Literature as Performance:
The Theatre of al-Hatimi's *Al-risala al-mudiha*

Wen-chin Ouyang

What I had set forth stunned Abu al-Tayyib, arrested his eloquence and detained his tongue from giving a response. He would have rioted if the awe of Vizier Abu Muhammad [al-Muhallabi] had not filled his heart. He had before avoided a debate [with me] like a debtor evading his creditor. When I reached this point [of my discussion of his poetry], he got up in anger, and that was the last we saw of him in that house. He left, bolting like an ostrich [in fright], [and stormed out in a huff] to wander aimlessly about. He did not show his face again until he was ready to leave Iraq [Baghdad] for Kufa. Some educated young men had thought him an easy target for their mockery, and some poets took it upon themselves to disparage him. Even those who never considered him an enemy suddenly shot their arrows at him out of animosity, tearing his skin and ripping it from his body. In fact, one of the fools of Baghdad, a nobody in the intellectual circles with no share in virtue or foothold in literary arts known as Ibn al-Hajjaj had thought himself, despite the inferiority of his worth and absurdity of his aspiration, as the one who ran him (al-Mutanabbi) out of town, forcing him to flee [Baghdad], to [again] cast his net wide in search [for another patron], and to agitate his mount in every direction. It was I who took hold of the reign [made by youth] and led him [by the nose] like a docile mare out of Baghdad. He could no longer remain in the City of Peace. He had to leave. He set out for Kufa and from there to Fars to seek refuge in 'Adud al-Dawla's hamlet and Ibn al-'Amid's circle, hoping to

reside on their soil and find shelter in their shades. He excelled in some of the panegyrics he dedicated to them but failed in others. His supply seemed blocked and he fell short of his target; he had exhausted his talent on Sayf al-Dawla, and stretched the reach of its arms to the limit. He was forced to leave again and to return to Iraq but he was destroyed on the way and that was the last anyone had seen or heard of him.

--Al-Hatimi, *Al-risala al-mudiha*

I

Risala: **A Kind of Paratext**

This slightly melodramatic translation of the penultimate paragraph of al-Hatimi's (d. 388 A.H.) *risala* on his encounter with al-Mutanabbi (d. 354 A. H.) in Baghdad is intended to bring out the 'literary' dimensions of a 'medieval' text that has thus far been read as a 'treatise' in 'literary criticism' centered on al-Mutanabbi's poetry. Contemporary scholarship on 'classical' Arabic literature in general and 'classical' Arabic 'literary criticism' in particular rightly, perhaps unavoidably, focuses its attention on the 'critique' of poetry and 'theory' of poetics in this work within a set of established conventions in reading 'medieval' texts. Categorization, location, comprehension and assessment of a work such as al-Hatimi's *Al-risala al-mudiha* are understandably informed by an implicit assumption operative in our interpretive process that the discourse of and inherent in the text transparently expresses the authorial intention. This intention, as conventional reading wisdom would have it, is made explicit in statements by the author in the introduction as well as various parts of the text and finds corroboration in the content of

the work and the career of the author. The relentless, or thorough, pursuit of al-Mutanabbi's plagiarism from earlier poets and shortcomings (*'uyub*) followed up by explanatory comments all seem to fit into the broader scheme of discussions of poetry fashionable at the time if not throughout the history of 'classical' Arabic discourses on poetry.[1] Al-Hatimi may be a minor poet, but his career, manifest in his prolific writings on poetry, defines him as a 'serious' commentator on poetry, if not an important critic, distinguished by his knowledge of poetry, understanding of poetics, and mastery of the poetic craft, well, at least in theory. There is no reason to think of *Al-mudiha* as anything but a 'treatise' on poetry, a work of literary criticism, especially given its subject matter and the consensus (among scholars of classical Arabic literature) on 'al-Hatimi's personality as a scholar and literary critic'.[2]

Reservations about al-Hatimi's character, described by Yaqut as '*mubaqhghadan ila ahli l-'ilmi* (loathed by scholars)',[3] and about his propensity to exaggerate in *Al-*

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[1] I have summarized this trend of writing about poetry and its assessment in *Literary Criticism in Medieval Arabic-Islamic Culture: The Making of a Tradition* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), particularly 'Fanfare of Controversy: Abu Tammam and al-Mutanabbi', 130-165.

