronouncement. This uncertainty and space between the two he characterizes by a not-so-silent silence, a cry without response:

"There is no God..."

Pause. Silence. Years go by and some
intrepid souls actually
write books about it, fill a so-called
vacuum with their squeals of despair,
scratch their heads incessantly, scratch
each other's heads.

But then the voice takes another
breath, for breath is the
current the canoes of words go out on, and
finishes the sentence:

"but God." ²

Much ink has been spilled over the first part of this statement of witness, the "there is no god" part (in Arabic *la illāha* and followed by the second part, *illā allāh*, meaning, except

¹ Abdal-Hayy Moore was born in 1940 in Oakland, California, and became a Sufi Muslim in 1970. Between 1964 and 2015, he published numerous volumes of poetry, as well as two prose books. He was also an editor of multiple volumes of poetry translations and journals. He passed away in 2016. See "About the Author," The Ecstatic Exchange, accessed November 28, 2017, <http://ecstaticexchange.com/about/>.

² Daniel Moore, *The Blind Beekeeper: Poems* (Bethesda, MD: Kitab, 2001), 12.

God) as the defining pronouncement which brought into being the modern age, a post-Enlightenment period in which reason rather than God became the ultimate authority. This age of modernity was characterized by Foucault, taking as his guide a definition offered by Charles Baudelaire, as one of “consciousness of the discontinuity of time: a break with tradition, a feeling of novelty, of vertigo in the face of the passing moment.”³ Modernity was not only this consciousness, he argued, but also a deliberate response to this consciousness, the act of “recapturing something eternal that is not beyond the present instant, nor behind it, but within it. It is the grasping and willing of the “heroic” aspect of the present moment.”⁴

Within theoretical frameworks of cultural history and thought, there is a tendency to generalize that this consciousness and its response, in the wake of the loss of the anchoring presence of God, is a unique experience of the modern man, and more specifically the secular man. Such a dialectical perspective implies that the religious voice is one of certainty and affirmation of God's presence, that it lacks the particular tone of loss and isolation and vertigo, which characterizes the man who lives in a secular society. The existential crisis springing from gazing into the abyss is a hallmark of our current age, it asserts, one that separates him fundamentally from religious man.

But Foucault himself was not satisfied to confine the modern experience to a particular post-enlightenment time period of the West, saying instead:

I wonder whether we may not envisage modernity rather as an attitude than as a period of history. And by “attitude,” I mean a mode of relating to contemporary reality; a voluntary choice made by certain people; in the end a way of thinking and

³ Michel Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?” in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2010), 39.

⁴ Ibid., 39-40.

feeling.... And consequently, rather than seek to distinguish the “modern era” from the “pre-modern” or “postmodern,” I think it would be more useful to try to find out how the attitude of modernity, ever since its formation, has found itself struggling with attitudes of “countermodernity.”⁵

Within this thesis, like Foucault, I argue that these temporal and spatial boundaries of so-called pre-modern and modern time periods and religious and secular experience are often artificially created and exaggerated, and I make a case against ‘otherizing’ these experiences from each other. Rather than a new invention of the secular Western world, this subversive voice of uncertainty, this feeling of vertigo in the face of the passing moment and confrontations with the “absence” of the divine, I argue, was built into the Arabic poetic tradition from its earliest beginnings (or as early as we can know them), and spans the experience of both the pre-Islamic poet, the poet after the coming of Islam writing about both the secular and the divine realm, and the modern and postmodern poet. And just as the practice of piling up of stones or the accumulation of graffiti at passing stations of their journey,⁶ the piling up of this poetic vocabulary upon the same motifs and images used to express the individual’s confrontation with that silence and the passing moment has created a certain community of strangers, as it were, one which speak back and forth across temporal and spatial boundaries and creates a certain eternalized aspect to the experience of the ephemeral.

The goal of this work, then, is to explore the role of uncertainty surrounding the presence of the divine or eternal in the Arabic poetic tradition. I therefore ask some of the same questions that have been asked of the modern age of the pre-modern: what is its

⁵ Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?” 39.

⁶ See, for example, Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī, attr., *The Book of Strangers: Mediaeval Arabic Graffiti on the Theme of Nostalgia*, trans. P. Crane and S. Moreh (Princeton: Marcus Weiner Publishers, 2000).

experience with respect to the passing moment and the ephemeral? And how is this moment expressed in motifs and imagery? These questions might ideally be asked at all points within the pre-modern tradition in order to build a fuller understanding, but given the broadness of that tradition, I confine myself here with an exploration of this subject within the pre-Islamic poetic canon.

With this goal in mind, the first chapter of this thesis begins by exploring in more depth the theoretical history of the disciplines of religious studies and Arabic literature with regards to this uncertainty, and by mapping out a useful theoretical framework for understanding it, drawing heavily upon Charles Long's concept of the "silence of God." The second chapter establishes a religio-historical framework for understanding these themes of uncertainty and ephemerality within the poetry of pre-Islamic Arabia and discusses how such themes have been addressed by other scholars. The third chapter presents an in-depth survey and analysis of these themes in pre-Islamic poetry in two of its more major forms: the *qaṣīdah* and the *rithā'*. Finally, I look at a few examples of how this voice and the themes that the pre-Islamic poet employed to frame his or her own experience of the ephemeral moment were both continued and played upon in the work of modern and postmodern poets drawing upon the tradition. Through this examination, I hope to show that not only has the modern and postmodern world not lost its "religious" voice, but that the pre-modern one we imagine never lacked a "secular" voice, and that poetic voices of both periods can spring from the pause between the voice crying "there is no God" and "but God."

CHAPTER 2

THE CASE FOR THE STUDY OF PRE-MODERN RELIGION AND LITERATURE IN A GLOBAL WORLD

*...Who will sing now? Was there just poison
or some grief in You when he fell through Chaos--
Your Abyss--for nights, and his mad wings, raging,
deafened the soundproof*

*halls of Heaven? What is apart from legend?
But He doesn't answer. He lets His Light go
out completely....*

- Agha Shahid Ali, from *A Secular Comedy*

Let me narrate one particular moment from our contemporary world that is relevant to the writing of this thesis. Picture me sitting on a bus headed for Chicago in spring 2009. I'm going there to visit prospective graduate programs (hence the relevance to this thesis). Though I grew up in Washington State, was educated near Philadelphia and am currently living in Wisconsin, these programs are located in various other cities across the US to which I've never been. While I'm watching other places I've never been to go by the window, I'm also holding a book of poetry in my hands. This particular collection of poems is written in English by a poet who grew up in Kashmir and later became a professor in the United States.⁷ The collection deals with the death of his mother in the US where she had come to receive medical treatment and the trip to return her body to her homeland in Kashmir specifically, and the passing moment, the irrevocable nature of death, and the immutable absence of God and of dead loved ones generally. One of the poems has an

⁷ Agha Shahid Ali, *Rooms Are Never Finished* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2002).

appropriately postmodern title “A Secular Comedy.” It references various tropes from pre-Islamic Arabic love poetry filtered through the Persian-Urdu Sufi poetic tradition and a hotel in Oregon that I stayed at once with my family as a child growing up.⁸ At that particular moment, the collection of poems about this Kashmiri-American man’s homesickness and sense of dislocation seems to speak directly to and evoke my own.

In the previous introduction, I briefly discussed western scholarly definitions of the modern and postmodern world and their connection to a sense of dislocation in time and space. Scholars have begun to talk about the particular world we inhabit now, however, as evolving into another new world, which while still possessing some of the qualities of these earlier worlds, is also distinctly different, one dominated by a process of globalization. This process has been driven by technological advancements, which have led to the establishment of various global networks which exist side by side with previously dominant power structures. Social theorist Arjun Appadurai identifies these new networks as *cellular* structures, characterized by their fluid political and spatial boundaries and distinguished from preexisting *vertebrate* structures such as nation states.⁹ These different cellular networks, he argues, be they terrorist networks, networks of multinational and international corporations, or social networks sustained by the internet, have created new relationships on a global scale which undermine the legitimacy and identity of both the local community and the nation state, and which have, Appadurai notes, “create[d]

⁸ The hotel in question was the DoubleTree (formerly, and now once more, the Red Lion) in Jantzen Beach, Portland, Oregon. See v. 9-10 of the poem in Ali, *Rooms Are Never Finished*, 63.

⁹ See Arjun Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers: An Essay on the Geography of Anger* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

unprecedented tensions between identities of origin, identities of residence, and identities of aspiration.”¹⁰

This blurring of lines of who belongs where and to what place and where they are meant to be going is in some sense a continuation of the sense of dislocation present in the postmodern age, but one now taking place at a new scale and speed. The uncertainty of the postmodern world, in which the Western world was confronted with the realization of a multiplicity of other communities and value systems, has now been heightened. As Appadurai points out, in a global world, no longer is it just the case of the nation state working to subsume the identity of the local community, but its identity is simultaneously being undermined as well. This has led to further increases in inequality and in violence against minority communities who act as the scapegoat for the greater more abstract threat of globalization to the certainty of the nation state’s own identity.¹¹

Paradoxically, it has also coincided with a parallel growing sense of interconnectedness and of transcendental global identity. The establishment of these cellular global networks has created a world in which “it is difficult to keep local instances local in their significance”¹² and also created for us new relationships, which transcend our local and national identities, making it possible for us to view our local problems through lenses of international solidarity.¹³ All of this is to say that in a globalized world, the case for the relevance for the reading of, or even study of contemporary world literature to the life of the Western scholar or non-scholar is easier to make than ever before. In this interconnected world, it has become difficult even to separate what constitutes “Western”

¹⁰ Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers*, 37.

¹¹ Ibid., 42.

¹² Ibid., 40.

¹³ Ibid., see especially 131-37.

and “Non-Western” literature. All our lives have direct, not indirect, connections to each other, and we are all increasingly occupying the same hotel rooms.

But what is the relevance of the study of historical literary or religious traditions, especially non-Western traditions, to our understanding of our own lives in this globalized world? What is the relevance of the subject of early or Classical Arabic poetry, the subject of this thesis and the reason that I was sitting on that bus in the first place? That is, what is its connection to my, or to any inhabitant of this global world’s, life? Surely the inclusion of all those traditional poetic tropes in the poetry of a contemporary secular poet suffering from the exact kind of double nausea Appadurai describes suggests that there is a connection. The poet had not jettisoned them entirely in favor of a completely new language or vocabulary. But one cannot ignore either the fact that the current modern—postmodern—and now globalized world represents a historical moment and context extremely different from the one which existed previously.

As was highlighted in the previous introduction, Western scholars define this difference in religious terms. The modern world was ushered in with the pronouncement that “God is dead,” or, at the very least, with the replacement or subservience of the religious mind to the rational mind. Within this world, local systems of orientation, that is, of religion, were suppressed and superseded by that of reason and the nation state. This undermining of local religious traditions continued into the postmodern world, in which the Western world was confronted with the fallibility of its own dominant narrative and the existence of counter-narratives. The loss of God as an orientating force of time and place resulted in the vertigo of the modern, postmodern, and now global world. But if God is truly dead, then what is the point of studying literatures or religions of the past? What

relevance do they have to us? Is the study of the pre-modern world to be reduced to nostalgia and mourning for a lost innocence that no longer exists? Or an attempt to preserve a dead tradition without connection to our own experience?

The Modern Study of Pre-modern Religion

For many early scholars of the modern field of the study of religions, this was indeed thought to be the case. And it is true that by presuming to talk about religion within an academic framework we are involved in a modern activity that separates us from the pre-modern understanding of what we are talking about by a certain distance. That is, as many critics have noted, pre-modern people would not have recognized a separate category of “religion” as such, it so permeated their understanding of the world in a holistic sense.¹⁴ Many early scholars of religious studies believed that this modern understanding of religion as something separate from the secular was the death knell of its existence in the contemporary world. Following the Enlightenment, many assumed that such forms of thought were simply going to disappear altogether and that the closest thing to it left would remain in literature.

Influenced by the development of the field of archaeology in the same time period, these early scholars were interested in constructing a history of different forms of human culture.¹⁵ One of the earliest founders of the field of the study of religion, for example, E.B. Tylor, postulated that religious thought in human societies had been developing along a continuum, originating first in animism and the formulation of the concept of the soul.¹⁶

¹⁴ For a discussion of these critiques, see Kevin Shillbrack in “Religions: Are There Any?” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78, no. 4 (2010): 1113-17.

¹⁵ Charles Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 39.

¹⁶ E.B. Tylor, “Animism and the Origin of Religion,” in *Introducing Religion: Readings from Classical Theorists*, ed. Daniel L. Pals (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 1-35.

Though the process may have been unsteady or nonlinear, through the attainment of knowledge passed through cultures over time, human beings in different societies came to attain a better understanding of the world, and earlier forms of religious thought were discarded in favor of more advanced ones. Evidence of this, he argued, could be seen in holdovers from these earlier belief systems (such as the custom of blessing a person who sneezes), which still existed within societies, but which had lost their original religious meaning and become empty gestures. Through this cultural learning process, animism lead to polytheism, which eventually lead to belief in a Supreme Deity, and then to “true monotheism.” Taylor saw the Enlightenment and the adoption of reason as the end result of this continual accumulation of knowledge, and religious practices which continued following it as holdovers that would eventually lose their meaning. In this schema, all human beings, pre-modern and modern, were connected by the same human nature that sought to understand and explain the world, but they were also separated by their specific history of understanding, which they had inherited from their cultural heritage and historical context. Similarly, one of the other major early scholars of religious studies, James Frazer, was also concerned with earlier and original forms of religious thought and saw the development of human thought and understanding of the world existing along a continuum from what he termed the ‘age of magic’ to the ‘age of religion’ and culminating in the ‘age of science.’¹⁷

As later critics noted, the perspectives of some of these early scholars of religious studies were grounded in a Western perspective of history, and the central place of Christian monotheism within it, which shaped their understanding of the historical process.

¹⁷ James Frazer, “Magic and the Rise of Religion,” in *Introducing Religion: Readings from Classical Theorists*, ed. Daniel L. Pals (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 37-70.

Though neither Tylor nor Frazer themselves made value judgments about other pre-modern forms of religion, within some of these early evolutionary understandings of religion, monotheism, often Christian monotheism, came to be seen as more ideally religious than other forms of religious expression. The result of the combination of this narrative along with the narrative of secular thought as the ultimate achievement of human thought, sometimes resulted in slightly schizophrenic behavior on the part of some scholars in which on the one hand, secularism and rationalism was lauded, and religion (defined par excellence as Christian variation of monotheism) was also held up in esteem, while other religious traditions were simultaneously criticized or looked down upon as either too religious or not religious (i.e. not Christian) enough.¹⁸ The field of the study of pre-modern non-Western religion, then, had to wrestle with two potential levels of separation between it and its subject of study: that of the secular gazing at the non-secular, and that of the ethnocentric gaze which sought to define religion and religious experience from the perspective of Western Christianity.

To bypass this distance, other scholars sought to strip out the specific social and historical circumstances of religious traditions and focus instead on trying to define and find underlying universals that characterized religious *experience* and *expression* cross-culturally and cross-temporally. This group of scholars were termed by religious studies scholar Charles Long as the *phenomenologists* and *morphologists* respectively.¹⁹ One of the foundational *phenomenologists*, German scholar Rudolf Otto, formulated that all

¹⁸ For more on this tendency and its criticism, see Shillbrack, "Religions: Are There Any?", 1112-38.

¹⁹ As in, for example, his essay "Prolegomenon to a Religious Hermeneutic," in Long, *Significations*, 27.

religion originated from the individual experience of the *numinous*.²⁰ In defining religion as individual religious experience of the non-rational, it became both universal and cross-temporal. Within Otto's formulation, religious expression and traditions followed from the individual's attempt to reflect upon and share that experience, rather than originating from specific historical circumstances as earlier scholars had postulated.²¹

While the *phenomenologists* focused on universal religious experience, the *morphologists* were interested instead in finding universal aspects of religious expression and practice. One of the major figures in this group was Mircea Eliade. In studying pre-modern non-Western religion, Eliade hoped to be able to speak about human nature and the way humans construct meaning. Eliade characterized the world of pre-modern man as divided into sacred and profane spatio-temporal worlds. When the sacred erupted across the boundary into the profane world, it was experienced by man as a heirophany. This sacred world helped to order and orientate members of a religious tradition in archetypal time and space. The sacred had not disappeared in the modern secular world, he argued, it was simply experienced in a different way and unrecognized. With the dismissal of the sacred world, we had lost the ability to give form or expression to heirophanic experience and became doomed to the "terror of history" in which our lives and events become unremembered and meaningless.²²

Long argues that both the *phenomenologists/morphologists*, treating religion as an expression of a universal experience of community or the numinous, and the *socio-*

²⁰ Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, trans. John W. Harvey, rev. ed. (London: Oxford University Press; H. Milford, 1928).

²¹ Long, *Significations*, 40.

²² Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and The Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, 1959).

historicists like Tylor and Frazer, treating it as culturally and historically specific knowledge, failed to achieve a complete understanding of religion. Long argues instead for a holistic approach.²³ In doing so, he identifies one of the major problems of the modern religious scholar: How can one both give tribute to and respect difference and the impossibility of understanding religious practices of different times and traditions while also producing empathy and understanding of them? How can one be both a universalist and a historicist – how can one find similarity without erasing difference? The other, perhaps related, major problem facing the religious scholar is that religion clearly has not disappeared from societies since the onset of the modern world, as was predicted by earlier scholars. Why that may be and the implications for this will be addressed at the latter part of this chapter, as I look to Long for an answer to explain not only how to achieve a holistic study of religion, but also the relevance of the pre-modern to the modern. I wish to address first, however, the scholarly tradition of the study of Arabic literature.

The Western Study of Arabic Literature

In the field of Arabic Literature, a similar tendency to the one within the field of religion can be seen in the treatment of Western scholars of pre-modern material in the field as “an other.”²⁴ The first encounters of the Western academic community with Arabic poetry might be said to begin in the late 18th and 19th centuries, with the discovery of a group of European scholars of classical Arabic poetry and their subsequent interest in

²³ Long, *Significations*, 27.

²⁴ For a general overview and critique of this scholarly history, upon which the summary presented here is based, see: Michael Sells, “The Qaṣīda and The West: Self-Reflective Stereotype and Critical Encounter,” *al-‘Arabiyya* 20 (1987): 307-57; Jaroslav Stetkevych, “Some Observations on Arabic Poetry,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 26, no. 1 (1967): 1-12; Jaroslav Stetkevych, *Arabic Poetry and Orientalism*, ed. Walid Khazendar (Oxford: St. John’s College Research Centre, 2004); Suzanne P. Stetkevych, “Structuralist Interpretations of Pre-Islamic Poetry: Critique and New Directions,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 42, no. 2 (1983): 85-107.

translating it into various European languages. This group of early scholars, mainly of English and German origin, has been labeled by the scholar Jaroslav Stetkevych as the *romantic orientalists*, and included among its major figures William Jones, Friedrich Rückert, and Charles Lyall.²⁵ Jones completed his translations of seven *qaṣīdahs* of *Al-Mu‘allaqāt* in 1782.²⁶ These same poems were translated into the German by Hartmann by 1815, and the German scholar and poet Rückert completed a translation of the *Al-Hamāsah* into German in 1846. Inspired by Rückert, Charles Lyall followed with his translations of pre-Islamic poems into English published in 1885.²⁷ These early translations were mainly literary in their purpose, and a great number of the early translators were themselves poets who found in these translations poetic inspiration and understanding, which seems to suggest that it had some relevance to their own lives.²⁸

The later groups of scholars who followed, however, which J. Stetkevych called the *historicists and philologists*, tended to treat pre-modern Arabic poetry as a compendium of historical or natural or linguistic information, for the facts and information which might be gleaned from the poems, but not to appreciate it for its poetic or lyrical qualities itself.²⁹ Indeed for them it occupied such another world that it was not understood as poetry as they understood it at all. In accessing the role of religion within Arabic poetry, these early scholars often fell into the same schizophrenic traps that plagued the religious scholars I noted above – criticizing pre-modern Arabic poetry either for being too religious or not

²⁵ J. Stetkevych, *Arabic Poetry and Orientalism*, 13.

²⁶ See William Jones, *The Works of Sir William Jones*, Vol. 10 (London: John Stockdale, 1807).

²⁷ Reprinted after his death in Charles J. Lyall, *Translations of Ancient Arabian Poetry: Chiefly Præ-Islamic with an Introduction and Notes* (New York: Colombia University Press, 1930).

²⁸ J. Stetkevych, *Arabic Poetry and Orientalism*, 13.

²⁹ Ibid.

religious enough (in a Western Christian sense of what religion meant). For example, scholars would often castigate the poetry of pre-Islamic Arabia for being “too secular” because of its focus on natural phenomena and place, and praise later Islamic poetry which employed more explicitly abstract concepts for containing truer religious feeling and depth. Thus H.A.R Gibb says of the pre-Islamic Arabs in his introduction to Arabic Literature:

Their secular physical environment has moulded their habits, thoughts and speech...the circle of ideas bounding the horizon of such nomads is necessarily narrow; the struggle for existence is too severe to allow for attention to anything beyond the practical and material needs of the day, still less of interest in abstract concepts and religious speculation.... Their thought is expressed in terms of the concrete, and their language will contain few abstractions...³⁰

Attempts to go beyond the reading of the pre-Islamic *qaṣīdah* as purely descriptive were revived by the school of structuralists in the late 20th century, who inspired by the work of Claude Levi-Strauss, tried to apply his theories on the structuralist interpretation of myth³¹ to the genre of Arabic poetry and to the *qaṣīdah* poem in particular to reveal its hidden meanings. These attempts were in certain ways directly opposite the earlier atomistic view of Arabic poetry of their predecessors, for rather than read the poem as a pastiche of independent and unrelated descriptions of places and moments, they instead sought to uncover thematic elements underlying the poem, which connected its hitherto superficially appearing disparate elements to construct meaning. These structuralists were in some sense synonymous with and influenced by the *morphologists* within the field of religion, for they sought to identify universal themes within the structure of poems. One of the earliest among those to attempt this kind of reading was Mary Bateson, who in her

³⁰ H.A.R Gibb, *Arabic Literature: An Introduction*, 2nd rev. ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), 3.

³¹ See, for example, Claude Levi-Strauss, “The Structural Study of Myth,” *Journal of American Folklore* 67 (1955): 428-44.

book³² endeavored to explore the structural patterns within five pre-Islamic *qaṣīdahs* taken from *Al-Mu‘allaqāt*. Bateson began by dividing each of the poems into passages based on thematic content and then examining their repetition and relationship to other such passages both at the intra- and extra- level of the poem. In addition to Bateson, Kamal Abu Deeb attempted a slightly different structuralist reading of the *qaṣīdah* of Labīd a few years later.³³ Abu Deeb followed more closely the methods of Levi-Strauss in identifying various oppositional themes in the poem, such as lowlands and highlands, sacred and non-sacred time, and dryness and fertility.

The problem with these approaches was that, just as the morphologists ignored historical contexts, by following Levi-Strauss’s lead and looking for structural relationships within the *qaṣīdah*, these structuralists nonetheless ignored relationships and meaning which might be the result of *narrative* structure or stylistic elements of the poem, even though Levi-Strauss himself thought that myth was quite different from poetry in lacking such elements. Critiques of both historicist and structuralist approaches have since attempted to revive a literary appreciation of Arabic poetry that comprehends it in a holistic manner. One such critic, Suzanne Stetkevych pointed out that “the thematic relationships of the poem are essentially poetic, that is, metaphoric. That is after all what makes a poem a poem...it is not just a myth, folktale, or ritual metered and rhymed.”³⁴ She argued not for throwing out the structuralist approach entirely, but for a *mythopoetic* approach which understood the poem not as simply myth, but as *both* myth and poem.

³² Mary Bateson, *Structural Continuity in Poetry: A Linguistic Study of Five Pre-Islamic Arabic Odes* (Paris: Mouton & Co, 1970).

³³ Kamal Abu Deeb, “Towards a Structural Analysis of Pre-Islamic Poetry,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 6 (1975): 148-84.

³⁴ S. Stetkevych, “Structuralist Interpretations of Pre-Islamic Poetry,” 95.

Another critic, the aforementioned Jaroslav Stetkevych, also decrying the fact that such earlier studies of the Arabic literature failed to comprehend it *as literature*, critiqued the importance of “research” in the study of Arabic literature. He suggested that what was more valuable towards actual understanding of the texts was “extensive, intelligent reading, motivated by *an intimate interest*, and capable of generating this legitimate pleasure and excitement” [italics mine].³⁵ In much the same way as Long advocated for a balance between comparative and historical studies of religion, J. Stetkevych wanted to find a “marriage between historicism and literary criticism” in the study of Arabic literature, in which literary criticism took the primary and historical studies the secondary position, and in which there was a “reclaiming of the past for the present” so that such texts can be “given life.”³⁶ He argued that to go forward, to end this otherizing and to be able to fully understand Arabic poetry on its own terms, for there to be a full meeting of the minds and to understand Arabic poetry *as poetry*, Western scholars must fully integrate themselves into 1) the Arabic language 2) the Arabic scholarly and literary community and 3) the current literary communities of their own traditions and languages.³⁷ Scholars of early and Classical Arabic literature in particular, he argued, could accomplish the second objective by contributing to the modern Arabic literary communities understanding of its roots.³⁸ In summary, J. Stetkevych argued that the scholar of early and classical Arabic literature must make their studies relevant to the modern reader, and to the modern creative community specifically, both within the Arabic speaking community and the community of speakers of his or her own language.

³⁵ J. Stetkevych, *Arabic Poetry and Orientalism*, 19.

³⁶ Ibid., 20-21.

³⁷ Ibid., 13-28.

³⁸ Ibid.