[2] S. A. Bonebakker, *Hatimi and His Encounter with Mutanabbi: A Biographical Sketch* (Amsterdam, Oxford, New York: North-Holland Publishing Company, 1984), 5. This observation is based on assessments made by Ihsan 'Abbas in *Ta'rikh al-naqd al-adabi 'ind al-'arab: naqd al-shi'r* (Beirut: Dar al-Thaqafa, 1971); F. A. al-Bustani in *Mashriq* XXIX (1931), 132-139, 196-204, 273-280, 348-355, 461-464, 623-632, 759-767, 854-859, 925-934; and Muhammad Yusuf Najm in 'Introduction (*muqaddima*)' to *Al-risala al-mmudiha fi dhikr sariqat Abi al-Tayyib al-Mutanabbi wa saqit shi'rihi* (Beirut: Dar Sadir and Dar Bayrut, 1965), ha'-mim.

[3] In Yaqut al-Hamawi, *Mu'jam al-udaba'* (*Irshad al-arib ila ma'rifat al-adib*), ed. D. S. Margoliouth (Beirut: Dar Ihya' al-Turath al-'Arabi, 1979 reprint), 18: 154, and repeated by 'Abd al-Rahman Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti in *Bughyat al-wu'ah fi tabaqat al-lughawiyyin wa al-nuhah*, ed. Muhammad Abu al-Fadl Ibrahim, 2nd edn (Cairo: Dar al-Fikr, 1979), 1: 86.

mudiha , observed by Bonebakker as 'the tone of many of his utterances in his *Risala Mudiha* suggest that he was given to unbridled self-glorification'[1] and 'the picture of al-Mutanabbi's behaviour and of Hatimi's advantage over his opponent is grossly exaggerated'[2], do not seem to have dimmed the earnestness to read this work as 'genuine' scholarly discourse in 'literary criticism', a 'brilliant illustration of these theories [he put forward] and the choice of a most unusual framework'.[3] This kind of single-mindedness found among contemporary readers of medieval Arabic texts, whereby works identified as 'classical' are given a purpose that is more a projection of our priorities than those of the author or of the audience he had in mind, is understandable. This is especially true in the case of al-Hatimi*'s Al-mudiha*, where an appropriate 'paratext' that can guide a different reading of this work is absent. It is referred to as *Al-risala al-mudiha*, *Kitab al-mudiha fi masawi al-Mutanabbi*, *Jabhat al-adab*, *Mukhataba*, *Munazarat Abi 'Ali al-Hatimi li-Abi al-Tayyb al-Mutanabbi... bi-Baghddd*, or simply *Al-risala al-Hatimiyya*.[4]

There are two '*Risala Hatimiyya*' in the literary, biographical and historical sources. One, commonly known as *Al-mudiha*, details al-Hatimi's debates with al-Mutanabbi on the latter's poetry and artistry in Baghdad in either 351 or 352 A.H. at the instigation of al-Muhallabi, the first grand vizier to the Buwayhids (or Buyids) at the time. And another, designated as *Al-Hatimiyya* in contemporary Arabic scholarship,

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[1]Bonebakker, 11.

[2]Bonebakker, 16.

[3]Bonebakker, 44.

[4]Bonebakker, 14-16.

consists of a survey of al-Mutanabbi's plagiarism from Aristotle.[1] More importantly, there is a variety of long and short, earlier and later versions of *Al-mudiha*, of which the modern printed edition brought out by Muhammad Yusuf Najm based on a 717 A.H. unique manuscript found at Escurial Library is only one. Najm's long version is clearly the result of a historical process involving many revisions by al-Hatimi himself and perhaps by other hands as well. The confusing 'autobiographical' references found in *Al-mudiha*--that it was composed for Abu al-Faraj Muhammad b. al-'Abbas b. Fasanjus (308-370 A.H.) towards the end of al-Hatimi's life, or for al-Muhallabi as soon as the first 'debate' had taken place in 351 or 352 A. H.--do not help to unravel the mystery the sources have put us in through seemingly 'one track minded' quotations and 'careless' naming. Quoted excerpts are invariably taken from the 'first' encounter at al-Mutanabbi's residence in Baghdad, which is to be followed by three other debates that took place at the court of al-Muhallabi in Najm's edition. This murky state of affairs of the sources in relation to their references to and quotations from the work, as Bonebakker points out, 'allows no positive conclusions about the circumstances under which the meeting between Hatimi and Mutanabbi, and in this respect contributes nothing to the other versions. Nor does it permit any conclusions about the history of these other versions'.[2]