But if this is to be our task, then, how are we to do it? I want to go a step further and suggest that just full fluency and operation within the Arabic language and the Arabic literary community and our own literary communities as J. Stetkevych suggests, though perhaps enough for scholars of contemporary Arabic literature, is not enough for scholars of pre-modern literature. For the scholar of pre-modern religion and pre-modern Arabic literature is still faced with another bridge of “otherness” to be crossed, beyond that of his or her own ethnocentrism in approaching a particular cultural or linguistic tradition. He or she is also faced with the bridge between the historical context of the pre-modern world and the one we currently inhabit. Even if we, for example, take a mythopoetic approach to our readings, as S. Stetkevych and others in that school do, what relevance do such myths and concepts of the sacred have to our own life today? How can one generate that “intimate interest” and “legitimate pleasure and excitement,” which J. Stetkevych so advocates, in the literature of a religious pre-modern world, in a supposed areligious world in which reason is the supreme guide and “God is dead”?

Charles Long on Religion as Signification and the “Silent God”

This question is taken up indirectly by noted scholar of African American religion Charles Long in a series of essays in which he both traces the history of the modern study of religion and puts forth a manifesto for the future of the discipline.³⁹ The short answer according to Long is that, in the modern world, God isn’t dead, He is silent. In order to understand what Long means by saying that the modern (and subsequent) world(s) are inhabited by a silent God, it is necessary to take a step back and discuss first his

³⁹ See in particular: “The Study of Religion: Its Nature and Its Discourse,” “Prolegomenon to a Religious Hermeneutic,” “Archaism and Hermeneutics” and “Silence and Signification” in Long, *Significations*.

understanding of religion and its relationship to language. Long's understanding is shaped by the work of the French philosopher and linguist Saussure and his theory of signs and symbols and the relationships between them.⁴⁰ Saussure postulated a category of linguistic terms called *signs*, whose relationship to what they signified was arbitrary. The other category he identified were *symbols*, whose relationship with what they signified was not completely arbitrary but had at least some natural connection to the object it was used to designate.

Similar to Foucault, Long drew upon Saussure's work in recognizing the power structures inherent in linguistic structures which underlie societal structures. Because the relationships between signs and the things which they signify are arbitrary, they argue, attempts to name or define through their use is inherently an act of oppression of the "signified" by the "signifier." Though this arbitrariness also paradoxically gives them the ability to be undermined in language as well. Where does the act of signification intersect with the practice of religion? While Long accepted Saussure's argument that religious symbols were *symbols* and not arbitrary *signs*, he argued that even these did not escape the paradigm. "Religious symbols, precisely because of their intrinsic power, radiate and deploy meanings," he says, and "the spread of these meanings creates an arena and field of power relationships."⁴¹ Because of these power relationships, he argues, they are "best defined in terms of significations and signs."⁴²

These signs and significations, Long continues, form the basis of religion. Religion for Long is rooted in the act of creative expression and in what he calls the "rupture of

⁴⁰ See especially the introduction to Long, *Significations*, 1-9.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴² *Ibid.*

myth.” This rupture is the compulsive creative response of human beings whenever they are confronted with “the manifestation of some new form of reality.”⁴³ Similar to Eliade’s concept of heirophany, this manifestation is the permeation of a new or primordial reality into the ordinary one. As this new sacred reality manifests itself within the existing world, both the manifestation and the human creative response to it are acts of signification: things which testify to the sacred, to something beyond themselves, to “the reality of a mode of being that is prior and different from the ordinary cultural categories.”⁴⁴

Religious experience is defined by Long as the way in which the human being “apprehends and discovers” through the use of religious symbol or language these sacred manifestations within “forms of the world.”⁴⁵ Therefore, in Long’s construction, the experience of the sacred and the creative response to it take place simultaneously and are inseparable, as they are likewise inseparable from the manifestation which is experienced, and the primordial sacred reality which the manifestation points towards.

Despite being inseparable, however, they are not the same. Creativity, according to Long, is “human, not primordial.” Because any act of creative expression is an act of signification, it sets the human apart from the sacred, primordial reality, leading to the “rupture” which is the “rupture of myth.” Thus, Long points out “the compulsion, the dynamic, the desire to stand over against the imagination of nature happens simultaneously with the first imagination of nature.”⁴⁶ But the act of expression cannot be separated from experience either, thus he makes the Derridean point that “for the religious person this

⁴³ Long, *Significations*, 30-31.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 28.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 30.

rupture from the ground of creativity elicits a response of intimacy and nostalgia.”⁴⁷ That is, religion, in Long’s paradigm, simultaneously brings one closer to and further away from the sacred reality. The ontological status of human beings and human culture depends upon this rupture between human culture and the sacred, without it, the former would not exist, and without it they would not be able to speak about or experience the latter either.

It is in this way that Long views religion as a “language,” something he uses to refer not only to verbal or written expression, but “to designate any mode of behavior that has as its purpose the communication of sacred meaning to the social group.”⁴⁸ His expansive understanding of the term includes within it expression in the form of the natural environment or material objects and ritual and ethics.⁴⁹ Religious expression differs from regular or ordinary forms of expression because of its ties to a primordial, permanent sacred reality.⁵⁰ Long notes that this tie to another sacred and unspeakable reality means that religious expression and apprehension “while revealing-remain[s] mysterious.” The inability to fully express this inexhaustible reality within the limited forms of ordinary reality simultaneously obscures and also drives religious expression forward indefinitely.⁵¹

From this understanding of the basis of religion in creative expression, an expression which never fully expresses or stops expressing, comes Long’s understanding of silence, and more specifically, the silence of God. Long identifies silence in a few different forms. There is the silence of an oppressed people or community who are unable to define themselves, but instead are defined by others, the silence of the “signified” who

⁴⁷ Long, *Significations*, 31.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

are unable to signify themselves.⁵² In the modern world, these silenced were those people or cultures who were not allowed to tell their own stories but who had their stories told to and about them by Western societies or scholarship. In addition, in this new post Enlightenment world, in which reason became one of the dominant signifiers, a world in which religion is a discipline of study, the religious voice has like that of Non-Western peoples and cultures also often been defined and silenced. In fact, Long argues, when the secular voice identified religion as a thing belonging to non-Western people, it condemned religious people to the same silence these people had also been subject.⁵³

I think it is worth appending to Long's point that similarly and simultaneously, Christian monotheism as the definition of "religion" par excellence, has also been used to silence the non-Christian voice in the same way. Increasingly, in our contemporary world, that voice has attempted to push back and silence the secular, rational voice as well. So these categories and identities of signified and signifiers are historically contingent upon existing power structures; they are neither set in stone nor do they necessarily operate in only one fashion or one direction.

The silence of the signified was and is not just passive, Long argues, or if it is only passive, "passive power is still power."⁵⁴ It exists as a counter-to-voice that holds open an undefined space. Speaking of non-Western peoples within the imperialistic world, he says, "they existed as the pauses between words--those pauses which are necessary if speech is to be possible--and in their silence they spoke...[the signified] kept the ontological dimension open through their silence. This silence was necessary as it was forced."⁵⁵ What

⁵² Long, *Significations*, 58-59.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 195.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 58.

Long seems to point to here is that silence creates a space which allows for the existence of something beyond what is defined. By refusing or being unable to speak, signified peoples, to a certain extent, were defying definition by their signifiers, by leaving open the possibility that there was something about them or their stories that was not being said. This aspect of silence—that it creates room for the undefined—relates directly to the religious quality of silence that Long identifies.

Finally, not only were the signified silent, Long says, but they were also “opaque.” Like their silence, this opacity gave them a certain kind of power that the signifiers lacked. Possessing what Long termed, *the opacity of reality*, the signified gave the hardness of reality back to the transparent metaphor which was used to signify them. For he notes, the metaphor cannot exist without that which it references. Just as the metaphor gives meaning to what it signifies, what it signifies simultaneously gives meaning back to it. In this way, for example, he points out, the suffering of the signified was able to give meaning back to the metaphor of Christ’s crucifixion.⁵⁶

But in addition to the silence of the signified, there is a second type of silence that Long identifies, the “silence of the High God.” He traces this concept to Pascal, who wrote about “the eternal silence of these infinite spaces that terrifies me,” what Long says is the result of “meditation of the fragility and finite nature of the human being when compared to the infinity of the world and nature.”⁵⁷ He relates this concept of “terrifying, eternal silence” to Eliade and other religious scholars’ concepts of the “High God.”⁵⁸ In their schema, the High God referred to a deity within a polytheistic tradition who was

⁵⁶ Long, *Significations*, 193.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 56-57.

responsible for the creation of the world, but who afterwards removed himself from human affairs and was never approached or worshipped directly. Instead, he was approached indirectly through other intermediary lesser gods embroiled within the world of human culture and creativity. This High God represented God's transcendent qualities, that which inspired awe and fear.

Though Long does not make it himself, an analogy might be made to Otto's concept of the *numinous*. In his work, *On the Holy*, Otto begins by specifying two aspects of religious experience, the rational and the non-rational or *numinous*, aspects that coexist within the divine.⁵⁹ According to Otto, the rational was that part of God which was analogous to human nature and so was graspable by the intellect, while the non-rational or *numinous* were those aspects of God which were wholly other and were only accessible through individual intuitive experience. Otto identifies two opposing feelings evoked by the experience of the *numinous*, *fascinans* and *tremendum*.⁶⁰ The latter refers to those qualities which draw one towards the *numinous*, evoking feelings of love or desire, and the former to those qualities which push one away, evoking feelings of fear or dread.

In Long's paradigm of religion as language, this High God who is the object of fear or dread or dumbness, this transcendent inaccessible aspect of God, is represented by silence. "Silence forces us to presuppose a reality which is prior to our naming and doing"⁶¹ Long says. If speaking about God causes a rupture from God, then silence must be that intact reality which exists disentangled and undemarcated by the human act of speech. Perhaps it is best to call the silence of God that part of the signified that is not entirely/ever

⁵⁹ Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 1-11.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 12-41.

⁶¹ Long, *Significations*, 60.

exhausted by the act of signification of religion and religious experience, that completely unreachable and unspeakable part which holds that undefined space open for God, that which is necessary for God to be God.

This is not to say that signification like silence does not have a crucial role either, for it is, according to Long's paradigm, the only way through which human beings approximate closeness to God; without the act of signification there is no act of understanding at all. I mentioned Long's suggestion that the suffering of the signified could be used to bring the hardness of reality back to the metaphor of Christ. The religious metaphor (as the crucifixion exemplifies) is according to Long something through which, "God becomes transparent." While ordinary signs and symbols are composed of a relationship between two elements, the metaphor (signifier) and ordinary reality (the signified), applying Long's characterization, religious symbol or metaphor might be seen as composed of three levels or elements: the sacred (signified), the metaphor (signifier), and ordinary forms of existence (also signified).

So while the usual linguistic model might be imagined as metaphor \leftrightarrow ordinary reality, a model for religious metaphor might be imagined instead as God \leftrightarrow metaphor \leftrightarrow ordinary reality or, using Long's terminology, light \leftrightarrow transparency \leftrightarrow opacity. In this model, the metaphor is separate from both the ordinary reality and God, and lessens each in the defining, yet depends upon both for meaning. In this way, the crucifixion lacking an understanding of what real earthly suffering consists of becomes less godly. That is, Long seems to be suggesting that the "hardness of reality" (embodied for example in pre-modern lesser gods and goddesses concerned with earthly affairs) like silence also has a crucial role in holding open space for God. When lacking this hardness, religious

metaphor becomes all idea and loses its ability to confer meaning or bring one closer to sacred reality.

Given this understanding of silence and signification, what does it mean, then, to say that the modern world is inhabited by a silent, rather than a dead God? As Long states, though it may be confused as such, “silence does not mean absence: rather, it refers to the manner in which a reality has its existence.”⁶² For Long, by disposing of religious signification, modern people have lost the intermediary means to express or comprehend the sacred, and with no rituals or language to call upon, modern people are left confronting this silence of the beginning, of the primordial God. It is not the ‘terror of history’ that they are confronting as Eliade suggested, or at least that terror does not come from the specter of history itself, but from the primordial infinite silence of God in the face of such a history. It is this experience of the confrontation with the silence of God, as conceptualized by Long, that is also the modern experience of vertigo in the face of confrontation with the passing moment and the absence of a unifying force of God as Foucault defines it, outlined in the previous introduction, I argue.

For an illustration of this silence of our contemporary world, one need only return to that poem by Agha Shahid Ali I was reading while sitting on the bus going to Chicago. In it, the inability to sing about God, his inability to hear or respond to human cries within “the soundproof walls of heaven’ is lamented.⁶³ Similarly, in the poem by Daniel Moore quoted in the previous introduction,⁶⁴ the modern age is imagined as people try to write books in the silence between the affirmation of ‘there is no God’ and ‘but God’ of the

⁶² Long, *Significations*, 61.

⁶³ Ali, *Rooms Are Never Finished*, 62.

⁶⁴ Moore, *The Blind Beekeeper*, 12.

shahada. In these contemporary poems, one finds a confrontation not with *the death of God* (though it is often called or confused with that) but with his *silence*. And because this silence of God is present in the pre-modern world as well, as Long proposes, it is there that we can find the relevance of the pre-modern religious voice to our own world today, a relevance which has not gone entirely unnoticed by the contemporary literary community.

Long's theory of religion as signification also provides him with a way to solve the problem of earlier scholars who either separated or equated the human experience of the sacred cross-culturally. For religion as he defines it, exists both as social expression embedded in a social-historical context and as something universal beyond it. He says:

Religion is a practical social concern...but, at the same time, it is a mode of release from the entanglements of the social, and it is the awareness of an objectivity that lies beyond the social and the existential....On the one hand, religion may be seen as an opening to and a discovery of a new order of reality, and, on the other hand, it may be seen as a serious exercise in the control of human experience. Both meanings are true and both are necessary.⁶⁵

Because human experience of the sacred is rooted in its socio-historical context, one cannot understand the universal aspect of religion without an understanding of the particular. Long argues, then, for a holistic approach to the study of religion in which “ontological analysis should arise from historical understanding,”⁶⁶ and in which historical religious traditions are understood first from the perspective of their historical context and then in a universal or human sense.

It is the inability to study religion holistically, in fact, he argues, that is responsible for the false assumption that religion does not exist within the modern world:

⁶⁵ Long, *Significations*, 35.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 45.

One might say that human beings have lost their religiousness—that God is dead and that the human no longer has any model or guide for conducting life. This way out is easy, for such a position reduces the religious imagination to ethics and fails to understand that religion is the continual quest for the meaning of human existence.... humanity participates in a reality which is more than historical and cultural—religiously, the human being is an ontological being.⁶⁷

Because human beings are inherently religious beings according to Long, and because religious culture no matter how woven into a specific historical moment speaks to the human condition and to a reality that exists beyond the historical moment, there is no way for the religious world to go away, only for cultures to lose the language of religious experience and go silent. But this silence is also an inextricable part of the sacred. And if we are to seek after a universal connection between the postmodern world and pre-modern one, we can find it here.

The presence of this “silence of God,” I intend to argue in the rest of this thesis, is prominent at both the earliest known and latest points of the Arabic poetic tradition; in fact, it is inextricably related to the act of poetic expression. And this silence and the undefined space it creates are associated with feelings of disorientation and uncertainty in the face of the passing moment--that supposed benchmark of the modern secular world.

Why might silence in the pre-modern world have been often overlooked by modern scholars? The answer may be in part because it was less prominent, hidden behind the creative, spoken world of religion. In attempting to remove that part, the modern world rendered the other aspect of the sacred more visible. It may also have been that, in a reaction against being defined by the secular voice, the religious voice in our contemporary world,

⁶⁷ Long, *Significations*, 58.

perhaps sensing this “silence of God” at the heart of the secular movement or maybe because it felt it represented a weakness in the face of secular attacks, has tried to eradicate its presence from its own traditions, a movement that in so much as such silence is a necessary component of the sacred, is in a sense areligious. And just as secularists have attempted to abdicate from using religious language, this undefined space for God has been erased by various fundamentalisms or literalists in our current global world. Given that state, I hope that a focus upon the silence of God within both secular and religious literary traditions over time might help to restore the religious ‘counter-to-voice’ to the religious voice today, just as it can perhaps lead to a recognition within the secular world of common understandings and shared human struggles with the religious world.

The goal of this thesis is therefore to look for manifestations of this uncertainty and “silence of God” first within the earliest period of the Arabic pre-modern poetic tradition, and then examine how those manifestations were expressed cross-temporally in Modern Arabic poetry, with the hope that it may speak to our own confrontation with that silence and the uncertainty it breeds today. This silence often manifests itself as a supposed absence or death, but also, as the attempt to speak about it reveals, cannot ever be properly dismissed as such either. Following Long's advice, such a reading will require us to understand the text's historical context as well as its universal message. It will also allow for us to accumulate the “knowledge” in the form of “a thousand-fold reverberating network of associations, analogies, interplaying images and symbols.” that J. Stetkevych so advocated in his own critique of the scholarly field of Arabic literature.⁶⁸

⁶⁸J. Stetkevych, *Arabic Poetry and Orientalism*, 20.

In addition to attempting to understand both the universal experience which these poems express and their practical/historical context, I also hope to go further and suggest that there is something particular within the historical context of both the tribal, nomadic experience of pre-modern Arabia and the global world of today that make them particularly relevant to each other—that it is not that far of a leap from a campsite to a hotel room--and that our understanding of the poetry of the inhabitants of each can help to revitalize and better understand the “other.”

CHAPTER 3

AN OVERVIEW OF PRE-ISLAMIC POETRY AND ITS CONTEXT

As was discussed in the preceding chapters, French philosopher and sociologist Michael Foucault has suggested that the modern world and modernity might be defined best not as a certain period in time, but as a certain “attitude” towards reality. That attitude, he went on to explain, taking a page from Charles Baudelaire, was characterized by an awareness of the discontinuous passing moment.⁶⁹ The relationship of the post-Enlightenment writer or artist with this passing moment, with what Baudelaire called “the ephemeral, the fleeting and the contingent”⁷⁰ and with the feelings of disorientation and uncertainty which were its result have been widely discussed. But Foucault himself did not see this particular attitude or consciousness of modernity confined to the post-Enlightenment time period itself, nor did he think it existed in isolation from other conflicting attitudes and countervoices.

Charles Long linked these feelings to the modern man's confrontation with "the silence of God," that undefined, unspeakable, and transcendent aspect of God evoked by man's encounter with the infinity of nature.⁷¹ And he argued that such experience was

⁶⁹ Michel Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?”, 39.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Long, *Significations*, 54.

actually intrinsically religious, whether it was understood as such or not, and therefore tied the secular, post-Enlightenment man to the pre-modern religious one.

Does a confrontation with the passing moment and with its resulting uncertainty and the silence beyond it exist in so-called “pre-modern” works of art? Can we find in them a similar consciousness of the discontinuity of time, which exists in so-called “modern” works? And how is their response to this discontinuity and uncertainty similar or different from the modern author’s response? This thesis begins to answer these questions from the perspective of the Arabic poetic tradition by exploring more specifically the attitude of the pre-Islamic poet of Arabia toward uncertainty and the ephemeral moment and asking if we can find Long’s concept of the silence of God within it. But, before we can attempt that exploration, it is helpful to first understand the historical context in which the poetic tradition existed, and what previous scholars have already discussed about such an attitude.

Pre-Islamic Religio-Historical Context

The poetry of the pre-Islamic period of Arabia (referred to as al-Jāhiliyya in the later Islamic tradition) provides an interesting case study for comparison to later works in that it represents the work of a predominantly non-monotheistic, small-scale society. The Arabian Peninsula in late antiquity prior to the arrival of Islam in 7th century CE was situated on the margins of three other large empires, the Persian Empire (under the reign of the Sasanian dynasty) to the northeast, the Byzantine Empire to the northwest, and the Abyssinian Empire to the southeast. The Byzantine Empire, a remnant of the old Roman Empire with its capitol in Constantinople, extended into regions of what today include

Turkey, Egypt, Syria, as well as portions of North Africa and the central Mediterranean.⁷² The official religion of the empire was the Eastern Orthodox Church, but other Christian sects also vied for popularity and the population was extremely ethnically, linguistically, and religiously diverse.

Such diversity also characterized the Sasanian Empire, which encompassed the regions of the modern nations of Iran and Iraq and further east into Afghanistan and Central Asia.⁷³ Within the Sasanian Empire, and in particular within its parts closest to Arabia, Zoroastrianism was the primary, though by no means, only religion practiced. Populations of Jews and monophysite and Nestorian Christians lived within its borders, while Manichaeism and Mazdakism also enjoyed some popularity.⁷⁴ During the reign of Khosro Anoshirwan during the 6th century CE, the empire became more centralized and engaged in ongoing territorial disputes with the Byzantines, extending their rule into Syria-Palestine and portions of Egypt and Anatolia, for a time, until they were recaptured by the Byzantine ruler Heraclius.⁷⁵

Within these ongoing territorial wars between these two major powers, Arabia was often a player, albeit an indirect one. Neither Byzantine nor Sasanian leaders were interested in seizing control over the region directly, however they attempted to exert diplomatic influence and secure alliances with various tribes in order to exercise indirect influence over access to its ports and trade routes.⁷⁶ In Arabia itself, however, Arabia was

⁷² Fred M. Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 4.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 24-27.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 31-34.

the center and the Byzantines were at the margins, and there may be a danger in historians extrapolating too much about the beliefs and practices of the Arabs of the peninsula from the accounts and cultural traditions of these empires. By way of illustrating this point, Michael Sells for example, quotes a verse from the pre-Islamic poet ‘Alqama, in which the clucking of an ostrich is compared to the incomprehensible babbling of the Byzantine Romans.⁷⁷

On the peninsula itself, Yemen, as well as portions of Oman, were one of the few places where rainfall was sufficient to support the development of more complex systems of social organization.⁷⁸ This organization had reached its height in Yemen during 1000 BCE, and continued on in the kingdom of Himyar during the 1st to 6th c. CE.⁷⁹ Social structures in other parts of Arabia during that period were more loosely organized and centered around tribal groups based on kinship affiliation. There existed within the peninsula both nomadic and more settled populations, often among those of the same tribe. These settled populations were usually located at oases, where natural springs made the irrigation of date palm garden economies that could support larger populations viable. Some of these major oasis towns during the period of late antiquity included Palmyra, Azraq, Dumat al-Jandal, Tayma, Khaybar and Yathrib (later known as Medina) in the northwest, and Al-Yamama and Hajar to the east.⁸⁰ Other towns developed as cultural or trade centers along trade caravan routes, often centered around places where *harams*

⁷⁷ Michael Sells, *Desert Tracings Six Classical Arabian Odes by ‘Alqama, Shānfarā, Labīd, ‘Antara, Al-A‘sha, and Dhu al-Rūmma* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1989), 11, 17.

⁷⁸ Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers*, 27.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 27-28.

(discussed further below) were located, the most prominent of which during the years prior to the coming of Islam was Mecca.⁸¹

In addition to its Byzantine and Sasanian neighbors, the Abyssinian empire in what is today Ethiopia was located to the east of the peninsula. It had converted to Christianity in the fourth century CE, and was in contact with Arabia through major trading posts along the Red Sea and even made attempts to control Yemen, converting some to Christianity.⁸² Historians generally agree that the population of believers of other monotheistic traditions was on the rise in the Arabian Peninsula during late antiquity. Arabic-speaking Jews had lived among followers of the pagan traditions in Arabia since at least 70 CE, and were especially concentrated in Northeastern Arabia and Yemen. In addition, followers and converts to Christianity were present in Yemen, a product of Byzantine missionaries, as well as in Northwestern Arabia.⁸³ However, the majority of the local population still practiced variations of traditional polytheism.

Unfortunately, much of what we know of traditional pre-Islamic religious practice must be projected from records that date to the period after the coming of Islam back into a time before its arrival. This presents the problem of disentangling from characterizations of pre-Islamic culture found within Islamic texts those aspects which reflect Islam's own motives and understandings of itself in opposition to the earlier period. For this reason, perhaps the best place to uncover the pre-Islamic worldview is within the poems of the period themselves.

⁸¹ Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers*, 27-30.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 4.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 30-31.

Nonetheless, we do know the names of multiple pre-Islamic Arabian gods from inscriptional evidence and references by contemporary Greek, Roman, and Syriac writers, as well as from later Islamic texts, including the *Book of Idols (Kitāb al-asnām)* by Ibn al-Kalbī.⁸⁴ Some have argued that, at least in the city of Mecca, one god may have occupied a superior place in the pantheon, while other deities functioned as intermediaries to this “high god.”⁸⁵ One of the most frequently mentioned deities is al-‘Uzzá, a feminine divine figure who was associated with the planet Venus. According to the Qur’an (53:19-20), she was worshipped along with two other goddesses, al-Lāt and al-Manāt. Greek and Roman writers have stressed the astral aspects of Arabian religion, and for the most part the divine does not seem to have been anthropomorphized.⁸⁶

The religious world view of pre-Islamic Arabia might also be characterized as being animistic; the natural world was viewed as being inhabited by nameless and formless (or constantly changing form) spirits or demons of ambiguous morality and capricious nature. These spirits were sometimes referred to by the terms *jinn* or *shayāṭīn* (which later took on specific meanings in Islam, but at that time were used more or less interchangeably).⁸⁷ There are a number of references to the worship of animal spirits, as well as to the belief that spirits or gods dwelled in trees or in stone in pre-Islamic times. The inhabitants of Mecca were known to have made pilgrimages to a certain tree thought to have been

⁸⁴ De Lacy O’Leary, *Arabia Before Muhammad* (London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co., 1927), 190; Hisham ibn al-Kalbī, *The Book of Idols (Kitāb al-asnām)*, trans. Nabih A. Faris (Princeton University Press, 1952).

⁸⁵ See Montgomery Watt, “The Qur’an and Belief in a “High God,” in *Proceedings of the Ninth Congress of the Union Européenne des Arabisants et Islamisants, Amsterdam, 1st to 7th September 1978* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1981).

⁸⁶ Giorgio Levi Della Vida, “Pre-Islamic Arabia,” in *The Arab Heritage*, ed. Nabih A. Faris (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1946), 53.

⁸⁷ Michael Zwettler, “A Mantic Manifesto: The Sūra of ‘The Poets’ and the Qur’ānic Foundations of Prophetic Authority,” in *Poetry and Prophecy*, ed. James L. Kugel (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 76-77.

inhabited by al-‘Uzzá,⁸⁸ and the Qur’an (48:18) tells of a possibly similar tree in Hudhaibiya where Muslims pledged allegiance to the Prophet during what is termed the *bay‘at al-riḍwān*.⁸⁹ The belief in stone as the dwelling place of spirits, or *wathan* (idol), can be related to the practice of litholatriy, or the worship of stone, *nusub* (pl. *anṣab*). Known examples of the *nusub* in pre-Islamic Arabia include, among others, the monolith, which was worshipped as the divine figure of al-Lāt in the city of Ta’if (al-Ṭā’if).⁹⁰

The pre-Islamic world also contained other impersonal forces which were at work within it, although not necessarily worshipped. Among these was the concept of time as fate or, perhaps more accurately, “the spatio-temporal process” as fate, indicated by such words as *dahr*, *zaman*, or *ayyām* (days).⁹¹ Another term, *manān* (*al-maná*), was used to refer to a similar idea of fate, and may have been incorporated into the deity Manāt who was worshipped at Mecca. In the same vein, were the concepts of *ajal*, a predetermined time of termination (i.e. of death) and of *rizq*, a man’s predetermined provision or food.⁹²

One area upon which existing sources on pre-Islamic religion are more revealing than elsewhere is the sacred places of the city of Mecca. The sacred area of Mecca, or the *ḥaram*, which encompasses both the sacred area of the Ka‘ba and the well of Zamzam, is rooted in a larger institution, also called *ḥawṭah* in Southern Arabia, which existed from

⁸⁸ O’ Leary, *Arabia Before Muhammad*, 195-96.

⁸⁹ O’ Leary, *Arabia Before Muhammad*, 195-96; A. Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of [Ibn] Ishāq’s Sīrat Rasūl Allāh* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955), 503.

⁹⁰ O’ Leary, *Arabia Before Muhammad*, 196.

⁹¹ Montgomery Watt, “Pre Islamic Arabian Religion in the Qur’an,” *Islamic Studies* 15, no. 1 (1976): 73-75; Watt, “The Qur’an and Belief in a “High God,”” 329. The *Ayyām al-‘Arab* was the name attributed to an historical account of intra tribal warfare during the pre-Islamic period. See Mittwoch, E., “*Ayyām al-‘Arab*,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., eds. H.A.R. Gibb et al. (Leiden: Brill, 1960), 793-794.

⁹² C.E. Bosworth and Jane D. McAuliffe, “*Rizq*,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., eds. P. Bearman et al. (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 567.

pre-Islamic times and still exists in Arabia today. The purpose of the *ḥaram* or *ḥawṭah* was to provide a safe place for tribes to meet to conduct trade and other affairs without the threat of tribal warfare.⁹³ The space of the *ḥaram* or *ḥawṭah* usually developed around a sacred object such as a stone or tree, thought to be inhabited by a spirit or god, such as the ones mentioned above, and were created and consecrated by a man of a “holy family” in conjunction with the consent and promise of the tribes involved. Its boundaries were then marked with rock cairns, and all who entered it were bound also by certain laws and prohibitions, especially regarding acts of violence.⁹⁴ The *ḥaram/ḥawṭah*, as a place where tribes could gather without fear of violence or recrimination, was a center of cultural as well as economic exchange. During pre-Islamic times, Mecca was already a major pilgrimage center and elements of the Meccan pilgrimage that exists in the Islamic tradition today may also be traceable back to their pre-Islamic origins.

There also appears to have existed within pre-Islamic Arabia a specialized group of people who functioned more frequently as intermediaries with the spiritual world. One of the main words used to indicate someone of this group was a *kāhin*.⁹⁵ Though likely of Mesopotamian origin, the word was used to indicate a particular kind of diviner or seer in pre-Islamic Arabia who received knowledge through ecstatic inspiration from spirits. This knowledge was of two kinds, foreknowledge of the future (*kahāna*) and insight into the past (*irāfa*).⁹⁶ The *kāhin* seems to have been predominantly employed in the work of using

⁹³ Robert B. Serjeant, “Haram and Hawtah, the Sacred Enclave in Arabia,” in *The Arabs and Arabia on the Eve of Islam*, ed. F.E. Peters (Brookefield: Ashgate, 1999), 168-170.

⁹⁴ Serjeant, “Haram and Hawtah, the Sacred Enclave in Arabia,” 171.

⁹⁵ T. Fahd, “Kāhin,” in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., ed. E. van Donzel et al. (Leiden: Brill, 1978), 420-422.

⁹⁶ R.G. Khoury, “Poésie et Prophétie en Arabie,” in *Oracles et Prophéties dans l’Antiquité*, ed. J.G. Heintz (Paris: De Boccard, 1997), 249.

his connection to address the specific problems and questions of clients. He would then dispense of the knowledge he received in the form of short rhymed prose or verse. Hämeen-Anttila argues that out of the role of *kāhin* a higher type of itinerant prophet had also emerged in pre-Islamic Arabia prior to the arrival of Muhammad whose visions and message concerned more universal themes.⁹⁷

Though the two professions do not appear to have overlapped, there are many similarities to the role of the poet and diviner/seer in pre-Islamic Arabia. Like the *kāhin*, the poet in pre-Islamic Arabia was traditionally thought to receive poetic inspiration from the *jinn*, and the poets themselves made references to their demonic alter-egos.⁹⁸ Some scholars have suggested that the role of the poet may have been, at least originally, more religious than is usually assumed, and that as a mediator between the supernatural in order to obtain the poetic utterance, he might be compared to a magician, or even to the prophet or oracle of the tribe.⁹⁹ Khoury in particular argues that in this role the poet was in fact the ultimate *kāhin*.¹⁰⁰

The Pre-Islamic Poetic Tradition

The poetic tradition of pre-Islamic Arabia was an oral tradition, with poems composed and recited by poets at festivals during times of intertribal gatherings or other important occasions. Syrian poet and critic Adonis argues that the roots of the tradition

⁹⁷ Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila, "Arabian Prophecy," in *Prophecy in its Ancient Near Eastern Context*, ed. M. Nissinen (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000), 115-146.

⁹⁸ Alan Jones, "Poetry and Poets," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, ed. Jane D. McAuliffe (Boston: Brill, 2004), 112.

⁹⁹ Reynold A. Nicholson, *A Literary History of the Arabs*. (London: Cambridge University Press, 1956), 71-74.

¹⁰⁰ Khoury, "Poésie et Prophétie en Arabie."

were tied to song and to recitation.¹⁰¹ Poetry had a public role within the culture, and a poet was responsible for perpetuating the honor and values of the tribe, lampooning its enemies and rivals, and commemorating and remembering seminal events, the battles and the heroes, that constituted its history (*ayyām al-‘Arab*).¹⁰² The Meccan pilgrimage in pre-Islamic times coincided with a poetry competition held in the neighboring town of ‘Ukādh, with the winning poems, according to tradition, being hung on the door of the Ka‘ba.¹⁰³ The most popular poems were remembered and passed down by *rāwis* (bards) through time. It was not until the 7th century CE and later into the Islamic era, when Muslim scholars were attempting to codify and understand the heritage of the Arabic language, that the poems were collected in a written form and took the final shape that they have now.¹⁰⁴ This makes it difficult to attribute specific authorship to any of them. Indeed, many scholars now believe that it is more likely that the act of remembering in the oral tradition of the Bedouin was also an act of recomposition and that no single author of any given poem exists.¹⁰⁵

It is also difficult to trace the history of the development of the poetic form prior to these collections (called *dīwāns*). The pre-Islamic period of Arabic literature is generally used to refer to works thought to date between ca 500-622 CE.¹⁰⁶ Some scholars, including Adonis, have suggested that the earliest form of poetry within the pre-Islamic tradition was

¹⁰¹ Jones, “Poetry and Poets,” 112; Adonis, *An Introduction to Arabic Poetics*, trans. Catherine Cobham (London: Saqi Books, 2003).

¹⁰² Roger Allen, *An Introduction to Arabic Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 68.

¹⁰³ Nicholson, *A Literary History of the Arabs*, 100-101.

¹⁰⁴ Allen, *An Introduction to Arabic Literature*, 71, 76.

¹⁰⁵ For a discussion of the scholarly debate on this issue as well as the authenticity of pre-Islamic poetry, see James Monroe, “Oral Composition in Pre-Islamic Poetry,” in *Early Islamic Poetry and Poetics*, ed. S. Stetkevych (Burlington: Ashgate, 2009), 1-53.

¹⁰⁶ Suzanne Stetkevych, “Introduction,” in *Early Islamic Poetry and Poetics*, ed. S. Stetkevych (Burlington: Ashgate, 2009), xiii.

a rhymed unmetred prose called *sajʿ*.¹⁰⁷ Later scholars within the literary tradition who attempted to categorize Classical Arabic poetry grouped together two of the more formal forms present during the pre-Islamic period, the *qaṣīdah* and *qitʿah* under the title *qarīd*.¹⁰⁸ This title was used to separate it from more informal form of verse called *rajaz*. This *rajaz* verse contained rhymed hemistiches or single divided lines of metered verse.¹⁰⁹ Some scholars believe that like *sajʿ* it may have preceded the more formal *qaṣīdah*; however, it continued to be used alongside it, even long after the arrival of Islam. A common pre-Islamic form of *rajaz* verse was *ḥidā*, or a camel driver's song.

The most well known form of pre-Islamic poetry, however, was the formal *qaṣīdah* (or ode). The *qaṣīdah* emerges already as a well-developed poetic form in texts dating back as early as the late fifth century C.E. It was composed of two metered hemistiches (*miṣrāʿ*) that together formed a verse (*bayt*).¹¹⁰ Each verse had a single end rhyme that was constant throughout the poem, and the internal meter of the verse conformed to one of several potential options.¹¹¹ The thematic structure of the *qaṣīdah* was generally made up of three major sections (first and famously identified by Ibn Qutayba):¹¹² the *nasīb*, whose theme usually revolved around the remembrance of a lost beloved brought upon by the encounter with her abandoned campsite, or *aṭlāl*. Within the poem there was then usually a point of conscious break from this remembrance called the *takhalluṣ*, which indicated the transition into the journey section (*raḥīl*). In this second section, the poet would account his traversal across the desert alone, often on a camel mare (*nāqah*). The third and final section (called

¹⁰⁷ Adonis, *An Introduction to Arabic Poetics*, 17.

¹⁰⁸ Allen, *An Introduction to Arabic Literature*, 76.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 80.

¹¹⁰ Adonis, *An Introduction to Arabic Poetics*, 26.

¹¹¹ Sells, *Desert Tracings*, 4.

¹¹² Allen, *An Introduction to Arabic Literature*, 76-77.

the *gharaḍ* or goal of the poem) contained either a boast (*fakhr* or *madīḥ*), in which the poet would praise himself or his tribe, *hijā'* (satire or invective of his enemies), an elegy (*rithā'*), or possibly elements of all three as well as general aphorisms or words of wisdom (*ḥikam*).¹¹³

In addition to the longer *qaṣīdah* form, shorter poems and verse also existed (either fragments of larger poems now lost or originally written in shorter form), called *qiṭ'ah*.¹¹⁴ These are usually defined as "monothematic," in that individual poems were usually confined to one topic, but could address a wider variety of potential themes or topics than the *qaṣīdah*. Like *saj'* and *rajaz* verse, some scholars have suggested that *qiṭ'ah* could have been an antecedent to the *qaṣīdah*. Many of these shorter poems were *marāthī* or elegies, a genre which was dominated by women.¹¹⁵ This may have been because of the central role of women in public funerary rituals as mourners for the dead during the time, for which anecdotal evidence suggests. Though most of these elegies written by women were smaller poems (*qiṭ'ah*), some were even longer *qaṣīdahs*.

The *Qaṣīdah* & Uncertainty: A History of Western Scholarly Perspectives

In general, the *qaṣīdah* as a genre was a conservative one, and the poet was confined by certain conventions not only in its structure, but also in the motifs and images that he or she employed. The result of such conventions is the recurrence of many stock motifs and images that can be found across different poems of the genre, often drawn from the desert landscape. As was discussed in the previous chapter, because of this early Western scholars

¹¹³ Allen, *An Introduction to Arabic Literature*, 77; S. Stetkevych, "Introduction," 1; Sells, *Desert Tracings*, 4-9.

¹¹⁴ Allen, *An Introduction to Arabic Literature*, 76.

¹¹⁵ For a treatment of women's poetry both within and outside of the *ritha'* see Marlé Hammond, *Beyond Elegy: Classical Arabic Women's Poetry in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

of the *qaṣīdah* tended to regard it as concerned primarily with a very concrete reality, and found in it little of the ephemeral, so much so that it was critiqued by them for being too secular. For them the prominence of landscape and nature imagery within the *qaṣīdah* seemed to reflect the practical goals of the pre-Islamic poet. Thus their poetry strived for perfection of description, for which it ought to be lauded, but did not aim to speak on profound matters of human experience. For example, the early Western scholar Reynold A. Nicholson says that, "religion had so little influence on the lives of the pre-Islamic Arabs that we cannot expect to find much trace of it in their poetry."¹¹⁶ In all their accounts, the naturalism and realism of the pre-Islamic poet is emphasized, an emphasis which for the Western scholar of this time obviated attention to the world of complex emotion or idea, which ought to be, they thought, properly located in the abstract and not the specific, in the interior and not the exterior. Perhaps their only nod to the existence of any kind of confrontation of the poet with ephemerality and uncertainty within the *qaṣīdah* was their recognition of its themes of survival and mortality.

The supposed concrete reality which made up the *qaṣīdah* began to be questioned, however, by later scholars, in particular Jaroslav Stetkevych, who took a deeper look at the functioning of place and nostalgia within the opening section of the *qaṣīdah*.¹¹⁷ J. Stetkevych questioned the previously hailed realism of many of the places within this opening section, and especially the ontological status of the *aṭlāl*, or ruins of the abandoned campsite, noting that they have within the poem a kind of false presence in the present

¹¹⁶ Nicholson, *A Literary History of the Arabs*, 135.

¹¹⁷ Jaroslav Stetkevych, *The Zephyrs of Najd: The Poetics of Nostalgia in the Classical Arabic Nasīb* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

while actually existing within the absolute past.¹¹⁸ This aspect of the abandoned campsite was also recognized by another of his students, John Seybold, who compares it to the phantom of the lost beloved who often appears in the same part of the poem.¹¹⁹ For Seybold, the abandoned campsite is a kind of non-place which, like the phantom, only evokes the presence of another real thing.

While J. Stetkevych focused upon the opening section of the *qaṣīdah*, he did not lose sight of how the places within it shape and echo with places in the other parts of the *qaṣīdah*. He linked the realization of the falseness of the ruins to the force which pulls the poet forward into the second part of the *qaṣīdah*. In this journey section, J. Stetkevych noted, a second temporal mode comes into being, that of real time, of *time passing*, marked by the passage *through* the space of the desert. J. Stetkevych then contrasted the ruins, which represent a lost abode, with the ‘found’ or regained one which appears in the final part of the *qaṣīdah*, one which exists inside the sacred enclosure of the tribe (*ḥimā*). This regaining of place is marked by a shift, he noted, to the present moment. In this way, Stetkevych read the narrative of the *qaṣīdah* as that of movement between non-places and places, one that reflects the psychological movement of the poet between different states of time consciousness.¹²⁰

In a similar vein, Suzanne Stetkevych’s mythopoetic approach has revived a religious understanding of the pre-Islamic *qaṣīdah* through the application of ritual theory. She has argued that Victor Turner’s rite of passage model¹²¹ is mirrored within the tripartite

¹¹⁸ J. Stetkevych, *The Zephyrs of Najd*, 22-25.

¹¹⁹ Seybold, “The Earliest Demon Lover,” 184.

¹²⁰ J. Stetkevych, *The Zephyrs of Najd*, 46-49.

¹²¹ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1969).

structure of the *qaṣīdah*.¹²² She notes how the opening image of the ruins of the abandoned campsite of the *nasīb* functions as a point of separation between the poet and his community, while the desert of the *raḥīl* exists she argues as a liminal nonspace or between space. In the final section of the poem, she says, the poet reenters the structured space of the community.

Another of J. Stetkevych's students, Michael Sells, has further fleshed out ideas about the way in which imagery is employed in the *qaṣīdah*. He notes that, "what occurs [in the *qaṣīdah*] is not so much description as it is metamorphosis."¹²³ What earlier scholars had termed the wanderings of the poetic mind due to his exuberance over the natural subject matter, or to show his descriptive skill, Sells explains instead as chains of similes in which the object of description is always evading being pinned down by the descriptive voice which must keep running to catch up with it. In this way, Sells, like J. Stetkevych, also questions the supposed ontological reality of place within the poems, likening the constantly shifting fluidity of the desert landscape within the *qaṣīdah* to the constantly shifting forms of the *ghūl* or *jinn* which also appear in the poems.

Conclusions

Having established this basic understanding of pre-Islamic socio-historical context, I wish to expand upon the work of this current school of scholarship within the study of pre-Islamic Arabic poetry. Incorporating and bringing together their

¹²² Suzanne Stetkevych, *The Mute Immortals Speak: Pre-Islamic Poetry and the Poetics of Ritual* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993).

¹²³ Sells, *Desert Tracings*, 5. For a more extensive discussion of this phenomena see also Michael Sells, "Guises of the *Ghūl*: Dissembling Simile and Semantic Overflow in the Classical Arabic *Nasīb*," in *Reorientations/Arabic and Persian Poetry*, ed. Suzanne P. Stetkevych (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

contributions to the understanding of uncertainty within it, in the following chapter I will conduct my own survey and analysis of the manifestations of uncertainty and what Long characterized as the experience of “silence of God” within pre-Islamic poetry. This review will also integrate, where relevant, the relationship of these themes in the poems to what is already understood about pre-Islamic Arabian religion and settlement patterns from other sources outlined above. By exploring the experience represented by the poet, it will hopefully not only fill in gaps in our understanding of these topics, but add some of what Long called the “opaqueness” of reality to those religious concepts and mobility patterns we already do understand abstractly as well. Finally, in addition to providing us with a better understanding of the specific experience of the pre-Islamic Arab, focusing upon these themes will provide a vehicle for making them accessible to experience of the global (and universal) reader.

CHAPTER 4

AN ANALYSIS OF UNCERTAINTY IN THE PRE-ISLAMIC POETIC TRADITION

I present here an in-depth attempt to summarize and look at sites and motifs of uncertainty and ephemerality and the passing moment located within the *qaṣīdah*. This will be followed by a short survey of these same themes in works more specifically classified thematically as elegy or *rithā'*. Such pre-Islamic Arabic poetic examples of themes of uncertainty and ephemerality, and instances of concepts of the eternal or silence beyond this passing moment, which reflect Long's concept of the "silence of God," provide strong evidence that the pre-Islamic poetic tradition (like modernistic and especially postmodern literature) is fertile ground for the historically recurring emergence of themes of uncertainty, ephemerality, and the eternality of the present moment. Of course, despite the strict conventions of the genre, the fluid nature of *qaṣīdah* imagery defies monolithic, allegorical interpretation, and the general patterns identified and put forth in the discussion which follows cannot claim to comprise a definitive and exhaustive interpretation of these motifs in every *qaṣīdah*. However, the summary here provides a sense of the meaning these different motifs came to acquire within the poetic tradition, a meaning which could then be played upon by the individual poet. By looking at these motifs side by side, one will be better able to understand their relationships with each other and with shared experience of that "silence," and to construct a general picture of its role within the pre-Islamic worldview.

Uncertainty, Ephemerality and Silence in the *Qaṣīdah*

The *Atlāl* or Ruins of the Abandoned Campsite

An appropriate place to begin a discussion of uncertainty and the passing moment in the pre-Islamic *qaṣīdah* might be with that motif that is traditionally central to the beginning of the poem itself: the *atlāl*, or ruins of the abandoned campsite. Within these ruins is predicated the opening scene of the poem: the persona of the poet is riding across the desert, often at night, when he encounters the remnants of a campsite. Upon closer inspection, these remnants are revealed to be the abandoned campsite of his beloved, from whom he has been parted as her tribe moved elsewhere.

At the very beginning of the poem, then, stands a trope that introduces, if not uncertainty, at the very least the idea of a loss and a sense of the passage of time. The word "ruins" is an imprecise translation, for it conjures up to the Western imagination images of collapsed columns of stone or grand monumental structures fallen into disuse. However, the architecture of the abandoned campsite in the opening section of the *qaṣīdah* is more modest, albeit retaining many of the same connotations. The heightened ephemerality of the materials used in the structure intensifies the feeling of impermanence they invoke. The remains of the campsite and its associated features and signs on the landscape¹²⁴ may be described by the poet at length or only referenced briefly, but it is the most defining characteristic of the *nasīb* and even when it is briefly mentioned, it still casts a melancholic shadow over the poem.

¹²⁴ For a good overview of the different aspects of the *atlāl* and their linguistic fields of meaning, see Jaroslav Stetkevych, "Toward an Arabic Elegiac Lexicon: The Seven Words of the *Nasīb*," in *Reorientations/Arabic and Persian Poetry*, ed. Suzanne P. Stetkevych (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Jaroslav Stetkevych argued that these have within the poem a false presence in the present while actually existing within the absolute past.¹²⁵ The relationship of the ruins to a past temporal moment is indicated even in one of the most common words used to refer to them, *rasm*, or traces. That is, the ruins exist as a drawing or outline of something *else*. For example, in the *qaṣīdah* of Al-Mukhabbal, the poet upon encountering the ruins, proclaims that:

wa-ará la-hā dār-an bi-aghdirat
al-sīdān lam yadrus la-hā rasm

I see her abode, at the pools
 of Sīdān its traces were not effaced.¹²⁶

In this verse, the traces of the *aṭlāl* are the outlines of the original abode (*dār*) of the poet-persona's beloved. The word *dār* connotes, according to some definitions, a circular enclosed space of settlement.¹²⁷ One remnant of the abode commonly part of the imagery of the *aṭlāl* is the trench dug around the abode in order to divert rainwater from entering and damaging the inhabited space. Another is the hearthstones. These hearthstones, called *athāfi* or *khawālīd*, occupy the central position in the abode,¹²⁸ and like the trench, they have a sheltering role:

illā ramād-an hāmid-an dafaʿat
ʿanhu al-riyāḥa khawālīdu suḥm

¹²⁵ J. Stetkevych, *The Zephyrs of Najd*, 22-25.

¹²⁶ Charles J. Lyall ed., *The Mufaḍḍalīyat: An Anthology of Ancient Arabian Odes Compiled by al-Mufaḍḍal son of Muḥammad According to the Recension and With the Commentary of Abū Muḥammad al-Qāsim ibn Muḥammad al-Anbārī*. Vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1918), 208, no. 21, v. 4.

¹²⁷ J. Stetkevych, "Toward an Arabic Elegiac Lexicon," 64.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 101.

cold extinguished ashes held back
from the winds by black (hearth)stones.¹²⁹

Yet, for all their protective role, as in the above verse, no fire exists for the hearthstones of the *aṭlāl* to protect, they harbor only cold ash. Nor is there any inhabited space for the trench to guard from floodwaters. The irony in the image of the *aṭlāl* is that the very thing which was supposed to protect the abode is now the only thing left of it.

To understand the relationship and distinction between the *dār* and the *aṭlāl*, I find it useful to borrow an idea from the archaeologist. In thinking about how an archaeological site becomes or is created from a living site of human activity, archaeologists use a concept of site formation processes.¹³⁰ The archaeological site or ruin is the end product of a series of forces and processes which shaped or affected it during its use, the process of abandonment, and finally the forces that have affected it afterward as it becomes a part of the archaeological record. If one were to liken the *aṭlāl* to an archaeological site, the *dār*'s use-life would exist while the beloved and her tribe occupies it and the act of abandonment would be represented by her departure. After this point, and in al-Mukhabbal's poem and others, it begins to be transformed by time and natural weathering processes, by wind and rain, from the *dār* to the *aṭlāl*.

Thus while al-Mukhabbal may proclaim that *its outline* is still intact, we learn as the poem continues that the *dār* has been ravaged by the elements of nature:

*fa-ka-anna mā abqá al-bawāriḥu wa al-
amṭāru min 'araṣātihā al-washm*

¹²⁹ Lyall, *The Mufaḍḍalīyat*, 209, no. 21, v. 5.

¹³⁰ Michael B. Schiffer, *Formation Processes of the Archaeological Record* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987).

as if that which the sidewinds and the rains left
among its empty courtyards were a tattoo.¹³¹

The metaphor of tattoo is used here to imply that the *aṭlāl* is an outline or mark which commemorates another thing; it holds the shape, but not the substance, of something absent. It is, to recall the terminology of Saussure, a *sign* pointing towards something else—in this case, towards a place once inhabited in a moment now past.¹³²

Perhaps most revealing of the *aṭlāl* as a sign, is that the poet often calls upon it to give voice to what it points towards. In the *qaṣīdah* of the poet ‘Antara, for example, he commands upon encountering it:

yā dāra ‘ablata bi-al-jiwā’i takallamī

Oh abode of ‘Abla at Jiwai, speak!¹³³

The poet then attempts a conversation, not with the ruins themselves, but rather with the *dār* of the past, greeting the beloved's abode and wishing it a good morning.¹³⁴ But the conversation is one-sided, and the poet wishes that the ruins might survive the passage of time as "a ruin" "empty" and "barren."¹³⁵ If the *aṭlāl* is a sign then, it is one which only becomes one when that which it points toward has disappeared and fallen silent.