If the authenticity and history of the work are elusive to historians of Arabic literature and literary criticism, how to read the various texts, both long and short, that

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[1]See O. Rescher, 'Die Risalet el-Hatimiyye: ein Vergleich von Versen des Motennabi's mit Aussprüchen von Aristoteles', *Islamica* II (1926), 439-473.

[2] Bonebakker, 36-37.

make up the work is equally treacherous. For an assessment of an entire area of intellectual inquiry, 'literary criticism', for example, depends on the ways in which the work may be read. 'Literary criticism', as a discipline, is defined by, in addition to its subject matter, a set of theories and methods within parameters agreed upon by its practitioners. Medieval Arabic literary criticism is, in one sense, focussed on an inquiry into poetry driven by a number of concerns, such as originality, symmetry, coherence and even progress, which are all reflected in *Al-mudiha*. However, should its designation as *risala* distinguish it from other works on poetry, in this case, discussions of al-Mutanabbi's poetry between supporters and detractors, whether commentators or anthologists, grammarians or lexicographers, lovers of astute reformulations or tracers of plagiarized lines, admirers of *gharib* or finders of *'uyub*? Our reading practices of medieval Arabic texts have not been hindered by the non-specifying paratext that is *risala*. Even though as a term it denotes no genre in particular it usually comes with a string of qualifiers that provide hints as to what the content, style, and mode of discourse of the work may be.

Al-Hatimiyya, least useful for readers of texts, tells us who the author is. *Al-mudiha*, whether qualified as *fi masawi al-Mutanabbi* or as *fi dhikr sariqat Abi al-Tayyib al-Mutanabbi wa saqit shi'rihi*, points to the focus of the work on uncovering plagiarism and shortcomings in al-Mutanabbi's poetry. *Mukhataba* (dialogue) and *munazara* (debate), on the other hand, describe the mode of discourse, that the discussions take the form of dialogic exchanges not monologic expositions. *Jabhat al-adab*, it is therefore possible to reason, signals that the tone is less than friendly in a show down between two men of letters, both versed in the knowledge and artistry of poetry. This idea of a show

down brings us to the *double entendre* in *al-mudiha*. It exposes al-Mutanabbi's indebtedness to great poets of the past unequivocally. More important, it announces al-Hatimi the winner of the match, for it is he who cracks al-Mutanabbi's head open, should we, as al-Hatimi does, imagine the encounter as a combat, a duel between two warriors in which conceptual, linguistic and literary weapons of all sorts are used.[1] After all, the term *risala*, read against its content, conveys that it, or the text that constitutes it, is nothing more than a 'communication act' structured as a dialogue. This dialogue, explicit or implicit between sender and recipient, can take on any topic, be set in any mode of discourse and cast in any style of writing. Such is the flexibility, or freedom, afforded by the term *risala*, which logically comes to designate a body of writings that do not necessarily fit into a generic straightjacket. *Al-mudiha* is made up of stories al-Hatimi (writer) tells his patron (addressee), be he al-Muhallabi or Ibn Fasanjus, of his encounter with al-Mutanabbi. Put differently, it is an extremely literary first person narrative account of a very literary duel set in the form of duet. But what of the other dialogue, *mukhataba* or *munazara*, is it simply the subject matter of a *risala* composed to suture the wound of a patron injured by al-Mutanabbi's dismissive arrogance (al-Muhallabi), or to gratify the vanity of another tickled by his public humiliation (Ibn Fasanjus)?

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[1]'There can be no doubt that the title *al-Mudiha* was chosen', Bonebakker explains, 'because it suggests a *double entendre*, i.e., "the *risala* that makes apparent, discloses [the shortcomings of Mutanabbi's poetry]" or, as explained by Hatimi himself (p. 4, lines 17-21), "the lacerating *risala*", referring to a type of head wound (*shajja*) by which the head or face is broken, that shows the whiteness of the bone, etc.' (16).