¹³¹ Lyall, *The Muḥaḍḍalīyat*, 210, no. 21, v. 7.

¹³² For more on the linguistic association between *rasm* and *washm* and signs, see for example, S. Stetkevych, *The Mute Immortals Speak*, 20-21.

¹³³ Abū Zakarīyā Yahya al-Tibrīzī, *A Commentary on Ten Ancient Arabic Poems: Namely the Seven Mu‘allakāt, and poems by al-A‘sha, An-Nābighah, and ‘Abīd ibn al-Abras*, ed. Charles J. Lyall (Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal at the Baptist Mission Press, 1894), 90, v. 2.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 90, v. 1: “wa-‘imī ṣabāḥan dār ‘abla wa-aslamī.”

¹³⁵ Ibid., 91, v. 5: “ḥuyyīta min ṭalalin taqādama ‘ahduhu aqwā wa-aqfara.”

The *aṭlāl* is compared most explicitly to language in the *qaṣīdah* of the poet Labīd in the image of rivulets of storm water uncovering and deepening their traces:

*‘afati al-diyāru maḥalluhā fa-muqāmuḥā
bi-minān ta’abbada ghawluḥā fa-rijāmuḥā
fa-madāfi ‘u al-rayyāni ‘urriya rasmuhā
khalaq-an kamā ḍamina al-wuḥīya silāmuḥā*

The abodes are effaced—their waystations and residences—
at Minā her Ghawl and Rijām return to wilderness.
And at the torrent beds of Rayyān its traces were laid bare,
worn as if they were preserved inscriptions in its rock.¹³⁶

The ephemerality of the beloved’s abodes is underscored in Labīd’s verse by the fact that it matters not whether it was a temporary one or a more permanent settlement, in either case, from the time scale of the poet’s gaze, they have both passed away. As S. Stetkevych has noted, there exists within this passage a tension between the eternal world of nature and the more fleeting one of culture and mankind.¹³⁷ This is particularly evoked by the verb *ta’abbada*, which signifies “to return to the wild,” but which also holds the meaning “to be eternalized.” In addition, though Stetkevych does not mention it, the verb can also connote “the running away of animals,” another allusion to the elusive quality of the eternal embodied in the ruins. This incongruence between both the certain eternal and fixed presence of the *aṭlāl*, and the elusiveness of the past moment which it recalls is captured through the metaphor of inscription into stone: erasure only makes it appear more starkly present to the poet and by extension within the mind of the reader or listener.

¹³⁶ Al-Tibrīzī, *A Commentary on Ten Ancient Arabic Poems*, 67, v. 1-2. Translation in consultation with translation by S. Stetkevych in *The Mute Immortals Speak*, 9.

¹³⁷ S. Stetkevych, *The Mute Immortals Speak*, 18-22.

The comparison of the *aṭlāl* to erasive writing continues in the verse that follows:

wa-jalā al-suyūlu ‘ani al-ṭulūli ka-annahā
zubur-un tujiddu mutūnahā aqlāmuḥā

The torrents have exposed the ruin as if it were
 writings whose texts pens inscribed anew.¹³⁸

As the original *dār* is washed away, its message is rewritten into the *aṭlāl*. The verb here used to indicate that process, *jalā*, can mean the act of revealing or making distinct or clear, or the act of representing something else. Or, perhaps more interestingly, it can also mean the act of removing or departing, so that the erosion of the floodwaters become a prefiguration and echo of the motif of the departure of the beloved that also occurs in the *nasīb* and which ushers in the transformation of the *dār* to the *aṭlāl*. In addition, the word used for texts, *mutun*, comes from the root indicating the act of making strong or firm, affirming the certainty of the markings. But this firmness is immediately undermined, for Labīd's attempt at conversation with the ruins, like ‘Antara’s, fails:

fa-waqaftu as’aluhā wa-kayfa su’ālunā
ṣumm-an khawālida mā yabīnu kalāmuhā

I stopped to question them, but how do we question
 deaf (hearth)stones whose words are unclear?¹³⁹

Labīd finds no response forthcoming or at the very least, the response is, despite the claims of the previous verse, an unintelligible one. This play between the apparent clarity and

¹³⁸ Al-Tibrīzī, *A Commentary on Ten Ancient Arabic Poems*, 69, v. 8. Translation adapted from S. Stetkevych, *The Mute Immortals Speak*, 10.

¹³⁹ Al-Tibrīzī, *A Commentary on Ten Ancient Arabic Poems*, 69, v. 10.

uncertainty of the message of the *aṭlāl* woven throughout the passage creates a sense of disorientation in the poem.

But whether or not the stones give a response, they do evoke the act of speech within the poet. In fact, one might argue that, placed as the encounter with them is at the opening of the *qaṣīdah*, the entire act of poetic speech springs from them. In Charles Long's model then, one might read the *aṭlāl* as a religious sign, if the criteria of the divine is imagined as that which evokes the act of speech but which does not itself speak. To further explore the concept of the *aṭlāl* as a religious sign, let us return again to the motif of the tattoo. In the *qaṣīdah* by Ṭarafa, the poet says of the ruins:

talūḥu ka-bāqī al-washmi fī zāhiri al-yadi

It appears like the remains of the tattoo on the back of the hand.¹⁴⁰

In Ṭarafa's verse, not only is the tattoo a memorial of something else, but the distance from the thing it marks is emphasized by the fact that the poet is only seeing the remains of the tattoo itself. This distance is further reinforced by its placement on the exterior of the hand, an indication that it is the outward side of something which is not visible.

In the poet Labīd's *qaṣīdah* the tattoo metaphor for the *aṭlāl* becomes extended to its fullest point:

*aw raj 'u wāshimat-in usiffa na 'ūruhā
kifaf-an ta 'arraḍa fawqahunna wishāmuḥā*

A tattoo woman resprinkling black powder

¹⁴⁰ Al-Tibrīzī, *A Commentary on Ten Ancient Arabic Poems*, 30, v. 1.

over palms over which tattoos are raised.¹⁴¹

In this passage, the association between the tattoo as that which brings back or makes visible what is hidden or unseen is at its most explicit. Just as in Labīd's earlier metaphor of the inscription, the tattoo of the *aṭlāl* rewrites the message of the earlier *dār*, and the tattoo of the *aṭlāl* in this case is reminder of a past moment or of a passing moment, of the time when the poet was together with his beloved and of her leave-taking. The *aṭlāl* brings it back to life, it reconstructs the beloved's abode in the poet's imagination.

There is another temporal aspect to the tattoo metaphor as well, for while a tattoo may be used to signify something else, in this case something lost in the past, it is also an attempt or act of making a permanent mark. The *aṭlāl*, consequently, is represented by those material aspects of the original campsite which have withstood the elements over time, by its most sturdy and durable components, especially those parts of it which are made of stone: the hearthstones of the campfire, for example, and the rocks to which the ropes of the tent were bound. In contrast, the temporal is represented as a fluid and mutable force, by wind and rain, and by the transient mobility patterns of humans on the landscape. Impervious as they seem to these temporal and natural forces which have destroyed its other parts, the ruins may even appear to the poet to have a quality of the eternal to them.

For example, *khawālid*, the word often used in the poem to denote the hearthstones, can be alternatively translated as “the immovable ones,” or “the earth-riveted, unchanging,” and carries with it the connotation of eternal existence both into the future and the past.¹⁴² It is tempting to view this eternal quality of the stones of the *aṭlāl* in

¹⁴¹ Al-Tibrīzī, *A Commentary on Ten Ancient Arabic Poems*, 69, v. 9.

¹⁴² J. Stetkevych, “Toward an Arabic Elegiac Lexicon,” 101.

relationship to the pre-Islamic belief that stones were one of the dwelling places of the *jinn*, the nameless, formless spirits who inhabited the desert. This view sometimes comes out in the poems themselves, as in Labīd's *qaṣīdah* where the desert jinn are said to have their "feet anchored in stone."¹⁴³

In this way, despite the fact that they are not the ruins of a Greek temple, the ruins of the campsite do evoke a feeling of monumentality as well as impermanence. Some of this monumentality stems from their relative permanence in relation to the rest of the landscape in which they are situated - susceptible to the forces of nature and time. One might also suggest that, in the absence of the grandeur of the structure itself, it is the beloved who once inhabited them who invests this monumentality to them. These ruins, as the incipient point of the poetic utterance, stand at the closest, most tangible point to the poet. Yet their tangibility is also in question because they are a referent to an intangible. The congruence of both the apparent manifest presence and the absent presence contained by the ruins evoke a sense of disorientation and uncertainty in the poet.

The Beloved and Her Departure

This brings us to the second, more human, site of uncertainty within the *nasīb*, the beloved. For just as the silent stones of the *aṭlāl* evoke speech and the *dār*, they also evoke the memory of its former inhabitant. In some poems, the act of remembrance actually precedes the appearance of the *aṭlāl*, or the poet may switch back and forth in contemplation of the two. The famous opening passage of the *qaṣīdah* of the poet Imru' al-

¹⁴³ Al-Tibrīzī, *A Commentary on Ten Ancient Arabic Poems*, 85, v. 71. Translation by Sells in *Desert Tracings*, 42.

Qays, for example, begins with the poet asking his two companions to stop at the ruins, and both the memory of the beloved and the *dār* are invoked simultaneously:

qifā nabki min dhikrá ḥabīb-in wa-manzili

Stop! Let us weep in memory of a beloved and a waystation.¹⁴⁴

Like description within the pre-Islamic *qaṣīdah* generally, descriptions of the beloved in the poet's memory are typically stylistically indirect, tangential, and derivative. The beloved, for example, may be described in fragments, by the "flash edge of her smile" or by the "fold of her hair."¹⁴⁵ These aspects of her appearance may then be compared to an aspect of the desert flora or fauna, be that a gazelle or a seed pod, and the poet may digress into a small scene of that animal or plant in nature, or even to the comparison of that natural thing with something else, the image or location or event continually changing. Sells has referred to this descriptive style of the *qaṣīdah* as 'dissembling simile,'¹⁴⁶ and he notes how it intensifies the feeling of the ungraspability and uncertainty of the beloved's presence specifically, and the geography of the *qaṣīdah* generally.

One place where the memory of beloved most often digresses is to her departure and her journey away from the poet. In fact, in many poems the memory of her departure is the most prominent or only aspect of the memory of her, in which the sadness of the poet halting over the *aṭlāl* invokes his sadness at her departure. One might say that in the *nasīb*

¹⁴⁴ Al-Tibrīzī, *A Commentary on Ten Ancient Arabic Poems*, 1, v. 1.

¹⁴⁵ As in the *qaṣīdahs* of 'Antara and 'Alqama, see translations by Sells in *Desert Tracings*, 14, 49.

¹⁴⁶ For Sells's discussion of this phenomena and its relationship to the description of the beloved and to both her and the poem's uncertainty of signification, see his essay, "Guises of the Ghul."

the beloved is most often defined by her act of leave-taking.¹⁴⁷ In Imru' al-Qays' poem, for example, following the opening lament, the poet goes on to describe the ruins before him, before lapsing into a memory of the day of the beloved's departure from the camp in verse four:

[*ka-annī*] *ghadāta al-bayni yawma taḥammalū...*

[As if] the morning of departure, the day they loaded up...¹⁴⁸

Here the departure of the beloved is described as a particular temporal unit, *yawm*, one day among the days which comprised the history (*al-ayyām*) of the Arab tribes.¹⁴⁹ The concept of days was also incorporated into the pre-Islamic Arab fatalism that was central to their worldview. It included the idea of *rizq*, that a man or woman had a certain predetermined amount of time or days, as well as an allotted sustenance, which was outside of his or her control.¹⁵⁰ This concept often is addressed more explicitly by the poet in the final part of the poem, but it is worth noting that already it can be found looming in the form of the day of the departure of the beloved. The day then, in the pre-Islamic Arabic world, is a unit of time passing, a part of history that makes up man or woman's finite temporal experience of the cosmos.

In addition to taking place on a specific day in history, the beloved's departure and the moment of separation from the poet may also comprise a particular temporal moment

¹⁴⁷ For an in-depth discussion of the theme of the beloved's departure see Hassan El-Banna Ezz El-Din, "'No Solace for the Heart': The Motif of the Departing Women in the Pre-Islamic Battle Ode," in *Reorientations/Arabic and Persian Poetry*, ed. by Suzanne P. Stetkevych (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 165-179.

¹⁴⁸ Al-Tibrīzī, *A Commentary on Ten Ancient Arabic Poems*, 3, v. 4.

¹⁴⁹ A similar construction occurs, for example, as '*yawm al-bayn*' in the ode of 'Alqama.

¹⁵⁰ Bosworth and McAuliffe, "Rizk," 567.

within the day; it often takes place in the morning as her tribe packs up their bags and departs. These concepts of morning and departure are so interwoven that they can already be found even within the word used for morning in Imru' al-Qays' poem, *ghadāt*, a word whose root, gh – d – w in form I can be used as a verb to mean 'to go in the morning' or in form III to mean 'to depart early in the morning'. It is also the root of the word for tomorrow, marking the break in time between the present and what comes next. That this passage of time is linked linguistically with uncertainty can be seen in the fact that the verbal noun commonly used to indicate the beloved's departure, *bayn*, shares a semantic field with *yabīn*, coincidentally used in Labīd's poem to refer to the indistinct words of the *aṭlāl*.

The departure of the beloved and the severing of their past state of togetherness and the subsequent space between them is often likened to the cutting a rope (*ḥabl*), as in the *qaṣīdah* of 'Alqama:

am ḥabluhā idh na'atka al-yawma maṣrūm

Or is her bond/rope, if far from you, today severed? ¹⁵¹

This severing rope is a symbol of infidelity or of a broken promise or trust. In the earlier quoted poem of al-Mukhabbal, the conjoined concept of leave-taking and betrayal can be found in the words used to describe the location of the ruins, “*bi-aghdirat al-Sīdān*” (by the pools of Sīdān).¹⁵² Here, the plural *aghdirat*, used to refer to the pools, stems from the same root gh – d – r, whose verb in form I means to deceive or betray, while in form II it means to depart. The relationship between these meanings is that such pools are left by a

¹⁵¹ Ahlwardt, *The Divans of the Six Ancient Arabic Poets*, 111, v. 1.

¹⁵² Lyall, *The Mufaḍḍalīyat*, 208, no. 21, v. 4.

downpour but then evaporate. Hence they cannot be relied upon as constant water sources.¹⁵³ Here we see again how the uncertainty of the beloved's presence cycles back onto the *aṭlāl* itself, just as the *aṭlāl* echoed it.

Al-A‘shá's *qaṣīdah* lacks any reference to the *aṭlāl* but opens instead with the departure of his beloved, Hurayra. The betrayal and uncertainty of her departure in verse one, however, is portended in his recounting of their time together that follows. Though the account starts with good memories, it soon devolves into a scenario in which love is unreciprocated and confused:

*‘ulliqtuhā ‘araḍ-an wa- ‘ulliqat rajul-ān
ghayrī wa- ‘ulliqat ukhrá ghayrahā al-rajulu*

I became attached to her by chance, and she became attached to a man
other than me, and the man became attached to another other than her.¹⁵⁴

Like the day of departure, the love triangle and its members emotions are imagined as a consequence of fate, out of the control of the poet. The rope metaphor also reappears here in the verb for the poet's desire for the beloved, *‘ulliqtu*, which suggests not just desire but attachment or fixation upon – implying the presence of a rope tying the lover to the beloved, fixing the lover in space, but also fettering him. The confused chains of unrequited loves lead to madness on the part of those in love:

*wa- ‘ulliqatnī ‘ukhayrá mā tulā ‘imunī
fa-ajtama ‘a al-ḥubbu ḥubb-an kulluhu tabilu
fa-kullunā mughrām-un yahdhī bi-ṣāḥibihi*

¹⁵³ See Edward Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, ed. Stanley L. Poole (London: Williams and Norgate, 1877), 2232.

¹⁵⁴ Al-Tibrīzī, *A Commentary on Ten Ancient Arabic Poems*, 145, v. 15.

nā- 'in wa-dān-in wa-makhbūl-un wa mukhtabilu

And another who didn't suit me became attached to me,
and love collected together love, all of it lovesick.
Each of us infatuated, carrying on to his friend,
forward and backwards, mad and causing madness.¹⁵⁵

This madness echoes a different kind of madness that can afflict the poet in the subsequent journey section of the poem. The unreciprocated love which has driven the bearer mad is once again likened to a rope, but one that the beloved is unaware of, and curiously like the unmentioned ruins, she is silent:

*ṣaddat hurayratu 'annā mā tukallimunā
jahl-an bi-ummi khulayd-in ḥabla man taṣīlu*

Hurayra turned away from us, not speaking to us,
ignorance on the part of Umm Khulayd of the rope that she tied together.¹⁵⁶

This bondless bond leaves the poet confused and disoriented, and the poet, al-A'ṣhā, making a reference to his own *laqab* asks her for a relief from the confusion:

*a- 'an ra 'at rajul-an a'ṣhā aḍarra bihi
raybu al-manūni wa-dahrūn mufnīd-un khabīlu*

Didn't she see a man night-blinded, wounded by
the uncertainty of fated death and by time, a refuter, crazy?¹⁵⁷

In this verse, the uncertainty of the poet's vision and his madness is linked causally not only to the beloved's absence, but to time generally, and to the uncertain time of his fated

¹⁵⁵ Al-Tibrīzī, *A Commentary on Ten Ancient Arabic Poems*, 145, v. 17-18.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 146, v. 19.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 146, v. 20. Translation in consultation with translation by Michael Sells, in *Desert Tracings*, 62.

death. One could read this verse either as a castigation of the beloved for her not being with him given his finite lifespan, or that both are to blame for his condition.

A similarly unequal and unreciprocated bond is imagined as a constraining but frayed rope in one of Ta'abbata Sharran's *qaṣīdahs*:

*innī idhā khullatun ḍannat bi-nā'ilihā
wa-amsakat bi-ḍa'īfi al-waṣli aḥdhāqi*

Surely when a friend/lover (f.) was stingy/lean with her favor,
and clutched with the weakness of a worn-out tie.¹⁵⁸

The lack of reciprocity on behalf of the beloved is often metaphorically linked as it is in the above passage to concepts of emptiness, being worn out or used up, and emaciation and deprivation—forces which are imagined not just working upon the landscape through the *aṭlāl* but as scarcity of provisions and of body – linking her departure further to the concept of *rizq*.

In one of Muraqqish the Younger's poems, though the poet's heartsickness begins over the *dār* of his beloved, it is directed further on in the *nasīb* not at the departure of the beloved, but at the departure of tribes of the past who have left behind an empty, uninhabited countryside. This remembrance not of the beloved's absence, but of the tribes now-absence, leads him to a meditation on time. He observes that like him, they probably viewed themselves as "eternal" (*khālidan*) and "not to be leaving," (*lā arīm*) but they still passed away.¹⁵⁹ In this way, just as the *aṭlāl* can serve as a stand in for the wasteland or uninhabited land generally, the departure of the beloved can serve as a stand for the tribes

¹⁵⁸ Lyall, *The Mufaḍḍalīyat*, 5, no. 1, v. 3. Translation aided by that of S. Stetkevych in *The Mute Immortals Speak*, 105; Arabic in *ibid.*, p. 297, v. 3.

¹⁵⁹ Lyall, *The Mufaḍḍalīyat*, 504, no. 57, v. 3-4.

nomadic settlement pattern more generally, and human subjectivity to time, and indeed to the poet's own subjectivity to it. This is often addressed more directly in later parts of the poem.

As well as being responsible for the poet's heartsickness, in the description of the beloved's act of departure we see also how it is responsible for the confusion of his vision. For example, after first comparing the beloved's tribe departing to a herd of gazelles, Labīd says about them: "the mirage dissolved them till they were like the windings of the riverbed of Bīshah."¹⁶⁰ The mirage (*sarāb*) as a site of uncertainty often recurs as well in the journey section of the poem. It is interesting that in Labīd's verse, as the departing tribe becomes more unclear, it becomes indistinct from the same formational processes which affect the *dār*, the floodwaters. In it, we also see the linking of poetic metaphor with mirage – both distort the original sight and reality in the same way. Like the poetic device transforms, so too does the distance of time and geography and the tricks of the natural desert landscape.

Despite this haziness of his sight induced by her distance, Labīd attempts to resist the reality of her departure and their broken bond by following after her as she departs in his memory, listing off the waystations of her journey, beginning with the *aṭlāl*. But as these stopping points progress away from the ruins, the poetic voice proclaiming them in Labīd's poem becomes less sure, calling his vision into question – shifting from certainty to multiple possible locations by the final verse in the scene.¹⁶¹

¹⁶⁰ Al-Tibrīzī, *A Commentary on Ten Ancient Arabic Poems*, 71, v. 15: "zāyalahā al-sarābu ka-annahā ajzā 'u bīshata." Translation by S. Stetkevych in *The Mute Immortals Speak*, 11.

¹⁶¹ Lyall, *The Mufaḍḍalīyat*, 70-71, v. 14-19. See translation by S. Stetkevych in *The Mute Immortals Speak*, 10-11.

This uncertainty can become projected back onto the *aṭlāl*, as in the *qaṣīdah* of

‘Antara, for example:

*wa-laqaḍ nazalti fa-lā tazunnī ghayrahu
minnī bi-manzilati al-muḥabbi al-mukrami
kayfa al-mazāru wa-qaḍ tarabba‘a ahluhā
bi-‘unayzatayn wa-ahlunā bi-al-ghaylami*

And certainly we alight—and don't you think otherwise
of me—at the stopping place of the noble beloved.
But how is the place of visiting [possible], when surely her family spends the spring
at Unayzatayn and our family in Ghaylam?¹⁶²

While at first the poet argues that “certainly” he stands at the original *dār* of his beloved, the certainty is immediately called into question by the realization of the current distance between the poet and the beloved. We might also ask, how reliable is not only the location of the *aṭlāl*, but also the memory of the beloved that began it? The poet ‘Alqama says it out straight:

*min dhikrī salmā wa mā dhikrī al-awāna la-hā
ilā al-safāhu wa-ẓannu al-ghaybi tarjīm*

To remember Salma and time spent with her
is but foolishness and speculation about the unknown, conjecture.¹⁶³

Here he throws the memory of the beloved into an act of unknowable prophecy and conjecture. It is, like, the other side of the hand which bears the tattoo of the *aṭlāl*, invisible. In the uncertainty surrounding the memory of the beloved and her departure, then, as in the *aṭlāl* we are once again confronted with an unseeable other.

¹⁶² Al-Tibrīzī, *A Commentary on Ten Ancient Arabic Poems*, 92, v. 8-9.

¹⁶³ Ahlwardt, *The Divans of the Six Ancient Arabic Poets*, 111, v. 13. The word for conjecture, *tarjīm*, is associated with the practice of the throwing of stones to predict the future.

The *Khayāl* or Phantom of the Beloved

Another conceit of the *nasīb*, the *khayāl*, amplifies this uncertainty surrounding the poet's vision and memory. The *khayāl* as it is most frequently referred to, is the phantom or ghost of the beloved.¹⁶⁴ And as is implied by the name, whose root comes from the verb to conjure or imagine, it is the infidelity not of the beloved, but of the poet's own sight which is most directly at the fore of its appearance in the *qaṣīdah*. The *khayāl* is also sometimes referred to as *ṭayf*, meaning an apparition and from the verb meaning 'to appear in one's sleep.' Though the phantom typically appears to the poet at night, it does so not while he is sleeping, but as he lies awake, thus filling a similar role to the *aṭlāl* as the object of the night reverie.¹⁶⁵

In a poem by Muraqqish the Younger, the beloved departs instead at night, and ushers in the long night of wakefulness in which the phantom visits, inducing in the poet a state of grief and lovesickness and also disorientation of sight:

*fa-lammā intabahtu bi-al-khayālī wa-rā 'anī
idhā huwa raḥlī wa al-bilādu tawaḍḍaḥu*

When I awakened/became aware of the phantom it startled me
Ah! it is my saddle and the countryside empty.¹⁶⁶

Here the verb used to indicate the effect of the phantom, to startle or awaken, is related to the form I verb to inspire, hinting at the role, like the *aṭlāl*, that the phantom plays in inducing poetic speech. And also like the *aṭlāl*, the uncertainty surrounding its presence is

¹⁶⁴ For a comprehensive discussion of the *khayāl* and its relationship to the *aṭlāl* and poetic inspiration see Seybold, "The Earliest Demon Lover."

¹⁶⁵ Seybold, "The Earliest Demon Lover," 184.

¹⁶⁶ Lyall, *The Muḥaḍḍalīyat*, 493, no. 55, v. 4. Translation in consultation with translation by Seybold in "The Earliest Demon Lover," 183.

marked also by an apparent absence. The phantom is not really there, the poet gazes instead at his own saddle and the countryside which is, like the *aṭlāl*, empty, a wasteland, absent of human presence.

Like the memory of the beloved, the phantom induces in the poet feelings of grief, longing, worry or lovesickness or love madness— the same conditions responsible for the poet’s wakefulness. For example, Muraqqish the Younger laments:

man li-khayāl-in tasaddá mawhin-ān
ash ‘aranī al-hamma fa-al-qalbu saqīm

Who is there to help against a phantom that arises at midnight
 and overwhelms me with worry and sickens my heart? ¹⁶⁷

The adjective used to describe his heart here, “*saqīm*” implies both sickness, but also leanness, that same deprivation of provision invoked by the memory of the beloved and her departure, while the poet notes later in verse 12 that in contrast the healthy (*salīm*) are asleep.¹⁶⁸ The poet’s wakefulness leads into a contemplation of the passing of time, which cause his tears to fall like water droplets from a “worn out waterskin,” once again invoking deprivation, and undermining a metaphor which would otherwise suggest bounty.¹⁶⁹

Seybold notes that though the poet will often speak directly to the phantom, “the phantom, like the *aṭlāl*, never responds.”¹⁷⁰ For example, he observes that in a *qaṣīdah* by al-Ḥārith ibn Ḥillizah al-Yashkurī, ¹⁷¹ the poet directly inquires how the phantom has

¹⁶⁷ Lyall, *The Mufaḍḍalīyat*, 505, no. 57, v. 10. Translation in consultation with translation by Seybold in “The Earliest Demon Lover,” 187.

¹⁶⁸ Lyall, *The Mufaḍḍalīyat*, 506, v. 12.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 506, v. 13: “*ka-al-shanni al-hazīm*.”

¹⁷⁰ Seybold, “The Earliest Demon Lover,” 185.

¹⁷¹ Lyall, *The Mufaḍḍalīyat*, 515-516, v. 1-3. Seybold, “The Earliest Demon Lover,” 185.

travelled to be with them without having come on foot, but no answer is given. In this sense we might consider the phantom, like the *aṭlāl* as a religious sign – as something associated with invoking a creative response, but one which holds open the space for a silent reality outside the bounds of language.

One instance in which there does appear to be dialogue between the phantom and poet occurs in Bashāma ibn Amr's *qaṣīdah*. This poem opens by reversing convention by having the poet depart rather than the beloved:

*hajarta umāmata hajr-an ṭawīlā wa-ḥammalaka al-na`yu `ib`-an thaqīlā
wa ḥummilta minhā `alā na`yihā khayal-an yuwāfi wa-nayl-an qalīlā*

You left Umāma far away, carrying the distance as a heavy burden,
and you were burdened (again) by her despite her distance by the phantom
appearing, offering little.¹⁷²

The opening verse sets up the situation of separation, and also introduces the contrast between this absence it implies, and the tangibility in the form of the weight of their distance, one exacerbated by the phantom. This paradox continues into a supposed dialogue between the phantom and the poet:

*atatnā tusā`ilu mā baththanā fa-qulnā la-hā qad `azamnā al-raḥīlā
wa qultu la-hā kunti qad ta`lamīna mundu thawā al-rakbu `annā ghafūlā
[....]
wa mā kāna aktharu mā nawwalat min al-qawli illā ṣifāḥ-ān wa-qīlā
wa `idhratuhā anna kulla imri`-in mu`iddun la-hu kulla yawm-in shukūlā
ka-anna al-nawwā lam takun aṣqabat wa-lam ta`ti qawma adīm-in ḥulūlā*

¹⁷² Lyall, *The Mufaddalīyat*, 79, v. 1-2. Translation adapted from the translation of Michael Sells in "Like the Arms of a Drowning Man: Simile and Symbol Worlds in the Nāqa Section of Bashāma's Hajarta Umāma," in *Festschrift Ewald Wagner Zum 65. Geburtstag*, Vol. 2, eds. W. Heinrichs and G. Schoeler (Beirut: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1994), 19-24. See also his discussion of the *nasīb*, 24-35.

She came around asking about our condition, and we said to her we've decided to depart.
 I said to her, you know since the riders pitched camp you've been ignoring us.
 [...]

 What she offered nothing more than empty talk.
 Her excuse: every man is allotted everyday his share of circumstances/trouble.
 As if the distance wasn't approaching and she wasn't far off, camped among the red tents.¹⁷³

Here the poet admonishes the phantom, despite its supposed concern for his situation for ignoring him, just as he often does the beloved of memory. In fact, there is some confusion over whether this conversation takes place in the present with the phantom, or is actually a memory, for the poet addresses the phantom with the feminine singular pronoun of the beloved, rather than the masculine singular pronoun typically used to refer to the phantom. The poet then dismisses her inquiries by arguing that though she purports to speak to him, that that is all she does, and it is "empty talk" "offering little." The jist of their conversation then, is an argument in which the poet rebukes the phantom's reality, saying that the existence the phantom asserts is but an illusion belied by the distance between them. We might consider this either an imaginary conversation then, a conversation of memory, or also if not a nonresponse, a response lacking a referent. Here then, like the *aṭlāl*, the uncertainty in the poet is caused by the tension of the paradoxical presence of absence, by "distance coming near to us" as the poet characterizes it. And when the poet asks the phantom for a reason for their separation and for her absence, she answers only that that is what fate and the days appoint.

Meditations on fate and time passing also occurs in conjunction with the appearance of the phantom in one of the poems of Muraqqish the Younger.¹⁷⁴ In the poem, following

¹⁷³ Lyall, *The Mufaḍḍalīyat*, 80-81, v. 4-5 and v. 7-9.

¹⁷⁴ Lyall, *The Mufaḍḍalīyat*, 503, no. 57.

an opening scene that includes the *aṭlāl* and a remembrance of the beloved, the poet lapses into a meditation on the passing of time. The phantom then visits the poet while he lies awake. Interestingly, his sleep has been disturbed already by a lightning storm:

arraqaṇī al-layla barq-un nāṣib-un
wa lam yu'innī 'alá dhāka ḥamīm

At night a troublesome/exhausting lightning flash kept me from sleeping
without a close friend to help.¹⁷⁵

The phantom then appears, causing lovesickness, and the poet continues:

wa laylat-in bittuhā mushirat-in
qad karrarathā 'alá 'aynī al-humūm
lam aḡtamiḍ ṭūlahā hattá inqadāt
akla 'ūhā ba'da mā nāma al-salīm

And many a sleepless night
that anxiety made repeat upon my eyes.
I didn't close my eyes throughout it until it passed,
watching it after the healthy/peaceful slept.¹⁷⁶

It can be assumed the feminine singular “it” in verse 12 is the night itself, but there is some ambiguity over what the cause of the anxiety and sleeplessness is. Is it the phantom or the phantom as memory of the beloved being blamed? Or the lightning storm? Or all them? In this way these categories can be subsumed within each other.

Seybold notes that the phantom usually occurs when the poet is “concentrated on watching the stars or flashes of lightning...both anxious and entranced by the

¹⁷⁵ Lyall, *The Mufaḍḍalīyat*, 505, no. 57, v. 9. Translation adapted from translation by Seybold, “The Earliest Demon Lover,” 187.

¹⁷⁶ Lyall, *The Mufaḍḍalīyat*, 506, no. 57, v. 11-12.

transcendental displays of nature.”¹⁷⁷ In this manner the phantom often overlaps with or occurs in conjunction with another common occurrence in the *qaṣīdah*, one also related to temporal themes, the night watch or storm watch scene. In the storm watch scene, the poet may lie awake watching the progression of a thunderstorm, and attempting to predict its path. In the *nasīb* of a *qaṣīdah* by the poet al-A‘shá, for example, the central scene of this section—rather than describe his memory of the journey of the beloved away from him as is more typical—depicts the poet-persona watching a storm cloud to determine the path of its rainfall.¹⁷⁸ This scene comes on the heels of an opening scene of the beloved’s preparation for her tribe’s departure which is playful, with no mention of the traditional *aṭlāl*. However, the echoes of the hearth of the *dār* can be found in the description of storm clouds in the watch scene, where “lightning kindled along on its edges.”¹⁷⁹

The poet proclaims that unlike others who spend their time drinking wine or with other amusements, nothing keeps him from his watch.¹⁸⁰ The act of watching is linked to the act of prophecy of the future, as he commands the group of intoxicated to foretell (*shīmu!*) their direction, but in their intoxicated state they are unable (in much the same manner that the *aṭlāl* is unable to speak).¹⁸¹ After listing several place names, over which he predicts the rain to fall, the goal of the prophecy is revealed: to cause the storm waters to rejuvenate and bring back the abandoned abodes or *dīyār*.¹⁸² In this way, the storm watch

¹⁷⁷ Seybold, “The Earliest Demon Lover,” 184.

¹⁷⁸ Al-Tibrīzī, *A Commentary on Ten Ancient Arabic Poems*, 123.

¹⁷⁹ Al-Tibrīzī, *A Commentary on Ten Ancient Arabic Poems*, 148, v. 36: “*al-barq fī ḥāfātihī shu‘al*.” Translation by Michael Sells in *Desert Tracings*, 62.

¹⁸⁰ Al-Tibrīzī, *A Commentary on Ten Ancient Arabic Poems*, 148, v. 38.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 148, v. 39.

¹⁸² Al-Tibrīzī, *A Commentary on Ten Ancient Arabic Poems*, 149, v. 43: “*yasqī dīyāran la-hā qad aṣbaḥat gharāḍ-an zūr-an tajānafa ‘anhā al-qawdu wa-al-rasal*.” Translated by Sells in *Desert Tracings*, 63: “a gushing quenching drought for abodes long since desolate, off the track of the horse and camel mare.”

functions in a very similar way to those scenes in which the poet imagines the departure of the beloved in his memory and attempts to follow after her.

A similar night storm watch scene occurs in the structurally atypical *qaṣīdah* by Imru' al-Qays in the final section of the poem rather than in the *nasīb*.¹⁸³ Like the storm watch scene in al- A' shá's ode and the memory of the beloved's departure, it includes a list of place names along the direction that the storm travels. And as in al-A' shá's watch, these names are the end result of a prophetic gaze, for poet listing them is "reading the signs,"¹⁸⁴ while the storm remains located far from the poet himself.¹⁸⁵ The prophetic nature of the scene is underscored both by the word used to indicate the places that the rain will fall, first on the right-side, *aymanu*, the root of which, y - m - n, means to be lucky, and "to see a good omen" in the fifth form. Meanwhile, the root of the word for left side, y - s - r, is also the basis for the word *maysir*, a common game of chance which involved arrow throwing and which was frequently alluded to and depicted in pre-Islamic poetry itself and is discussed further below.¹⁸⁶ The nature of the act of prophecy is also alluded to within the image of the lightening flash, both illuminating the darkness of the night, but ultimately ungraspable in its instantaneous coming and passing away.

The attempt to bring back the beloved and the *dār* in the storm watch scene, might be said to be echoed in the *khayāl* as well. For example, in a poem by Muraqqish the Elder,

¹⁸³ Al-Tibrīzī, *A Commentary on Ten Ancient Arabic Poems*, 26-29, v. 71-82. For a translation and discussion of this scene and poem, see S. Stetkevych, *The Mute Immortals Speak*, 241-285.

¹⁸⁴ Al-Tibrīzī, *A Commentary on Ten Ancient Arabic Poems*, 27, v. 74: "*bi-al-shaymi*." Translated as such by S. Stetkevych, in *The Mute Immortals Speak*, 256, an alternative reading might be "expecting or hoping."

¹⁸⁵ Al-Tibrīzī, *A Commentary on Ten Ancient Arabic Poems*, 23, v. 73: "*ba' da mā muta' ammalī*." S. Stetkevych translates this as, "How distant was the object of my gaze!"

¹⁸⁶ Al-Tibrīzī, *A Commentary on Ten Ancient Arabic Poems*, 27, v. 74.

the poet imagines that the “phantom came from Sulāyma,”¹⁸⁷ a specific stopping place. In the next verse, the inhabitant of that place is revealed to be the beloved, for the poet stays awake, “awaiting her people though they were far away.”¹⁸⁸ He goes on to say that he thinks that he sees, the campfires of her tribe on the horizon, much in the same way the poet sees a lightning flash on the horizon in a storm watch scene. In this way, the phantom might be said to be an emissary and a tangible sign of the much farther, and now more intangible beloved.

Similarly, the phantom appears as a “visitor” in the *nasīb* by the *ṣuʿlūk* poet Taʿabbata Sharran.¹⁸⁹ Here the connection between the memory of the beloved and the phantom is made explicit:

ya ʿidu mā la-ka min shawq-in wa-īrāqi
wa-marri ṭayf-in ʿalā al-ahwāli ṭarrāqi
yasrī ʿalā al-ayni wa-al-ḥayyāti muḥtafiy-ān
nafsī fidā ʿuka min sār-in ʿalā sāqi

Oh ever-returning memory, what longing and wakefulness you bring,
 And the passing phantom that, despite the terrors, comes by night,
 Who makes his way by night, despite weariness and snakes, unshod,
 May my soul be your ransom, night wayfarer, on foot.¹⁹⁰

Here the phantom is referred to by the epithet, night traveler, implying that it travels from the beloved’s far off and unknown *dār*, but also hinting at the poet-persona’s own night journey to come in the journey section. In this recognition of identification between the

¹⁸⁷ Lyall, *The Mufaḍḍalīyat*, no. 46, 460, translation by Seybold, “The Earliest Demon Lover,” 184.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Lyall, *The Mufaḍḍalīyat*, no. 1, 2.

¹⁹⁰ Lyall, *The Mufaḍḍalīyat*, 2, v. 1-2. Translation by S. Stetkevych in *The Mute Immortals Speak*, 105.

poet and the phantom, we see a hint of the poet's own agency behind it, but also his shared fate with the beloved and with the others who have passed away.

Seybold has hinted at a connection between this motif of the night watch of the poet-persona over the ruins of the abandoned campsite, in which he is visited by the *khayāl* and the process of incubation to conjure up the dead.¹⁹¹ Perhaps both the storm watch scene, the memory of the beloved, and the phantom represent similar attempts to resurrect something which has passed. These similarities will be discussed further in the discussion of the elegy below.

But though the poet may attempt to control them or to enact a resurrection, like the attempt to bring the beloved back in memory, they elude his control. For the poet's attempt to stop or reverse the passage of time through the night watch and through the phantom both fail, and like the traditional beloved of memory, the phantom departs in the morning:

fa-law annahā idh tudliju al-layla tuṣbiḥu
fa-wallat wa-qad baththat tabārīḥā mā tarā
wa-wajdī bi-hā idh taḥduru al-dam 'a abraḥ

If only she would stay till morning when she comes at night.
 Then she left, having scattered tormented longings which you see,
 and my love for her, when she caused the tear to fall, was most ill-fated.¹⁹²

¹⁹¹ Seybold, "The Earliest Demon Lover," 188-89.

¹⁹² Lyall, *The Mufaḍḍalīyat*, no. 55, v. 6-7. Translation adapted from Seybold's in "The Earliest Demon Lover," 183. See also the *qaṣīdah* of al-Ḥārith ibn Ḥillizah al-Yashkurī, cited and translated by Seybold, 185: "The phantom made a night visit—never was such a night!—clinging to our saddles, but it didn't stay," from Lyall, *The Mufaḍḍalīyat*, no. 62, v. 1: "*ṭaraqa al-khayāl wa lā ka-layla mudlij sadik bi-'arhulinā wa lam yata'araj.*"

Here we see again, that like the night watch scene generally, there is as well a link between the poet's sight of the phantom and the act of prophecy. In this case, his vision of her is equated to the scattering of stones for omens, and they are read to be ill-fated.

A comprehensive illustration of how the phantom, *aṭlāl*, and memory of the beloved can function together as sites of uncertainty occurs in the poem by al-Mukhabbal. In the poem, the memory of the beloved causes her phantom to appear, confusing his senses:

*dhakara al-rabāba wa-dhikruha suqmu
fa-ṣabā wa-laysa li-man ṣabā ḥilmu
wa-idhā alamma khayāluhā ṭurifat
'aynī famā'u shu 'ūnihā sajmu*

He remembered Rabab and memory of her was a sickness.
He was a child and a child has no foresight/self-command.
And when her phantom blinked into existence,
tears from the tearlines of my eyes streamed down.¹⁹³

Here al-Mukhabbal pulls forth another temporal metaphor for the appearance of the phantom - it is like the blinking of an eye, an increment of time even more discrete and ungraspable than the day of days. And in a subsequent verse, through these phantom induced tears he suddenly grasps the traces of the *aṭlāl*.¹⁹⁴

Al-Mukhabbal's poem and its phantom-induced *aṭlāl* forces the ultimate question as to the poet's sight. Which, if any of these three (the memory of the beloved, the phantom, or the *aṭlāl*) is tangible/real? The phantom is a flickering trick or delusion of the imagination or memory. Is the poet's memory then reliable? What about the *aṭlāl* itself? Is it real either? Is it truly the beloved's old campsite over which the poet haults? Or is that

¹⁹³ Lyall, *The Mufaḍḍalīyat*, no. 21, 207, v. 1-2. Translation in consultation with translation by Michael Sells in "Along the Edge of the Mirage," 119-24.

¹⁹⁴ Lyall, *The Mufaḍḍalīyat*, no. 21, 208, v. 4.

identification just as much of a trick of imagination as the phantom is? Interestingly, in the *qaṣīdah* of Ṭarafa, the *aṭlāl* is said to “appear” (*talūhu*) like a phantom.¹⁹⁵

The poet ‘Antara asks this very question about the reality of the *aṭlāl*, and then explicitly calls it, like the phantom, an act of imagination:

*hal ghādara al-shu’arā’u min mutaraddam
am hal ‘arafta al-dāra ba‘da tawahhum*

Did the poets depart from the broken places?
Or did you recognize the abode after their imagination?¹⁹⁶

In this verse, in a play on the conceit, it is not the beloved who has departed, but in fact the poets. And it is suggested that, in their absence, the association between the *aṭlāl* and the *dār* ceases to exist, for such an association exists only because of their act of imagination.

We can see this uncertainty surrounding the *aṭlāl* in the *qaṣīdah* of Imru’ al-Qays, in which upon their first mention the traces of the *aṭlāl* are declared to be uneffaced in the traditional manner:

*fa-tūḍiḥa fa-l-miqrāti lam ya’fu rasmuhā
li-mā nasajathā min janūb wa shamāl*

[At] Tūḍiḥ and al-Miqrāt its traces were not effaced
by the north and south winds’ weavings.¹⁹⁷

By the end of the first section however, following the remembrance of the beloved, that intact status is in doubt as the poet asks:

¹⁹⁵ Al-Tibrīzī, *A Commentary on Ten Ancient Arabic Poems*, 30, v. 1.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 90, v. 1.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 2, v. 2.

fa-hal 'inda rasm-in dāris-in min mu 'awwali

Is there not at the effaced traces a place for weeping? ¹⁹⁸

In this way, both the memory of the beloved and her phantom can call into question the reality of the *dār* and reveal its status as the *aṭlāl*.

Thus, the *aṭlāl*, the remembrance of the beloved, and the phantom (no matter how brief its appearance) ushers in the *qaṣīdah* as built upon the meditation on the ephemeral and the contingent moment, a moment that the poet suffers from both as a loss and also by its tangible memory that won't leave him in peace. The temporal and locational disorientation brought upon by all three in the opening section of the *qaṣīdah* is linked through metaphors to the shifting unreliability of the desert landscape. But the *aṭlāl* and the memory and phantom of the beloved, though they provoke the poet to speech and attempts to communicate with a moment passed, are ultimately *silent*. The poet is not able to retrieve them in a realistic way. This unactualized bond threatens to drive him mad, so that he can no longer perceive anything clearly.

The Journey or *Rahīl*

The confrontation with the reality of their areality creates a break (*takhalluṣ*) in the poem, catapulting it into the second section, the *rahīl*. In the *rahīl*, which means journey or departure, the poet-persona travels alone through the desert. This section is often figured as a conscious break, and it might be characterized as an attempt to master control over the situation, not through retrieval of the past but through command of the poet's present. The poet may even proclaim himself no longer subject to the unrequited bond that haunted him

¹⁹⁸ Al-Tibrīzī, *A Commentary on Ten Ancient Arabic Poems*, 5, v. 6.

in the *nasīb*, and head in a different direction. This unactualized bond tying the poet to his beloved was represented by a rope in the *nasīb*, where it fixed him and orientated him in space. That same metaphor is also used to represent the poet's active choice to break with her memory and set forth on his own journey in the *qaṣīdah* of Labīd, who begins his journey by proclaiming:

fa-aqṭa ' lubānata man ta 'arraḍa waṣluhu

Cut off your desire for one whose bond is insecure.¹⁹⁹

If the *nasīb*, with the rope or bond between beloved and poet, and with the motion of halting or pausing over the *aṭlāl*, centers, then the *raḥīl* section might be said to decenter, through his deliberate movement and wandering.

In keeping with that decentering, S. Stetkevych notes that the journey takes place in a liminal space, away from the cultural constraints of the tribe.²⁰⁰ In traditional *raḥīl* convention, this journey is undertaken upon a camel mare or other mount, where now untethered, the poet traverses the distance of the desert. In contrast to the beloved's journey, his journey begins typically not in the morning but during the night, like his encounter with the *aṭlāl*. Despite the abrupt break from the *nasīb*, there is also a certain continuity that is carried forward into the second section of the *qaṣīdah*, and oftentimes reappears in its imagery. This can be seen in Labīd's poem in which the poet-journeyer's mount is compared to a storm cloud, and the clouds of dust from her feet echo the smoke

¹⁹⁹ Al-Tibrīzī, *A Commentary on Ten Ancient Arabic Poems*, 72, v. 20. Translation in consultation with translation by S. Stetkevych in *The Mute Immortals Speak*, 11.

²⁰⁰ See S. Stetkevych, *The Mute Immortals Speak*. Stetkevych argues that the tripartite structure of the *qaṣīdah* mimics that of Turner's rite of passage model in Turner, *The Ritual Process*.

of the campfire of the *dār*.²⁰¹ Sometimes the poet will even explicitly suggest that the purpose of his journey, rather than representing a change of direction, is to visit the far off stopping place of the beloved.²⁰²

In either case, we often see the poet attempt to transverse the decried distance of separation that haunts the *nasīb*. For example, the *ṣu lūk* poet Shanfarā boasts:

*wa-kharq-in ka-ḡahri al-tursi qafr-in qaṭa 'tuhu...
fa-alḡaqtu ūlāhu bi-ukhrāhu*

Desert plains like the surface of a shield, a wasteland, I cut through them...
and I joined their beginning to their end.²⁰³

This empty desert or wasteland, referred to here by the name “*qafr*,” is not only prominent within the *raḡl*, but also sometimes occurs as a stand in for ruins within the *nasīb*.²⁰⁴ For the *qafr*, like the *aṭlāl* is a once populated place that has now been abandoned. A similar example of the poet cutting across (q-ṭ- ') a bare landscape occurs in the *qaṣīdah* of Imru' al-Qays:

wa-wād-in ka-jawfī al- 'ayri qafr-in qaṭa 'tuhu

A wadi like the belly of a wild onager, a wasteland that I cut across.²⁰⁵

²⁰¹ Al-Tibrīzī, *A Commentary on Ten Ancient Arabic Poems*, 73, 75, v. 24, 31-32.

²⁰² For example, the poet 'Antara asks, “Will a Shadanīyyan mare carry me to her abode?” (“*hal tublighannī dārahā shadanīyyatun*”) in Al-Tibrīzī, *A Commentary on Ten Ancient Arabic Poems*, 95, v. 22. See also the poet 'Alqama in Ahlwardt, *The Divans of the Six Ancient Arabic Poets*, 111, v. 14.

²⁰³ Muḡammad ibn al-Zamakhsharī, *A ḡab al- 'Ajab fī Sharḡ Lāmīyat al- 'Arab* [Cairo: Maṭba'at Muḡammad al-Warāq 1328/1910], 130, v. 65-66, <https://ia800309.us.archive.org/10/items/shr7lamiatal3rab/shr7lamiatal3rab.pdf>.

²⁰⁴ As for example, in v. 4 of No. 57 of Muraqqish the Younger: “they revealed wastelands which were inhabited in previous times by lords of the raids.” (*aṣḡat qināra wa-qad kāna biḡā fī sālifī al-dahri arbāb al-hujūm*) in Lyall, *The Mufaḡḡalīyat*, 504.

²⁰⁵ Al-Tibrīzī, *A Commentary on Ten Ancient Arabic Poems*, 21, v. 50.

Here we see the wasteland as a wadi – echoing the trenches of the *aṭlāl*, and like it, a place emptied or transformed into a non-place by water. In addition, the poem plays upon the dual meanings of *jawf*, which could indicate either a hollowed-out space, or the belly or abdomen, to bring to mind the association of the hunger of wild animals to the emptiness of the landscape.

This wasteland upon which the poet journeys is defined by its indefinability – it is an empty landscape whose flatness defies demarcation or direction. It lacks landmarks or paths to orientate him on his journey. In the Shanfarā's *qaṣīdah*, the description of the landscape is couched within a denial of the poet's susceptibility to this uncertainty:

wa-lastu bi-miḥyāri al-ḡalāmi idhā antaḥat
hudā al-hawjali al- 'issīfī yahmā 'u hawjalu

I am not a man confused by darkness, when
 the course of the reckless fool is turned astray by the wayless wasteland.²⁰⁶

In this verse, the directionless journeyer and the uncontained landscape of the journey come together. Sells notes of the repetition of the word *hawjal* in the poem: “the term is first used to denote the unskilled traveler...then, secondly,...the looming enormity of the trackless and/or starless desert and/or night. The two referents of *hawjal* are so combined that we are unable to divide them poetically; the two images melt into one another, and the inner and outer states also merge.”²⁰⁷ That is, both the directionless wandering of the poet, and unmarked landscape reflect one another, and they reveal something of the poet-persona's psychological state.

²⁰⁶ Al-Zamakhsharī, *A 'jab al- 'Ajab fī Sharḥ Lāmīyat al- 'Arab*, v. 19.

²⁰⁷ Michael Sells, "Shanfarā's Lamiyya: A New Version," *al-'Arabiyya* 16, no. 1/2 (1983): 23.

As in Shanfarā's ode, the uncertainty of the boundless and empty desert of the *raḥīl* can extend and intermingle with the boundless sky above, whose totaling darkness adds to his confusion. In the *qaṣīdah* of Labīd, the disorientated searching of the camel mare as doe for her lost fawn is exacerbated by a rainstorm and by the "night whose stars were veiled by clouds."²⁰⁸ While elsewhere in the journey he describes the sunset thus:

ḥattā idhā alqat yad-ān fī kāfir-in
wa-ajanna 'awrāti al-thughūri ḡalāmuhā

When daylight dipped its hand into the all-concealing night,
 and darkness veiled the crotches of each mountain pass.²⁰⁹

The night here is like the desert, an un-demarcated space, hiding any paths or waymarks. It also conceals or hides. The verb for veiling or covering originates from the root j-n-n, and can also mean in form I to become possessed or insane, where it is associated with the power of the jinn, suggesting something once again which impacts the poet's underlying psychological state. In the journey section of Imru' al-Qays' *qaṣīdah* there is another reference to night as a concealer:

wa-layl-in ka-mawji al-baḥri arkhā sudūlahu
'alaya bi-anwā'i al-humūmi li-yabtalī

A night like a wave of the sea let fall its veil
 upon me with all kinds of worries to isolate me.²¹⁰

²⁰⁸ Al-Tibrīzī, *A Commentary on Ten Ancient Arabic Poems*, 78, v. 42: "fī laylat-in kafara al-nujūma ḡhamāmuhā," translation is by S. Stetkevych, in *The Mute Immortals Speak*, 13.

²⁰⁹ Al-Tibrīzī, *A Commentary on Ten Ancient Arabic Poems*, 84, v. 65.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 19, v. 44.

In Imru' al-Qays' poem, the darkness of the night echoes the veil over [one of] the beloved[s] in his extended *nasīb* section, and here the cover of night serves not only to confuse his sight, but to cut him off from others. The poet then addresses the night directly, asking it to go away and “reveal dawn,” just as the poet might appeal to the *aṭlāl*, but like the *aṭlāl*, it does not respond.

This all-concealing and disorientating night of the journey might be seen alongside the night which is broken (albeit only momentarily) by a lightning flash in the storm watch of the *nasīb*. This lightning gives the traveler a location or point to orientate their location by, just as the stars also do further in Imru' al-Qays' description:

fa-yā la-ka min layl-in ka-anna nujūmahu
bi-kulli mughār-in al-fatli shuddat bi-yadhbuli

Oh, what is like you among nights? As if its stars
 in every place by twine were fastened to Mount Yadhbul.²¹¹

Here Imru' al-Qays in describing the long night, refers to the feeling that the passage of time has stopped, and that the stars are tied by ropes to the mountains.

Mountains, as landmarks, often stand out as some of the few fixed points within the journey section. In Labīd's *qaṣīdah*, for example these high places are “vantage points,” and they seem to bring an opportunity for peace, a relief from fear, and a chance to see clearly in contrast to the confusion of the demarcated land. They echo the *aṭlāl* and the waystations of the journey of the beloved away from him. One might see these stopping points, as momentary intrusions of the fixed or eternal moment, while the starless night or

²¹¹ Al-Tibrīzī, *A Commentary on Ten Ancient Arabic Poems*, 20, v. 47-48. Translation in consultation with translation by S. Stetkevych, *The Mute Immortals Speak*, 254.

unmarked desert stands in for the movement of time unmarked or unfixed. But even the certainty and security of these places is, like the ruins of the campsite, often undermined, for the lookouts of Labīd's poem are "empty" and the way stones hide hunters behind them.²¹²

As the poet-journeyer travels, he oscillates between these waystations and between other unmarked parts of the landscape, which heightens the sense of the fear as well as a sense that the journeyer is simply of pacing or zigzagging about. That is, despite his claims to conquer the distance, within the journey there is no clear stopping place or destination in which his searching rests. And as it was in the *nasīb*, this uncertainty of place is exacerbated by the dissembling simile within the poems, in which the poet moves between one scene and another elsewhere.

In his description of the long night, Imru' al-Qays decries that though dawn brings revelation, it will "be no better for me."²¹³ And as the night turns to day, in place of the darkness which shrouds the poet-journeyer's vision, there is often instead heat induced mirage. For example, in Labīd's *qaṣīdah*, the blinding result of the sun leaves the landscape in much the same state as if the poet still journeyed at nightfall:

[*fa-bi-tilka*] *idh raqaṣ al-lawāmi 'u bi-al-ḍuḥá*
wa ajtāba ardiyata al-sarābi ikāmuḥā

When the [sun's] shimmers danced in the dawn
 and its hills put on the cloaks of the mirage.²¹⁴

²¹² Al-Tibrīzī, *A Commentary on Ten Ancient Arabic Poems*, 74, v. 27. Translation by S. Stetkevych, *The Mute Immortals Speak*, 12.

²¹³ Al-Tibrīzī, *A Commentary on Ten Ancient Arabic Poems*, 20, v. 46: "*alā ayyahā al-laylu al-tawīlu alā anjali bi-ṣubḥi wa mā al-iṣbāḥu fika bi-amthali.*" Translation by S. Stetkevych, *The Mute Immortals Speak*, 254.

²¹⁴ Al-Tibrīzī, *A Commentary on Ten Ancient Arabic Poems*, 80, v. 53.

In all of this, we can see a continuation from the *nasīb* of the state of uncertainty of the poet's sight and location. This state of uncertainty is associated also with anxiety in the poet. The psychological state of the poet, however, rather than expressed through him directly, is most often deflected upon the poet's mount within the poem, which serves as the primary agent in the scene and functions as a stand-in for the poet's self (the only exception being the *ṣu'lūk* poets, like Shanfarā, who, having renounced that symbolic aspect of the tribe, have no mount and instead travel on foot).

This mount is usually a camel mare, or *nāqah*, and though she may embody his tie to the tribe,²¹⁵ she is also associated with travel, and in the *raḥīl* she embodies the harsh conditions and deprivation of his journey. In Labīd's poem, for example, she is introduced as:

bi-ṭalīhi asfār-in tarakna baqiya-ān
min-ha fa-aḥnaqa ṣulbuhā wa-sanāmuḥā

Jaded by travels that have reduced her to a remnant
 of herself, her loins and her hump emaciated.²¹⁶

It is interesting that just as the concept of hunger or scarcity of resources was linked to the absence of the beloved in the *nasīb*, in the verse above we see the emaciation and weariness of the camel mare of the journey metaphorically linked to the remains of the *aṭlāl*. Just as time and the departure of the beloved have reduced the *dār* to remnants, so too has the journey of the poet reduced his mount to remnants of herself. There is also a certain irony

²¹⁵ See S. Stetkevych, *The Mute Immortals Speak*, 27.

²¹⁶ Al-Tibrīzī, *A Commentary on Ten Ancient Arabic Poems*, 72-73, v. 22-23. Adapted from translation by S. Stetkevych, *The Mute Immortals Speak*, 11.

built into the image, like the irony of the *aṭlāl*. For the words used to indicate the camel mare's hump and loins, "*sanām*" connotes height or mountain peaks, just as the "*ṣulb*" – the loins are associated with the concepts of firmness and hardness. So in the emaciation of the camel mare, what was supposed to be high has been brought low, and what was supposed to be firm has softened.

The hunger and deprivation of the journey's effects upon the body are linked directly to the concept of *rizq* and to fate in a metaphor by Shanfarā wherein the poet-as-wolf's ribs are likened to gambling arrows:

muhallalat-un shību al-wujūhi ka-annahā
qidāḥ-un bi-kaffay yāsir-in tataqalqalu

Worn thin, white of face, as if they
 are arrows in the palm of a *maysir* player, shaking.²¹⁷

The adjective used to describe their thinness here, "*muhallal*" comes from the verb meaning not only to grow shabby or thin, but also to weave thinly or in a threadbare, diaphanous manner, and can be also used to mean the "weaving" of a poem, suggesting the fragility or failure of the poet's own creative endeavor. The theme of gambling comes to the fore in the final section of the *qaṣīdah*.

Reinforcing that the journey exists outside cultural boundaries of the tribe, the poet's mount is often imagined as various wild animals, as an ostrich or ghazelle, which the poem, in typical style, digresses into a scene about. Description in these scenes often emphasize the susceptibility of the young of these animals, or the animals themselves, to

²¹⁷ Al-Zamakhsharī, *A ʿjab al-ʿAjab fī Sharḥ Lāmīyat al-ʿArab*, v. 29; S. Stetkevych, *The Mute Immortals Speak*, 146, 302, v. 29.

predation. For example, in the journey of the poet Labīd, the camel mare is likened to a doe mourning her fawn who had lagged behind the herd and been killed by a wolf.²¹⁸ Distraught in her grief, she paces to and fro searching in vain for the now lost fawn. The death of the fawn is attributed to fate, an actor who unlike the traveler or the fickle beloved, does not go off course: “the arrows of fated death did not stray from their mark,” the poet proclaims.²¹⁹

Similarly, in the journey of the poet ‘Alqama, the *nāqah* is compared to an ostrich hurrying back to his nest “as if he was afraid ill-luck’ may have befallen his eggs or hatchlings.²²⁰ While in the poem of ‘Antara, the camel mare herself is attacked by a dune cat, but escapes.²²¹ Shanfarā, a *ṣu lūk* poet, in proper *ṣu lūk* form, inverts the simile of camel mare as prey and compares himself instead to the wolf. But even in the guise of a predator, he finds no escape from hunger. This hunger is imagined as a loss, which he and his pack mourn:

fa ḍajja wa-ḍajjat bi-al-barāḥi ka-annahā
wa ṭyāhu nawḥ-un fawqa ‘alyā’a thukkalu

He howled and they howled in the vast emptiness, as if they
 and he were mourning women upon a ridge, bereaved.²²²

²¹⁸ Al-Tibrīzī, *A Commentary on Ten Ancient Arabic Poems*, 76-80, v. 36-51.

²¹⁹ Ibid., 77, v. 39: “inna al-manāyā lā taṭīshu siḥāmuhā.”

²²⁰ Ahlwardt, *The Divans of the Six Ancient Arabic Poets*, 112, v. 20-28. The quoted line comes from v. 22: “ka-annahū ḥādhirun li al-naḥs.”

²²¹ Al-Tibrīzī, *A Commentary on Ten Ancient Arabic Poems*, 96-97, v. 29-30. See also Sells’ translation in *Desert Tracings*, 51.

²²² Al-Zamakhsharī, *A‘jab al-‘Ajab fī Sharḥ Lāmīyat al-‘Arab*, v. 32; S. Stetkevych, *The Mute Immortals, Speak* 146 (translation), 302 (Arabic text), v. 32. S. Stetkevych reads this as “nūḥ,” whereas “nawḥ” is regarded as the plural of “nā’iḥah” and “na’iḥ” (Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, 2864). The 1328 edition of *A‘jab al-‘Ajab*, reads nūḥ on p. 38; but in a later commentary included in the 1328/1910 edition (following the *A‘jab al-‘Ajab*), the commentator explicitly stated that it is *nawḥ bi-faṭḥ al-nūn jam’ nā’iḥ wa-na’iḥah* (‘Aṭā’ allāh b. Aḥmad al-Miṣrī [d. 1772], *Nihāyat al-‘Arab fī sharḥ Lāmīyat al-‘Arab*, included in the 1328 edition of *A‘jab al-‘Ajab* [Cairo: Maṭba‘at Muḥammad al-Warāq 1328/1910], 134), <https://ia800309.us.archive.org/10/items/shr7lamiatal3rab/shr7lamiatal3rab.pdf>.

Like the wayless traveler converged with the wayless desert, the hunger of the predator and the emptiness of the wasteland converge. As the vignette continues, it depicts the wolves vacillating between crying out and then falling silent, between speaking their grief/hunger and then deciding to conceal it, because “when complaining is of no use endurance is best” and that “each despite his hunger has the kindness to hide it.”²²³ Against the backdrop of the boundless landscape, one finds the poet in the guise of camel mare in the guise of a wolf, circling an unspeakable loss--or perhaps more accurately, a loss that exceeds what is spoken.

In their concealment of or silence over that loss or hunger, one finds not only an echo of the concealing night of the journey, but also of the *nasīb*. For the bond between the beloved and the poet is also imagined there as something hidden. The most prominent example perhaps comes from the opening verse of ‘Alqama’s *qaṣīdah*, in which he asks:

*hal mā ‘alimta wa-mā istawda ‘ta maktūm
am ḥabluḥā idh na’atka al-yawma maṣrūm*

Is what you learned and what you put away for safekeeping kept concealed?
Or is her bond, if far from you today, severed?²²⁴

In this verse, we see the association between hiddenness and preservation over time in contrast to that which is broken or lost by it. While in Shanfarā’s ode, the loss itself is what is concealed. Loss that crops up within the poet’s journey is often imagined as maternal

²²³ Al-Zamakhsharī, *A ‘jab al- ‘Ajab fī Sharḥ Lāmīyat al- ‘Arab*, v. 34-35: “*la al-ṣabru in lam yanfa ‘i al-shakū ajmalu*” and “*kulluhā ‘alā nakaḥin mimmā yukātimu mujmilu*.” Translation in consultation with translation by Suzanne Stetkevych, *The Mute Immortals Speak*, 146. See also Michael Sells’ alternative translation of v. 35 in *Desert Tracings*, 27, based on text/variant by Mullūhī– “keeping composure over what they conceal.”

²²⁴ Ahlwardt, *The Divans of the Six Ancient Arabic Poets*, 111, no. 13, v. 1.

bereavement, but it is intertwined with the same concept of hunger that was associated with the loss of the beloved within the *nasīb*, and with the concept of it being hidden or concealed from sight or undifferentiated to the human gaze.

In addition to the dangers of getting lost, or of hunger and thirst, and the possibility of death at the hand of predators, other supernatural dangers may also be found within the poet's desert journey. Unlike the phantom who appears in the *nasīb* as an aspect of the poet's imagination, these figures are truly supernatural, and more hostile.²²⁵ Like the camel mare as an animal of prey, these scenes intensify the feeling of the fragility of the poet's condition, of potential danger lurking in the shadows.

Despite their being a site of uncertainty, loss, and danger, the journey can also imbue the poet with an aspect of freedom, heroic self-determination and of victory over these fears, or at least the illusion of it. For example, the poet Ṭarafa boasts that unlike others who "imagine impending ruin," "I don't skulk the high-backed wadi slopes in fear."²²⁶ This fearlessness is reflected in the description of his camel mare, who while likened to the doe oryx scared of her fawn, is also compared to various metaphors of stability, firmness, and strength.²²⁷ Similarly, though Labīd's camel mare is worn, still she moves lightly across the landscape like a cloud that carries no load of rain.²²⁸

²²⁵ For a more detailed discussion of them and comparison to the *khayāl*, see Seybold, "The Earliest Demon Lover," 180-181.

²²⁶ Al-Tibrīzī, *A Commentary on Ten Ancient Arabic Poems*, 39-40, v. 40 and v. 44. Translation by Michael Sells in "The Mu'allāqa of Ṭarafa," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 17 (1986): 27.

²²⁷ Al-Tibrīzī, *A Commentary on Ten Ancient Arabic Poems*, 33-39, v. 12-38.

²²⁸ Ibid., 11, v. 24.

For the *ṣu lūk* poet, Shanfarā, the act of crossing affords him a sort of heroic moment. We find him at the end of his journey upon a mountain peak amidst the mountain goats:

*wa-yarkudna bi al-āṣāli ḥawlī ka-annanī
min al-‘uṣmi adfá yantaḥī al-kīḥa a ‘qalu*

They are motionless in the late afternoon/dusk around me as if I were
a long horned buck, heading for the mountain peak, unassailable.²²⁹

In this way, we might see the journey as an attempt by poet through the heroicism of his struggles within the journey to grasp some of the still, silent, monumentality of the eternal within its transitive space. This heroicism comes to a head in the final section of the *qaṣīdah*.

The Final Section or Gharad

The final section of the *qaṣīdah*, the *gharaḍ*, or goal of the poem can take many forms. It might contain a boast (*fakhr* or *madīḥ*), in which the poet praises himself or his tribe, satire or invective of his enemies (*hijā’*), an elegy (*rithā’*), general aphorisms or words of wisdom (*ḥikam*), or elements of all four. Though the poem focuses on this specific goal or message, each of these might contain some commentary on the uncertainties encountered in the previous sections of the poem.

Those uncertainties are perhaps most directly addressed within the wisdom portions of the *gharaḍ*, within which one finds a final meditation on the uncertainty of fate which has been haunting the poet from the beginning. For example, Muraqqish the Younger

²²⁹ Al-Zamakhsharī, *A ‘jab al- ‘Ajab fī Sharḥ Lāmīyat al- ‘Arab*, v. 68. Translation adapted from translation by S. Stetkevych, *The Mute Immortals Speak*, 150 (trans.), 304 (Arabic text).

observes how time can bring changes in circumstances at random and without regard to the present skills or status of a particular person:

*kam min akhī tharwat-in ra 'aytuhu
ḥalla 'alā mālihi dahr-un ghashūm
wa min 'azīz al-himá dhī man 'at-in
aḍḥá wa-qad aththarat fī-hi al-kulūm*

How many among sons of riches, I saw him
undone, despite his wealth by time, an unjust tyrant.
And [how many] among the great protectors, masters of invulnerability,
marked with wounds...²³⁰

The poem continues on in the same manner for several more verses, where further examples of changes in circumstance are enumerated.²³¹ In the poet's worldview, one's inherent character or present circumstance have no relationship to one's future, or to one's ultimate outcome. Those who have wealth, lose it. Those who are strong, are made weak. Those who are travelling, settle down, while those in bad situations suddenly find them improved. Time is not fair or just, and there is no continuity or stability from one moment to the next.

This uncertainty or randomness of fate is sometimes represented in the *gharaḍ* by the practice of *maysir* gambling or the casting of stones.²³² The reference to stone throwing as an act of prophecy and its inherent futility is linked back through to the *aṭlāl*'s hearthstones in the *qaṣīdah* by 'Alqama wherein he too warns that the present moment is no prediction of the future one:

²³⁰ Lyall, *The Mufaḍḍalīyat*, 506-507, v. 16-17

²³¹ Ibid., 507, v. 18-20.

²³² For a more detailed discussion of this motif in general see Nadia Jamil, "Playing for Time: Maysir-Gambling in Early Arabic Poetry," in *Islamic reflections, Arabic Musings: Studies in Honour of Professor Alan Jones*, eds. R. G. Hoyland and P.F. Kennedy (Oxford: Gibb Memorial Trust, 2004), 48-96.

*bal kullu qawm-in wa-in ‘azzū wa-in kathurū
‘arīfuhum bi-athāfī al-sharri marjūm*

But every tribe, though great and though many,
their chief by the hearthstones of evil disaster is stoned.²³³

There is a play on words in the use of the word “‘arīf” for chief or leader in the second hemistich of this verse, for the word can also be used to signify a seer or one who has knowledge. One reading of it may thus be that knowledge is ultimately called into question and brought down by more all-seeing powers. The term *marjūm* here can literally mean ‘object of prophecy’ as well as one who is stoned or cursed. The overall sense then is that one is a victim of one’s own devices; any attempt at foresight or certainty will ultimately be undermined.²³⁴ The hearthstones of the *aṭlāl* will ultimately bring not knowledge, not memory or foresight, but mortality and misfortune. Through inverting the act of stone throwing, so that they are now being cast at the poet, ‘Alqama connects thus all of the previous uncertainties within the *nasīb*—of love and memory—and adds a final element, that of future death.

The poet’s response to this uncertainty, can often be found within the boast or *madīḥ*, wherein he praises his own virtues or that of his tribe. For within the *gharaḍ*, in most cases, there is, as S. Stetkevych has noted, a return from the liminal space of the journey back into the communal ties of the tribe. The exception to this rule is in the *qaṣīdah* of the *ṣu‘lūk* poets, wherein the poet remains at the margins of the tribe and human community. S. Stetkevych argues that the *ṣu‘lūk* poets have a “permanent liminal

²³³ Ahlwardt, *The Divans of the Six Ancient Arabic Poets*, 112, v. 29.

²³⁴ This is made clearer in verse 35 of the same ode in Ahlwardt, *The Divans of the Six Ancient Arabic Poets*, 113: “And whoever scatters the crows [for an omen] is rebuked by them, and despite his health and security is certainly cursed. (*wa-man ta‘arraḍa li al-ghirbāni yazjuruḥā ‘alā salāmatihi lā budda mash‘ūmu*).” Translation in consultation with translation by Sells in *Desert Tracings*, 18.

identity.”²³⁵ In their decision to remain permanently in the liminal space of the *raḥīl*, one might argue that they most closely approximate the “modern” perspective of the eternal moment.

For those poets who do return to the “refuge” of the tribe, their refuge is not found within the stability of the tribe or their material possessions, for as the poet has already declared, such reliance is ultimately doomed. Instead, the prescribed or virtuous response towards the uncertainty of fate is often exemplified in the pre-Islamic virtue of *karīm*. The concept is marked by the ability of the poet to let go and to give away, especially to others in the tribe. The willingness of the poet to give away and to not hoard himself or his possessions is often illustrated in the boast through his deeds in battle or through his holding of banquets or dispersal of wine to his companions.

This noble quality of generosity is often contrasted with the person who hoards his wealth or possessions for himself, and as such is subject to the blame of the tribe, as we see in the boast of the *qaṣīdah* of ‘Alqama:

wa-al-jūdu nāfiyat-un li-l-māli mahlakat-un
wa-al-bukhlu bāq-in li-ahlīhi wa madhmūm

Generosity is the remains of wealth, destroying,
 and what you hoard is left over and by the people scorned.²³⁶

²³⁵ S. Stetkevych, *The Mute Immortals Speak*, 87.

²³⁶ Ahlwardt, *The Divans of the Six Ancient Arabic Poets*, 112, v. 30. Translation adapted from translation by Sells in *Desert Tracings*, 17.

Here generosity is compared to the remains of the abandoned campsite, that is, it is a virtue which lasts. Says ‘Antara, proclaiming it an intrinsic part of his character, irrespective of his circumstance:

*fa-idhā sharibtu fa-innanī mustahlik māli
wa- ‘irḍī wāfir-un lam yakallama
wa-idhā ṣaḥawtu fa-ma uqaṣṣiru ‘an nadā
wa-kamā ‘alimti shamā ‘ilī wa-takarrumī*

When I am drinking, I spend away my wealth,
though my abundant honor is not injured.
And when I sober up I am not more restrained in generosity,
just as you have known my character and have honored me.²³⁷

Perhaps the most quintessential example of *karīm* is embodied in one of the more pivotal elements of the final act of the *qaṣīdah*, the sacrifice of the camel mare. This ritual sacrifice is carried out through the practice of *maysir* gambling, in which the wager that the poet gambles is his own mount and arrows are thrown to determine how its meat is apportioned. As this leaves the choice up to the randomness of fate, his sacrifice is not only an act of generosity to the community, but also an act of surrender to fate as the apportioner of hunger and provision, as boasted the ode of ‘Alqama:

*wa qad yasartu idhāmā al-jū ‘u kullifahū
mu ‘aqqab-un min qidāḥi al-nab ‘i maqrūm
law yaysirūna bi-khayl-in qad yasartu bi-ha*

I have gambled whenever hunger was its cost,
the result of divining arrows carved from the *nab* ‘i tree.
When they gambled their horses, I have gambled her.²³⁸

²³⁷ Al-Tibrīzī, *A Commentary on Ten Ancient Arabic Poems*, 99, v. 40-41.

²³⁸ Ahlwardt, *The Divans of the Six Ancient Arabic Poets*, 114, v. 54-55. Translation in consultation with Sells, *Desert Tracings*, 19. For another example of the camel sacrifice by way of the game of *maysir*, see also the *qaṣīdah* of Labīd in Al-Tibrīzī, *A Commentary on Ten Ancient Arabic Poems*, 86, v. 73-74.

Just at the camel mare stood in for the poet's own experience within the journey, so too then, does the sacrifice of the *nāqah* take on premonitions of the poet's future death and its certain uncertainty. We can see overtones of this within the boast from the *qaṣīdah* of the poet Ṭarafa:

karīm-un yurawwī nafsahu fī-ḥayātihi
sa-ta 'lamu in mutnā ghad-ān ayyanā al-ṣadī
arā qabra nahhām-in bakhīl-in bi-mālihi
ka-qabri ghawīy-in fī al-baṭālātī mufṣīdī

tarā juthwatayni min turāb-in 'alayhumā
ṣafā 'ihu ṣummun min ṣafīh-in munaṣṣadi
arā al-mawta ya 'tāmu al-kirāma wa-yaṣtafī
'aqīlata māli al-fāḥishi al-mutashaddīdī
arā al-dahra kanz-ān nāqīṣ-ān kulla laylat-in
wa-ma tanquṣi al-ayyāmu wa-al-dahru yanfadi
la- 'mruka inna al-mawta mā akhṭa 'a al-fatā
la-ka-al-ṭiwali al-murkhā wa-thinyāhu bi-al-yadi

A generous one quenches his soul during his life.
 You will know when we are dead tomorrow which of us is the thirsty one.²³⁹
 I see a tomb of a hoarder of his wealth,
 like a tomb of the one who strays in corrupt idleness.
 I see two tumuli of rocks among the graves,
 upon them both hard/deaf slabs among the slabs in rows,
 I see death choose the noble
 and pick the best of the wealth of the rigid miser.
 I see time, a treasure, diminished every night,
 and the days and time diminish and are used up.
 By your life, death doesn't miss the brave youth
 around you the slackened length, and its twisted coils²⁴⁰ in hand.²⁴¹

In these verses, the eternal silent stone of the *aṭlāl* is pronounced the tombstone of the mortal poet, and of all. Time, represented as days, like provisions and like the body, are

²³⁹ “the thirsty one” might also indicate the dead person's owl, see discussion below.

²⁴⁰ *thinyāhu* has a double meaning and can mean both a twisted plait (reins) and also time as a duration.

²⁴¹ Al-Tibrīzī, *A Commentary on Ten Ancient Arabic Poems*, 44-45, v. 62-67. Translation in consultation with translation by Sells in “The Mu‘allaqa of Ṭarafa.”

used up and worn out. The boast ends with a final inversion of the typical journey motif of the poet riding his camel mare and completes his self-identification with the camel mare's fate: death is riding the poet, driving him on.

Uncertainty, Ephemerality, and Silence in the *Rithā*

It would be remiss to discuss uncertainty surrounding death within the pre-Islamic *qaṣīdah*, without also discussing at least briefly the *rithā* or elegy generally as a genre as well. Though the elegy can appear as a part of the *qaṣīdah* as the *gharaḍ*, not all or even most elegies are written in *qaṣīdah* form. These elegies have been sometimes called by scholars monothematic, as they are defined by being concerned or about the topic of the remembrance of a dead, but Marlé Hammond has shown that, like the *qaṣīdah*, they can actually be quite structurally complex in themselves. She notes how they often contain such elements as a *nasīb*, wisdom section, encomium or praise of the dead, exhortation to war or revenge, and a death scene or death announcement.²⁴²

In elegies which contain a *nasīb*, the dead relative or tribesperson replaces the departed beloved of the *nasīb* of the *qaṣīdah*. And rather than halting or stopping over the ruins of the beloved's campsite, the elegist instead halts over their grave. This halting often mimics the nightwatch of the *nasīb* of the *qaṣīdah*. For example, Mulhalhil in his elegy to his brother,²⁴³ begins with an act of remembering and the poet's tears in response, just as the *nasīb* of the *qaṣīdah* might open with the remembrance of the beloved and weep over

²⁴² Hammond, *Beyond Elegy*, especially: 96-97.

²⁴³ Shaykhu, Luwīs. *Kitab Shu'arā' al-Naṣrānīya*. Vol. 1 (Beirut: Dār Al-Mashraq, 1967), 123-124. See a full translation of the poem by S. Stetkevych in *The Mute Immortals Speak*, 216-218 (trans.), 310 (Arabic text).

her absence. Who is being remembered is not immediately clear, as the poet lies awake in a night so long that “it did not have a day”²⁴⁴ and watches the stars:²⁴⁵

*wa-bittu urāqibu al-jawzā 'a ḥattā
taqāraba min awā 'ilihā inḥidār
uṣarrifu muqlatī fī ithri qawm-in
tabāyanati al-bilādu bi-him faghārū
wa-abkī wa-al-nujūmu muṭalli 'āt-un
ka'an lam taḥwihā 'annī al-biḥāru
'alā man law nu 'ītu wa kāna ḥayy-an...*

I spent the night watching the Gemini constellation until
the first of its [stars] came close to setting.
I turned my gaze to the track of a tribe,
it moved from one land to another and fell into them.
I cried and the stars shone forth
as if the expanses didn't hold them/enclose them from me.
For whom, if my death was announced, and he was alive...²⁴⁶

In his night watch, the poet watches the stars until their falling in the sky brings his eyes to the horizon. There he tries to follow the tracks or remnants left from the path of a tribe on the horizon, until it seems to fall into the expanse of the countryside like the stars do. This track is revealed in the last verse to be not just from a departure of memory, but also a departure from life, as it is suggested that his tears are caused by his brother and his tribe who are no longer present. After following the departure on the horizon, the poet's gaze returns to the stars, and he remarks that through his tears, they shine so brightly in his vision it appears they are near. In these stars (or stars-as-the-memory-of-the-dead), again we see that concept of a farness coming near, in the same way that the remnants of the *aṭlāl* makes

²⁴⁴ Shaykhu, *Kitab Shu 'arā' al-Naṣrānīyah* 123, v. 2: “kānna al-layla laysa la-hu nahāru.”

²⁴⁵ A similar scene of sleeplessness caused by grief, combined with stargazing, occurs in an elegy by the poetess Al-Khansa, see Hammond, *Beyond Elegy*, 75-78.

²⁴⁶ Shaykhu, *Kitab Shu 'arā' al-Naṣrānīyah*, 123, v. 3-6. Translation made in consultation with S. Stetkevych's translation referenced above.

the distance of the moment of the *dār* seem near. Yet that magnitude of the distance of the stars from the poet is also the distance of his now dead brother from him.

And as the poet called out to the *aṭlāl* for response, so too does he/she call out for a response from the dead.²⁴⁷ For example, following the night watch scene, Mulhalhil calls out to his dead brother:

da 'awtuka yā kulaybu fa-lam tujibnī
wa-kayfa yujībunī al-baladu al-qifāru

I called out to you, Oh Kulayb, but you did not answer.
How can the empty countryside answer me?²⁴⁸

In the following verses, he continues to call out to his brother repeatedly, but still no answer comes. J. Stetkevych notes how in this poem, the dead person becomes intermingled with the empty landscape, both eluding response. This intermingling is similar to the intermingling between the distance of the dead and the distance of the night sky in the previous verse. J. Stetkevych argues that the “grave is the ultimate wasteland and the ultimate abode,”²⁴⁹ an equivocation which he points out becomes clear in the later part of the poem:

sa 'altu al-ḥayya ayna dafantumūhu
fa-qālū lī bi-safḥi al-ḥayyi dāru

I asked the tribe where did you bury him?
They said to me at the foot of the mountain of the tribe is an abode.²⁵⁰

²⁴⁷ See J. Stetkevych's discussion of this phenomena in particular as it concerns the poem by Mulhalhil in J. Stetkevych, "Towards an Arabic Elegiac Lexicon," 113.

²⁴⁸ Shaykhu, *Kitab Shu 'arā' al-Naṣrānīyah*, 123, v. 7; S. Stetkevych, *The Mute Immortals Speak*, 216 (trans.), 310 (Arabic text), v. 7.

²⁴⁹ J. Stetkevych, "Towards and Arabic Elegiac Lexicon," 113.

²⁵⁰ Shaykhu, *Kitab Shu 'arā' al-Naṣrānīyah*, 124, v. 20; S. Stetkevych, *The Mute Immortals Speak*, 217 (trans.), 310 (Arabic text), v. 20.

The poet looking for a response from the grave is redirected toward the silent *dār*.

Sometimes in the elegy there does appear to be a response, in the form of the cry of an owl.²⁵¹ For example, in an elegy by Al-Mughallis al-Faq‘asī, upon discovering his brother’s grave, the poet finds that during the concealing night an owl appears at it:

la-hu hāmat-un tad‘ū idhā al-laylu jannahā

He [the deceased] has an owl calling out/appealing when the night covers it.²⁵²

This owl appears to have had a significance within the pre-Islamic belief system. According to a later account by Al-Mas‘ūdī:

Some of them [pre-Islamic Arabs] claimed that the soul (an-nafs) was a bird... so that when [a man] dies or is killed, he continues to circle [his body] assuming the form of a bird which cries out over his grave...and they claim that the bird is small, and then it grows larger until it becomes an owl; it is always savage and shrieking, and it is alone in the desolate dwellings...²⁵³

In this account, an association is found between the tomb and the *aṭlāl*, and between both and the act of fixing in place. Homerin argues that pre-Islamic Arabs viewed death as a form of sedentism, while the living wandered.²⁵⁴ Unlike humans and their lives of constant travel, he says, the dead remain in one place, fixed to their graves. In the *nasīb* of the elegy and the *qaṣīdah*, we see the poet try to approximate this attitude through the act of halting

²⁵¹ For a comprehensive discussion of the owl and death in pre-Islamic poetry see T.E. Homerin, “Echoes of a Thirsty Owl: Death and Afterlife in Pre-Islamic Arabic Poetry,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 44 (1985): 165-184.

²⁵² Homerin, “Echoes of a Thirsty Owl,” 180.

²⁵³ Quoted in Homerin, “Echoes of a Thirsty Owl,” 168.

²⁵⁴ Homerin, “Echoes of a Thirsty Owl,” 167.

over the *aṭlāl* or the tomb, but it ultimately eludes him. Just as the person who once was alive, and the mortal beloved leaves, and the poet must as well.

In that vein, the owl also appears in the wasteland of the poet's night journey as a death warning in the *qaṣīdah* of Rabī'ah ibn Maqrūm:

fī mahmat-in qadhaf-in yukhshá al-halāku bi-hi
aṣḍā'uhu mā tanī bi-al-layli taghrīd-ān

In a wide dry desert wherein death/destruction is dreaded,
 its owls do not grow tired of singing/hooting in the night.²⁵⁵

The owls here are associated both with the emptiness of the desert and its lack of water (further associations between the owl and being “thirsty” are discussed further below). The owls are also, like the poet who holds a night watch, unable to sleep, and one might compare the ceaseless crying of the owls to the poetic speech of the poet. In this case, despite their vocalization, one might wonder whether they in fact represent a response from the dead. This is questioned in a poem by al-Asadī:

khalīlayya hubbā ṭāla mā qad raqadtumā

....

uqīmu 'alá qabraykumā lastu bāriḥ-ān
ṭawāla al-layālī aw yujība ṣadākumā....

wa-abkīkumā ḥattá al-mamāti wa-mā alladhī
yuruddu 'alá dhī 'awlat-in in bakākumā

My two friends, wake up! A long time you have slept.

....

I remain watching over your two graves, I am not one who leaves
 during the length of nights, in case your owl answers....

²⁵⁵ Lyall, *The Mufaḍḍalīyat*, no. 43, v. 7. Translation mine in consultation with translation by Homer in “Echoes of the Thirsty Owl,” 180. For another example, see ‘Alqama’s ode in Sells, *Desert Tracings*, 15: “in the shadows the owl sends forth a muffled cry.”

And I weep for you both until death,
but what [answer] is given to one wailing as he wept over you?²⁵⁶

In this elegy, the two dead men recall the two companions who halt with the poet over the *atlāl* in the poem by Imru' al-Qays. And like the poet addresses the beloved through the ruins, here he addresses the dead through their graves, wondering when they will awaken, confused as to the permanency of their sleep. Also following the *atlāl* convention, the poet takes up a night watch over their graves – the night is a long, fixed night. The goal of the watch is to procure a response from the owl of the dead. But the final line suggests that though the desire for a response will not run out (until the poet's own death), the dead will not answer.

In this sense we might wonder if the owl is not to the dead what the phantom is to the beloved. Is it also a figment of imagination? One of the words commonly used to refer to the owl, as in this poem by al-Asadī, is *ṣadā*, which comes from the verb meaning to echo.²⁵⁷ In this way we might see its cry as a reflection of the poet's own interior despair returning back to him from the exterior. The other meaning associated with the word *ṣadā* is thirsty, and the owls' thirst echoes that of the animals that appear in the journey. Graves themselves are often described as "thirsty." Al-Asadī, like many elegists, attempts to quench this thirst in his poem by pouring wine onto his friends' graves (and it is also implied, through his tears), but concedes that they may not taste it.²⁵⁸ One might compare

²⁵⁶ Abū Tammām, *Dīwān al-Ḥamāsa* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1998), no. 290, 155-56, v. 1, 4-5. Translation in consultation with translation by Homer in "Echoes of a Thirsty Owl," 184.

²⁵⁷ About this, and its other connotations, see Homer in "Echoes of a Thirsty Owl," 175-177.

²⁵⁸ Abū Tammām, *Dīwān al-Ḥamāsa*, no. 290. For a discussion of wine pouring on graves in the elegy generally, see Hammond, *Beyond Elegy*, 68. In addition to wine and to tears, the thirst of the dead or the grave can also represent the need for vengeance (that is, a thirst for blood) for the death, as discussed by Homer in "Echoes of a Thirsty Owl," 179-180.

then the cry of the owl upon the gravestone to be like Shanfarā's wolf crying out in the wasteland-- it ends in silence, and the dead remains unreachable.

The silence of the dead is often embodied by the hard or deaf (*summ*) stones which mark tombs just as they marked the *aṭlāl*. We already saw how these decorated the tombs of the dead in Ṭarafa's boast. Heaped up stones also occur in the form of cairns to remember the dead in the *qaṣīdah* of Urwah ibn al-Ward. These piles of stones appear in the *nasīb* in which he asks his beloved to either sleep or lie awake for him, but to leave him be to live his life:

*dharīnī wa-naṣṣī, umma ḥassān innanī
bi-hā qabla an la amlika al-bay'a mushtarī
aḥādītha tabqā wa-al-fatā ghayru khālīd-in
idhā huwa amsā ḥāmat-ān fawqa ṣuyyari
tujāwibu aḥjāra al-kināsi wa-tashtakī
ilā kulli ma 'rūfīn ra'athu wa-munkari*

Scatter me and my soul away, Mother of Ḥassān, for I
am going to spend with it before I no longer possess the price.
Tales of deeds remain when the brave youth is not immortal,
when he becomes an owl above a rock cairn.
She answers/echoes off the stones of the enclosure and complains
to all she sees, those known and those unrecognized.²⁵⁹

In this poem, we see the association between the heaped-up stones and the dead's remembered deeds, the poet likening them to those immortal stones of the *aṭlāl* in their relative immortality in comparison to the poet. In that the elegy is an account of the dead's noble deeds, and the *qaṣīdah* an account of the poet's, there is an equivocation as well

²⁵⁹ Urwah ibn al-Ward, *Dīwān 'Urwah ibn al-Ward*, ed. 'Abd al-Mu'īn al-Mallūhī (Damascus: Wizārat al-Thaqāfah wa al-Irshād al-Qawmī, 1966), 66-67. Translation in consultation with translation by J. Stetkevych in *Muḥammad and the Golden Bough* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 99, and Homerin, "Echoes of a Thirsty Owl," 182.

between the piled-up stones and the poem. But that equivocation is undermined by their silence, as a hardness upon which the owl's voice echoes off of, and perhaps it is better to equate the poem with this latter figure.

The grave can be not only silent, but also secret, as in this verse from a poem by Ḥātim al-Ṭā'ī:

*a 'ādhila inna al-juda laysa bi-muhlikī
wa-lā mukhlidī al-naḥsi al-shaḥīḥati lūmuhā
wa-tudhkaru akhlāqu al-fatā wa- 'izāmuhu
mughayyabat-un fī al-laḥdi bāl-in ramīmuhā*

Oh blamer, surely generosity is not destroyed,
nor does her blame make the soul of the stingy immortal.
The character of the brave youth is remembered while his bones
are concealed in the grave, their remains decayed.²⁶⁰

The concealment is a call back to the hidden secret or bond between beloved and the poet. In this case it is what becomes of the poet after his death which is concealed, his own body equated with the remains of the *aṭlāl*. Immortality or eternity is sought instead in the continued remembrance of his good deeds and generosity, in the remembrance of his *karīm* afterwards. As a consequence, the response of the poet to death within the elegy will often focuses upon this concept. For example, the poet might call for vengeance to restore the honor of the dead or depict the sacrifice of the dead person's camel. This sacrifice was carried out by the camel being tied to their owner's grave and left to die of starvation or thirst, in an echo of the elegized's own passing at the hands of the uncertainty of fate and of *rizq*.²⁶¹

²⁶⁰ Ḥātim al-Ṭā'ī, *Dīwān shi 'ir Ḥātim ibn 'Abd al-Ṭā'ī wa akhbāruh* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khanjī, 1990), no. 123, v. 2-3.

²⁶¹ Hammond, *Beyond Elegy*, 68.

Conclusions

In conclusion, throughout the body of pre-Islamic poetry one can find a richly developed vocabulary of uncertainty and the experience of the “silence of God.” It could be argued that early Western scholars of pre-Islamic poetry, like Gibb and Nicholson, overlooked this “religious” experience of the pre-Islamic poet because they mistakenly considered it “secular,” or mistakenly considered the “secular” to be areligious. But examining it through the lens of Long’s understanding reveals that in fact their poetry contains a complex diary of religious experience. This lens is able to bring together and affirm the readings and work of such recent scholars as S. Stetkevych, J. Stetkevych, and of their students Michael Sells, John Seybold, and others.

The experience of silence and resulting uncertainty forms the driving force of the creative voice of the poet in the *qaṣīdah* and the *rithā’*. One might go as far as to say that the entirety of its speech may be seen as both a meditation on and a response to this uncertainty. In the pre-Islamic *qaṣīdah*, one finds uncertainty encountered through the experience of love and of the natural world pointing to and resting upon an underlying uncertainty due to the passage of time and mortality. Underlying all these voices of uncertainty, there is a counter-voice of certainty, which exists beside it. This is the voice that avows that the beloved is indeed there inside the poet’s memory and the physicality of the *aṭlāl*, that he knows where she is now. In a sense, this voice is as strong as the voice that proclaims the opposite. This voice of certainty, however, rests upon things that are silent or hidden. These are apparent absences or distances which nonetheless bother the poet because of their presence or proximity: the *aṭlāl/ḍār*, the distance or vastness of the desert or the sky or a campfire or storm on the horizon, the beloved and her phantom,

and the dead, all of which drives the poet's speech. Seen from the perspective of Long's model, we can understand these not as experiences solely of the "terror of history," but of something beyond it which evades human speech and religious expression. Such a perspective provides an alternative reading of J. Stetkevych and Seybold's characterization of the *aṭlāl* as a non-place— the *aṭlāl* is not a non-place, or if we might call it that, we might preface it by saying that a non-place still holds open space, it is not just an absence.

If one were to construct a worldview of the pre-Islamic poet, based on what appears in their poetry, one might note that departures and the passing moment or day was, as J. Stekevych previous work and my own survey has noted, a central feature of it, at the fore in not only the major motifs of the opening *nasīb*, but also throughout the *rahīl* section, and continuing within the aphorisms of the *gharaḍ*. This worldview, I argue, was a product of both universal human experience and their specific historical and geographical circumstances. That is, as is evident through their own poetic language, the desert landscape of the Arabian Peninsula was particularly fluid and changeable and lacked the kind of stable and defining landmarks that characterize other environments, in this way, and as the poet often himself compared it to, he was like a mariner at sea who relies on the stars for navigation, and even these can be covered by clouds. In addition, the mobility of the nomadic tribes upon this landscape added another layer to this uncertainty in terms of human relationships and geographic stability. The poet then stands in for the human presence that often outlasts both the landscapes naturally and culturally built features, but also--as the *aṭlāl*/tomb reminds us--doesn't outlast them. The departure of the beloved is more than just a poetic or dramatic device and more than just a superficial or ornamental

conversation starter, for the departure of the beloved leads one to the fated death of the poet himself. It is one departure which signifies all departures, and which encompasses his temporal understanding of the cosmos.

For Foucault and Baudelaire, the response of the modern artist to uncertainty and to the passing moment, in contrast to the pre-modern or postmodern artist, was one of “recapturing something eternal that is not beyond the present instant, nor behind it, but within it.”²⁶² This modern attitude, Foucault argued, was a willful act of the “heroization of the present” through art, which encompassed not only exterior works, but the self as art as well.²⁶³ One might similarly ask, what is the response of the pre-Islamic poet to uncertainty and the passing moment? At least initially, as it does for the modern artist, the act of will seems to also be involved in the response of the pre-Islamic poet. The willful act of separation which characterizes the transition from the *nasīb* to the *raḥīl* section of the poem is also characterized as a turning away from the attachment to the passing past moment and to the problems which it causes him. Despite this attempt to flee from it, however, in the mirage and the harsh desert environment of the *raḥīl*, the poet is once again met with a “certain uncertainty,” this time in the form of his own looming mortality. The poet then instead adopts a more confrontational heroicism in the face of uncertainty which plays out most clearly in the *gharaḍ*. This is marked by his willingness to let go of not only the bond with the beloved, but his material possessions and hoarding of his life, and through doing so to give up the belief that he himself was eternal.

²⁶² Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?” 39.

²⁶³ Ibid., 40–42. Note that Foucault did not argue, however, that the goal of such an attitude was to “maintain or perpetuate” the present moment, for such a goal would place the artist outside of the work of art, 40.

Suzanne Stetkevych has framed this movement between *nasīb-rahīl-fakhr*, in terms of a ritual and rite of passage, or failed rite of passage. I would expand upon this paradigm to argue that even when the rite is completed, the return to the fold of the tribe does not provide a complete return from a status liminality. The poet is still surrounded by an ambient silence and uncertainty, the uncertainty of fate; the tribe does not see itself as immortal, nor the tribesmen, and even within the trappings of religious expression and ritual, this “silence of God” can remain present within the poem. The presence of this universally experienced underlying silence within pre-Islamic poetry provides an opportunity for it to engage with and enrich contemporary artistic communities and readers, as the following chapter helps to illustrate.

CHAPTER 5

PRE-ISLAMIC SITES OF UNCERTAINTY IN TWO MODERN ARABIC POEMS

Having established the pre-Islamic vocabulary of uncertainty and experience of absence/silence, I would like to turn now to a few examples of how this vocabulary was taken up in two works of modern Arabic poets. This uncertainty and the motifs by which pre-Islamic experiences of them were embodied continued to play an important role in the subsequent Arabic/Islamic poetic tradition. To encompass how the development of the poetic tradition after the coming of Islam to the Arabia peninsula, and the subsequent spread of its culture from a relatively small-scale society to an empire which encompassed a much wider and more cosmopolitan and urban environment, and following the transformation of the dominant religious understanding within that society, is a task for another thesis or dissertation or many, as is the development of the post-Classical tradition. So the analysis will not fully incorporate some of these developments, but focus instead on the “remnants” of these metaphors from the pre-Islamic time.

The discussion of the two works presented here is also only anecdotal, and is by no means meant to represent a comprehensive or exhaustive survey, nor even to argue for a cohesive or general understanding of uncertainty of modern Arabic culture, but rather strives to show how particular Arabic poets continued to find them meaningful tools of expression, which they could adapt and transform to their own experience of uncertainty and absence in their “modern” worlds.

The first poem I would like to consider is one written by perhaps the most esteemed and well known modern Arabic poet, Mahmoud Darwish. The poem in question addresses the Palestinian experience of exile from their homeland. It comes from his 1986 volume of poems, *Ward Aqall* (Fewer Roses), and is titled by its first line, *wa naḥnu nuḥibbu al-ḥayāh*. Here is the poem in full:

wa-naḥnu nuḥibbu al-ḥayāta idhā mā istaṭa 'nā ilayhā sabīl-ān
wa-narqūṣu bayna shahīdayni narfa 'u mi 'dhanat-ān li al-banaḥsaji baynahumā aw
nakhīl-ān

nuḥibbu al-ḥayāta idhā mā istaṭa 'nā ilayhā sabīl-ān

wa-nasriqu min dūdati al-qazzi khayṭ-ān li-nabnī samā'-ān la-nā wa-nusayyija
hadhā al-raḥīl-ā
wa-naḥṭaḥu bāba al-ḥadīqati kay yakhruja al-yāsaminu ilā al-ṭuruqāti nahār-ān
jamīl-ān

nuḥibbu al-ḥayāta idhā mā istaṭa 'nā ilayhā sabīl-ān

wa-nazra 'u ḥaythu aqamnā nabāt-ān sarī'a al-numūwi, wa-naḥṣidu ḥaythu
aqamnā qatīl-ān
wa-nanfukhu fī al-nāī lawna al-ba 'īdi al-ba 'īdi, wa-narsumu fawqa turābi al-
mamarra ṣahīl-ān
wa-naktubu asmā'anā ḥajar-ān, ayyuhā al-barqu awḍiḥ la-nā al-layla, awḍiḥ
qalīl-ān

nuḥibbu al-ḥayāta idhā mā istaṭa 'nā ilayhā sabīl-ā

And we love life whenever we can find a path to it.

And we dance between two martyrs. We erect a minaret for the violet or date palms between them both.

We love life whenever we can find a path to it.

And we steal from the silkworm a thread to build our sky and we build a fence around this journey/departure.

And we open the garden gate so that the jasmine goes out into the alleyways as a beautiful day.

And we plant where we stay fast growing plants, and we harvest where we stay a dead man.

And we blow into the flute the color of the far far away, and draw on the dusty earth
of the passageway a whinny.
And we write our names stone by stone. Oh lightning, brighten the night for us,
brighten it a little.

We love life whenever we can find a path to it.²⁶⁴

The poem opens with a refrain, repeated multiple times throughout the poem and again at the poem's end. This opening statement, "we love life whenever we can find a path to it," almost seems like a response to blame from an outsider, or perhaps from the community itself, that they are not enjoying or valuing life. The response of the poet is that happiness or loving life is conditional. It depends on the ability to "find a path to it."

This statement sets up a juxtaposition between the suffering of the community and an attempt to find joy while it exists, between dancing and death, for the community exists in a transitive state, rather than fully in life. This becomes clearest by the fourth verse, where the location of the community is identified as "in this *raḥīl*" calling back to the other journeys of the pre-Islamic poet. *Raḥīl* here could signify both the act of leave-taking or the journey that follows, and as both readings are possible, the community is made to seem to exist within a state of continual departure.

Within this departing, there is a paradoxical attempt to construct the materiality of a domestic life by borrowing from elements of nature – a sky is constructed from the thread of a silkworm, a minaret is built, but only for the palm trees. This paradox is underscored by the community's attempt to build a fence, a symbol of containment and settled life, to contain the journey itself. And their itineracy is emphasized by the fact that when there are

²⁶⁴ Maḥmūd Darwīsh, *Dīwān Maḥmūd Darwīsh*, Vol. 2 (Beirut: Dār al-ʿAwdat, 1994), 371. Translation is mine.

moments of settled life, they are fleeting – they plant fast growing crops. The mobility of the community is seen from the specter of ever present death. Who are the fast-growing crops? They are the poet’s people, who last only the length of a growing season.

Not only does the community build out of ephemeral materials, but the things they build or create are absent or at a distance, created as metaphor only. Visual experience is recreated from a distance as an aural sign (colors of a faraway place played by a flute), while a visual representation of an aural experience is drawn (the drawing of the horse’s neigh). The tracing (*narsum*) of the sound of horse, another domestic reference, in the dust in verse 7 recalls the *rasm* or traces of the *aṭlāl*. This evocation of the *aṭlāl* is reinforced by the location of the drawing, *turāb*, which can mean home or earth or dust, but also can indicate an earthen grave, or a grave covered by dust. Such a reading becomes stronger in light of the dead of the community already mentioned, though it might also be read as the grave of the homeland which is far away. At the same time, *al-mamarra*, suggests both a passageway (and the physical state of transit) but also passing generally, and the passing of mortal life.

The final verse brings all of this together. The poet calls for a moment of clarity. “Brighten the night for us, brighten it a little,” he asks of the lightning, reaching back to the pre-Islamic poet’s storm watch on the horizon. In calling for the lightning flash, he asks for insight into a faraway location, that faraway place being the life that the community has had difficulty finding a path to. But his plea is made not with the expectation of finding a constant dwelling place there. He doesn’t ask for too much clarity, just for a little. One might suggest that in calling back to the lightning, and to the pre-Islamic poet in his storm watch, the poet has in a sense created the lightning flash himself. For the unmoored

community in exile, through viewing its experience through the experience of a larger communal experience of journey and departure built up over time, is able to gain a moment of orientation and a fixed point to hold onto.

As a second illustration of how pre-Islamic themes were incorporated into modern Arabic poetry, I wish to look at one other poem which also deals with the experience of exile, this one by the Iraqi poet Abdul Wahab al-Bayati. Al-Bayati, though born in Iraq and educated in Baghdad, was imprisoned because of his criticism of the Iraqi monarchy, and eventually forced to go into exile elsewhere in the Middle East in 1955, leaving behind his family. Despite returning for brief periods, he spent much of his life in either self-imposed and forced exile, spending time in Moscow, Cairo, Madrid and other cities.²⁶⁵ The poem I wish to discuss comes from his 1971 book of poems, *Qaṣā'id ḥubb 'alā bawābāt al-'ālim al-sab'* (Love Poems at the Seven Gates of the World) and is titled *Majnūn 'Ā'isha*.²⁶⁶ The title is a reference to the name of the beloved who recurs throughout his poems, Aisha, and to the story of Layla and Majnūn which was popular within the tradition of love poetry that developed out of the *nasīb* of the pre-Islamic *qaṣīdah* in the later Arabic-Islamic tradition. Rather than address these later developments, I wish to bracket those particular parts for now and focus upon the pre-Islamic tropes which, filtered through them, occur in the poem.

The poem begins with the poet-persona being awoken in the darkness of night by a bird calling him. The call begins a journey, or rather what will be multiple journeys, which take place over the multiple sections of the poem, and whose successfulness is uncertain. These journeys, in addition to taking place multiple times throughout the poem, also take

²⁶⁵ Abdul Wahab al-Bayati, *Love, Death and Exile*, bilingual ed., trans. Bassam K. Frangieh (Washington, D.C: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 2-6.

²⁶⁶ Al-Bayati. *Love, Death and Exile*, 82-95.

place on two levels. The first level occurs as he and his beloved wonder the museum of the Louvre in Paris, searching for the section on Mesopotamian civilization. The second level is the journey of poet-persona as a pre-Islamic Bedouin poet across the desert.

Like the journeying community of Mahmoud Darwish's poem, the poet-persona of al-Bayati's poem exists in a liminal state, what he repeatedly calls the "in-between world" or *al-mābayn*.²⁶⁷ But unlike Darwish's poem, which focused upon the exile of the communal voice, here the poet speaks as a lone individual in search of community and for "empire." In the journey that takes place in the Louvre, this is sought through the cultural artifacts of the Mesopotamian civilization of his homeland. Meanwhile, in the first section of the poem, the poet-as Bedouin poet succeeds in crossing the dessert, aided by stars, to Bukhara (a city at one time a center within the Islamic Empire), and then returns to another historic center of the empire, Damascus, wherein he posts his poems on the city wall, mimicking the posting of the seven *Mu'allaqāt* on the Ka'ba in pre-Islamic times, and then sacrifices his camel mare.

This search for an empire is also a search for expression, a problem that is figured not so much as a lack of vocabulary, but as the inability to find one which belongs to him in the chaos of too many vocabularies:

nabḥath 'an aṣwātinā fī ḍajja al-aswāt
nabḥath fī al-ma'nā 'an al-ma'nā

We search for our voices in the din of the voices,
 We search in the meaning for meaning."²⁶⁸

²⁶⁷ Al-Bayati, *Love, Death and Exile*, 86-87, 90-91.

²⁶⁸ Ibid., 92-93.

For the poet in exile this chaos of languages exists as well alongside the silencing effect of the oppression which was the cause of it. He says:

*rasā`ilī wa-kutubī ahraqahā al-fāshist
min qabli an aktubahā fī al-qalb
wa-khatamū famī bi-sham`i al-ṣamt*

The fascists burned my letters and my books
before I wrote them in my heart,
and sealed my mouth with the wax of silence.²⁶⁹

This confusion leads to an incomplete journey: the two lovers wondering the museum are unable to find the Mesopotamian goddess Ishtar. Likewise, the desert crossing(s) of the poet-persona are undermined. He doubts the authenticity of his own authorship. The beloved, reminding the poet that they will soon be parting because “the day will end,”²⁷⁰ repeatedly compares her desire for the poet-persona to that of a thirsty bee or “*naḥla`atshá*,” a play upon the secondary meaning of the word *naḥla* of a work falsely attributed to a classical poet. Yet the bond between al-Bayati and his past community and tradition is not completely severed. Instead, his exile from the cultural tradition is imagined as the dark night of the pre-Islamic poet, and as the wasteland of Shanfarā’s poem:

*hīna yaghīyb fī samā` al-layli najmu al-qutb
wa-hīna ya`wī al-dhi`b*

When the polar star disappears in the night sky and
when the wolf howls.²⁷¹

²⁶⁹ Al-Bayati, *Love, Death and Exile*, 88-89.

²⁷⁰ Ibid., 84-85: “*sayantahī al-nahār*.”

²⁷¹ Ibid., 90-91.

And the poet's wandering is compared to the wandering of the hunted gazelle of Labīd's ode:

*kānat al-ghizlān
madh 'ūwra tabḥath fī miṣyada al-mawt 'an al-ghudrān*

The frightened gazelles were
searching in the snare of death for the watering pools.²⁷²

In the poem's final section, the poet and his beloved exit the Louvre, and she asks if they can arrange a time to meet up later. That reunion does not take place. Yet despite the departure of the beloved, like the lightning flash of Mahmoud Darwish's poem, this poem ends with a thread to hold on to – a light in the darkness – in this case “a flowering branch in the gloom.” The poem ends with the image of the poet following his camel mare and that branch towards the city of his exile rather than a city of the Islamic Empire:

*murtaḥil-ān wa- 'ā'id-ān waḥīd
amshī warā'a nāqatī wa-ghuṣnuhā al-muzhir quddāmī ilá bārīs*

Departing and returning alone.
I walk behind my camel mare, her flowering branch in front of me, towards
Paris.²⁷³

In both poems, then, this guiding light of community – the shared cross temporal experience, is called upon as an anchor for the poet in their unmoored geographic and communal experience.

²⁷² Al-Bayati, *Love, Death and Exile*, 86-87.

²⁷³ Ibid., 95.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS: AGHA SHAHID ALI RETURNING

*When even God is dead, what is left but prayer?*²⁷⁴
 -Agha Shahid Ali

Let us return again to the present (or near present). I'm no longer sitting on that bus to Chicago. I'm sitting in a study room on the campus of Georgetown University of Washington, DC. It's eight years later. I'm living in this city because my sister moved here for a job. In the course of the past year I've been travelling less by bus but instead by plane – first to spend two weeks aiding in the care of my grandmother for an illness, and the second for my grandfather's funeral. There have been several reminders of the vagaries of fate – a car-bicycle accident in which my mother was seriously injured, the loss of my grandfather mentioned above, and finally, one rather jolting change of political circumstances within my own country. I have even confronted, through the journey of writing this thesis, my own limits and anxieties about the uncertainty of whether it would be finished.

I want to end by returning to one final poem, a poem by Agha Shahid Ali, from the same book of poems that I was reading on the bus eight years ago. As I mentioned earlier, the poem concerns his grief at the death of his mother. It is the closing poem in the book dedicated to that topic, and as becomes clear, the final word on the topic. It is titled, "I

²⁷⁴ From the poem, "In," in Agha Shahid Ali, *Call Me Ishmael Tonight: A Book of Ghazals* (New York: Norton, 2003), 66.

Dream I Am at the Ghat of the Only World.”²⁷⁵ In the poem, the poet rides a boat into the underworld, piloted by an oarsman, Gula, who he remembers from his childhood in Pakistan, who used to row him across the river there.²⁷⁶ During his journey he searches for his mother, encountering a pastiche of different dead figures, both Western and Non-Western in both Western and non-Western locations. Some of these dead are searching for letters from the living loved ones that death has separated them from, unconvinced, as Ali is, of the finality of their deaths. Though the boatman delivers them the letters from the living, there is a barrier between the living and the dead and no words are exchanged between them:

From each houseboat tourists from long ago
wave, longing for letters, frantic to tear open
envelopes. But they are stilled, always a tableau
when we approach. Gula leaves by their feet, in silence,
the letters I have brought, then returns to row

us faster faster....
When I look back, nothing at all is heard
though I can see them furious in oblivion's

shade, crumpling postcards.²⁷⁷

As his journey continues, Ali encounters the Kashmiri activist and thinker, Eqbal Ahmad in the poet's home in the US where his mother had died. They speak, and Ahmad directs Ali further along to where his mother awaits him, to a shrine in Kashmir marking the grave of a saint. When they arrive, the shrine has been bombed out, representative of both a real and spiritual crisis:

I see desecration, God's tapestry

²⁷⁵ Ali, *Rooms Are Never Finished*, 97-104. Ali is not an Arab poet, but is influenced by the tradition, and because of the thematic coherence of his discussed work with the rest of the thesis, it warrants inclusion.

²⁷⁶ Ibid., 97-98.

²⁷⁷ Ibid., 99-100.

ripped, the faded chant of “There is no god but God
and Mohammad...” emptied of its eternity.²⁷⁸

Ali’s mother is there, and as he walks over to the shrine, his mother takes his place and boards the (now veiled) boat. He pleads with her not to leave him alone there a second time in his spiritual abyss. His mother consoles him, saying that the saint’s thread she has wrapped around his wrists will keep him safe and stops his tears for her and for the Kashmiri dead. Yet the boatman proclaims “*Weep! For this is farewell, / To be rowed forever is the last afterlife,*”²⁷⁹ while Ali prostrates himself and professes his belief through weeping.

In this confrontation between the finality of his mother’s departing without hope of return and his affirmation that even beyond the veil he sees himself in her and that he believes, he arrives finally to a response. The response comes from his friend the poet James Merrill, who had passed away a number of years earlier. Like Merrill did in his own poetry while he was alive, he speaks even more appropriately now in Ali’s poem in all caps, imitating the writing of a Ouija board:

The boat enters a fog...which thickens to clear...for one voice:

WEeping YOU MUST NOT. I ask, “Which world will bring her
back, or will he who wears his heart on his sleeve eaves-
drop always, in his inmost depths, on a cruel harbinger?”

SHAHID, HUSH. THIS IS ME, JAMES. THE LOVED ONE ALWAYS
LEAVES.²⁸⁰

²⁷⁸ Ali, *Rooms Are Never Finished*, 102.

²⁷⁹ Ibid., 103.

²⁸⁰ Ibid., 104.

In addressing himself by first name directly, Ali follows the convention of the last line of the *ghazal*, a later form of love poetry that developed out of the *nasīb* of the *qaṣīdah*. But Ali puts this refrain in the mouth of the now deceased poet James Merrill. And so, unlike the pre-Islamic elegist, Ali appears to succeed in getting an answer from the dead. But that answer or certainty is only what the tradition, both within the Arabic tradition, and outside of it, speaks of: *the loved one always leaves*. The poet then takes the messenger's advice, and falls silent.

Taking our answer from the poem, then, in all of these poems we might see a common theme of departure: the tribal nomad is to the modern man in exile is to the global citizen. They all share the itinerancy of their experience. In fact, one might argue that the escalating mobility of our current global world gives us a point of shared experience to the mobility of the pre-Islamic Arab not shared by more settled eras. But that experience, in addition to being an experience of a particular mobility or settlement pattern, is also the general and human experience of life writ large. And the accumulation of this loss and uncertainty that results from that experience, paradoxically provides both the Arabic poetic tradition and us in our global reality with a cross temporal-- and perhaps even atemporal-- fixed anchor point, one which we might be well-served to grab onto in these times in which we find ourselves not to have many. In spite of the idea of an ideal past of absolute certainty, dreamt of at times throughout history, from the perspective of Long's paradigm, there is no historical era whose inhabitants were able to escape the experience of the "silence of God," to which we might return. Rather than attack imagined scapegoats, or an imagined other that we blame for our current experience of this uncertainty, we might do well to share that experience instead. That is, rather than attacking this uncertainty, and

attacking ourselves, in what Derrida called the autoimmune defense that only destroys us – we might form, as Appadurai describes, those international networks of solidarity for our local problems – specifically we might find unity in our shared experience of uncertainty and, whatever our religious or non-religious identity, or our historical circumstances, find solace and strength and solidarity with our contemporaries cross culturally and our ancestors who have gone before, in the experience of silence that surpasses our understanding.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abu Deeb, Kamal. "Towards a Structural Analysis of Pre-Islamic Poetry." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 6 (1975): 148-184.
- Abū Tammām. *Dīwān al-Ḥamāsa*. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1998.
- Adonis. *An Introduction to Arabic Poetics*. Translated by Catherine Cobham. London: Saqi Books, 2003.
- Ahlwardt, Wilhelm, ed. *The Divans of the Six Ancient Arabic Poets Ennābiga, ‘Antara, Tharafa, Zuhair, ‘Alqama, and Imruulqais*. London: Trubner and Co, 1870.
- Ali, Agha Shahid. *Call Me Ishmael Tonight: A Book of Ghazals*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2003.
- Ali, Agha Shahid. *Rooms Are Never Finished*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2002.
- Allen, Roger. *An Introduction to Arabic Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Appadurai, Arjun. *Fear of Small Numbers: An Essay on the Geography of Anger*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006.
- Bateson, Mary. *Structural Continuity in Poetry: A Linguistic Study of Five Pre-Islamic Arabic Odes*. Paris: Mouton & Co, 1970.
- Bayati, Abdul Wahab al-. *Love, Death and Exile*. Bilingual edition. Translated by Bassam K. Frangieh. Washington, D.C: Georgetown University Press, 1990.
- Bosworth, C.E. and McAuliffe, Jane D. "Rizk." In *Encyclopaedia of Islam*. 2nd edition, edited by P. Bearman et al., 567-568. Leiden: Brill, 1995.
- Darwīsh, Maḥmūd. *Dīwān Maḥmūd Darwīsh*. Volume 2. Beirut: Dār al-‘Awuda, 1994.
- Della Vida, Giorgio Levi. "Pre-Islamic Arabia." *The Arab Heritage*, edited by Nabih A. Faris, 25-57. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1944.
- Donner, Fred M. *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012.

- Ecstatic Exchange, The. "About the Author." Accessed November 28, 2017.
<http://ecstaticexchange.com/about/>.
- El-Banna Ezz El-Din, Hassan, "'No Solace for the Heart': The Motif of the Departing Women in the Pre-Islamic Battle Ode." In *Reorientations/Arabic and Persian Poetry*, edited by Suzanne P. Stetkevych, 165-179. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994.
- Eliade, Mircea. *The Sacred and The Profane: The Nature of Religion*. Translated by Willard R. Trask. New York: Harcourt, 1959.
- Fahd, T. "Kāhin." In *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*. 2nd edition, edited by E. van Donzel et al., 420-422. Leiden: Brill, 1978.
- Foucault, Michael. "What is Enlightenment?" In *The Foucault Reader*, edited by Paul Rabinow, 32-50. New York: Vintage Books, 2010.
- Frazer, James. "Magic and the Rise of Religion." In *Introducing Religion: Readings from Classical Theorists*, edited by Daniel L. Pals, 37-70. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Gibb, H.A.R. *Arabic Literature: An Introduction*. 2nd revised edition. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963.
- Guillaume, Alfred. *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of [Ibn] Ishāq's Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955.
- Hämeen-Anttila, Jaakko. "Arabian Prophecy." In *Prophecy in its Ancient Near Eastern Context*, edited by M. Nissinen, 115-146. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000.
- Hammond, Marlé. *Beyond Elegy: Classical Arabic Women's Poetry in Context*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Homerin, T.E. "Echoes of a Thirsty Owl: Death and Afterlife in Pre-Islamic Arabic Poetry." *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 44 (1985): 165-184.
- Iṣfahānī, Abū al-Faraj al- (attr.). *The Book of Strangers: Mediaeval Arabic Graffiti on the Theme of Nostalgia*. Translated by Patricia Crone and Shmeul Moreh. Princeton: Marcus Weiner Publishers, 2000.
- Jamil, Nadia. "Playing for Time: Maysir-Gambling in Early Arabic Poetry." In *Islamic Reflections, Arabic Musings: Studies in Honour of Professor Alan Jones*, edited by R. G. Hoyland and P.F. Kennedy, 48-96. Oxford: Gibb Memorial Trust, 2004.
- Jones, Alan. "Poetry and Poets." In *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, edited by Jane D.

- McAuliffe, 110-114. Boston: Brill, 2004.
- Jones, William. *The Works of Sir William Jones*. Vol 10. London: John Stockdale, 1807.
- Kalbī, Hisham ibn al-. *The Book of Idols (Kitāb al-asnām)*. Translated by Nabih A. Faris. Princeton University Press, 1952.
- Khoury, R.G. "Poésie et Prophétie en Arabie." In *Oracles et Prophéties dans l'Antiquité*, edited by J.G. Heintz, 243-258. Paris: De Boccard, 1997.
- Lane, Edward W. *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, edited by Stanley L. Poole. London: Williams and Norgate, 1877.
- Levi-Strauss, Claude. "The Structural Study of Myth." *Journal of American Folklore* 67 (1955): 428-444.
- Long, Charles. *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986.
- Lyall, Charles J. *Translations of Ancient Arabian Poetry: Chiefly Præ-Islamic with an Introduction and Notes*. New York: Colombia University Press, 1930.
- Lyall, Charles J. ed. *The Mufaḍḍalīyat: An Anthology of Ancient Arabian Odes Compiled by al- Mufaḍḍal son of Muḥammad According to the Recension and With the Commentary of Abū Muḥammad al-Qāsim ibn Muḥammad al-Anbārī*. Volume I: Arabic Text. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1918.
- Mittwoch, E. "Ayyām al-‘Arab." In *Encyclopaedia of Islam*. 2nd edition, edited by H.A.R. Gibb, et al., 793-794. Leiden: Brill, 1960.
- Monroe, James T. "Oral Composition in Pre-Islamic Poetry." In *Early Islamic Poetry and Poetics*, edited by Suzanne P. Stetkevych. Burlington: Ashgate, 2009.
- Moore, Daniel. *The Blind Beekeeper: Poems*. Bethesda: Kitab, 2001.
- Nicholson, Reynold A. *A Literary History of the Arabs*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1956.
- O’Leary, De Lacy. *Arabia Before Muhammad*. London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co., 1927.
- Otto, Rudolf. *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*. Translated by John W. Harvey. Revised edition with additions. London: Oxford University Press; H. Milford, 1928.

- Schiffer, Michael B. *Formation Processes of the Archaeological Record*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987.
- Sells, Michael. “‘Along the Edge of Mirage’: The Mufaddaliyah of al-Mukhabbal as-Sadi, an Interpretation.” In *Literary Heritage of Classical Islam*, edited by Mustansir Mir, 119-136. Princeton: Darwin Press, 1993.
- Sells, Michael. *Desert Tracings: Six Classical Arabian Odes by ‘Alqama, Shānfara, Labīd, ‘Antara, Al-A‘sha, and Dhu al-Rūmma*. Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1989.
- Sells, Michael. “Guises of the Ghūl: Dissembling Simile and Semantic Overflow in the Classical Arabic Nasīb.” In *Reorientations/Arabic and Persian Poetry*, edited by Suzanne P. Stetkevych, 130-164. Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1994.
- Sells, Michael. “Like the Arms of a Drowning Man: Simile and Symbol Worlds in the Nāqa Section of Bashāma’s Hajarta Umāma.” In *Festschrift Ewald Wagner Zum 65. Geburtstag*, Volume 2, edited by Wolfhart Heinrichs and Gregor Schoeler, 18-41. Beirut: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1994.
- Sells, Michael. “The Mu‘allaqa of Ṭarafa.” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 17 (1986): 21-33.
- Sells, Michael. “Shanfara’s Lamiyya: A New Version.” *Al-‘Arabiyya* 16, no. 1 (1983): 5-25.
- Sells, Michael. “The Qaṣīda and The West: Self-Reflective Stereotype and Critical Encounter.” *Al-‘Arabiyya* 20 (1987): 307-357.
- Serjeant, Robert B. “Haram and Hawtah, the Sacred Enclave in Arabia.” In *The Arabs and Arabia on the Eve of Islam*, edited by Francis E. Peters, 167-184, Brookfield: Ashgate, 1999.
- Seybold, John. “The Earliest Demon Lover: The Ṭayf al-Khayāl in al-Mufaḍḍalīyāt.” In *Reorientations/Arabic and Persian Poetry*, edited by Suzanne P. Stetkevych, 180-189. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994.
- Shaykhu, Luwīs. *Kitab Shu‘arā’ al-Naṣrānīyah*. Volume 1. Beirut: Dār Al-Mashraq, 1967.
- Shillbrack, Kevin. “Religions: Are There Any?” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78, no. 4 (2010): 1112-1138.
- Stetkevych, Jaroslav. *Arabic Poetry and Orientalism*, edited by Walid Khazendar. Oxford: St. John’s College Research Centre, 2004.

- Stetkevych, Jaroslav. *Muḥammad and the Golden Bough*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000.
- Stetkevych, Jaroslav. "Some Observations on Arabic Poetry." *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 26, no. 1 (1967): 1-12.
- Stetkevych, Jaroslav. "Toward an Arabic Elegiac Lexicon: The Seven Words of the Nasīb." In *Reorientations/Arabic and Persian Poetry*, edited by Suzanne P. Stetkevych, 58-129. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994.
- Stetkevych, Jaroslav. *The Zephyrs of Najd: The Poetics of Nostalgia in the Classical Arabic Nasīb*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.
- Stetkevych, Suzanne P. "Introduction." In *Early Islamic Poetry and Poetics*, edited by Suzanne P. Stetkevych, xiii-xxxviii. Burlington: Ashgate, 2009.
- Stetkevych, Suzanne P. *The Mute Immortals Speak: Pre-Islamic Poetry and the Poetics of Ritual*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993.
- Stetkevych, Suzanne P. "Structuralist Interpretations of Pre-Islamic Poetry: Critique and New Directions." *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 42, no. 2 (1983): 85-107.
- Ṭā'ī, Ḥātim al-. *Dīwān shi'ir Ḥātim ibn 'Abd al-Ṭā'ī wa-akhbāruh*. Cairo: Maktabat al-Khanjī, 1990.
- Tibrīzī, Abū Zakarīyā Yaḥya al-. *A Commentary on Ten Ancient Arabic Poems: Namely the Seven Mu'allakāt, and Poems by al-A'sha, An-Nābighah, and 'Abīd ibn al-Abras*, edited by Charles J. Lyall. Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal at the Baptist Mission Press, 1894.
- Turner, Victor. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1969.
- Tylor, E.B. "Animism and the Origin of Religion." In *Introducing Religion: Readings from Classical Theorists*, edited by Daniel L. Pals, 1-35. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Von Grunebaum, Gustave E. "The Response to Nature in Arabic Poetry." *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 1, no. 3 (1945): 137-151.
- Ward, Urwah ibn al-. *Dīwān 'Urwah ibn al-Ward*, edited by 'Abd al-Mu'īn al-Mallūhī. Damascus: Wizārat al-Thaqāfah wa al-Irshād al-Qawmī, 1966.
- Watt, Montgomery. "Pre Islamic Arabian Religion in the Qur'an." *Islamic Studies* 15, no. 1 (1976): 76-78.

Watt, Montgomery. "The Qur'an and Belief in a "High God"." In *Proceedings of the Ninth Congress of the Union Europeenne des Arabisants et Islamisants. Amsterdam, 1st to 7th September 1978*, 327-333. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1981.

Zamakhsharī, Muḥammad ibn al-. *A'jab al-'Ajab fī Sharḥ Lāmīyat al-'Arab*. Cairo: Maṭba'at Muḥammad al-Warāq, 1328/1910.
<https://ia800309.us.archive.org/10/items/shr7lamiatal3rab/shr7lamiatal3rab.pdf>

Zwettler, Michael. "A Mantic Manifesto: The Sūra of "The Poets" and the Qur'ānic Foundations of Prophetic Authority." In *Poetry and Prophecy*, edited by James L. Kugel, 75-119. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990.