II

Mukhataba and *Munazra*: Contest between Poet and Critic

The long version of the *risala*, *Al-mudiha*, is a later, revised edition of earlier works, according to al-Hatimi himself, possibly completed between 365 and 370.[1] The flowery short introduction, now framing the account, tells us that the consolidated version (2)[2] was the work of an older al-Hatimi commissioned by Ibn Fasanjus. He is now reluctant to revisit the 'notorious' episode in his past. For one thing, it happened in his youth and at the behest of another patron, al-Muhallabi, who is now dead and his court in permanent hiatus. For another, the encounter(s) is too famous to need his revisiting; it is still fresh in the memory of the eminent scholars and men of letters who were present, and stories continue to be told about his intellectual and literary prowess. But, most importantly, he has already committed to writing the famous, or infamous?, encounter that took place at the urging of an earlier patron, al-Muhallabi, who in fact gave him that task of chasing al-Mutanabbi out of town (3).[3] A *rasala*, which al-Hatimi named *Jabhat al-adab* and dedicated to al-Muhallabi, already exists and continues to be a favourite work (for transmission) among the *ruwat* (3).

These reservations notwithstanding, al-Hatimi goes ahead and puts together a new *risala*, which he calls *Al-mudiha*, and dedicates it to Ibn Fasanjus. *Al-mudiha* is, in

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[1]Ibn Fasanjus's short vizierate ended in 360 with his arrest and eventually his banishment to Samarra. He may have recovered some of his status and returned to Baghdad before his death in 370. For details of the discussion of dating this work, see Bonebakker, 38.

[2]The text in Arabic: '*risala tashtamilu 'ala akhta'ihi wa tunazzimu manthura fusulihi wa abyatihi*'.

contemporary terms, an expanded edition of *Jabha*. A carefully revised *Jabha* now serves as the core of the work to which accounts of three more encounters, now described as *munazara* (dispute) or *mushajara* (quarrel), are added, together with a new introduction inscribing a new dedication to a new patron. *Al-mudiha*, the expanded new edition of *Jabha*, consists of an 'introduction' (1-5), in which the circumstances surrounding its composition and writing are detailed, and four chapters (*fusul*), each telling the story of one encounter. The long first chapter (6-97), a re-edited version of *Jabha*, tells the story of the initial encounter between al-Hatimi and al-Mutanabbi at the home of the latter. The following three short chapters (98-119, 120-156, and 157-196 respectively) provide detailed accounts of the discussions of poetry between the two protagonists, primarily of al-Mutanabbi's shortcomings in comparison with great poets of the past, at the court of al-Muhallabi on three occasions. The core chapter is distinguished from the later additions not only by time, place and length, but also by its tone, style, structure and the exuberance of its framing narrative. These distinguishing 'literary' features of the core chapter, the original *Jabha*, are obfuscated by the addition of the three new chapters. They are now seemingly overwhelmed by the majority, three chapters against one, and the abundance of material mobilized to drive home the point that the work is more interested in the substance of the 'discussions' between a poet and his critic.

The discussions recounted in the form of dialogue (*mukhataba*) or debate (*munazara*) may be read here as a 'treatise' on the intellectual exchange between two

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[3]The text in Arabic: '*Samani hatka harimihi wa tamziqa adimihi wa wakkalani bi-tatabbu'i 'uwarihi wa tasaffuhi ash'arihi wa ihwajihi ila mufaraqat al-'iraqi wa idtirarihi karahiyatan li-muqamihi ba'da tanahihi--kana--fi idna'ihi wa ikramihi*'.

poets, two scholars of poetry and two critics informed by a set of criteria for excellence

agreed upon at the time. These criteria, as al-Hatimi sums them up (25), concern

'diction, meaning, meter and rhyme (*lafz*, *ma'na*, *wazn* and *qafiya*)', in addition to

originality, in terms of generating both new ideas and novel expressions. Poetic words or

utterances (*alfaz*) must be fresh, sweet and in harmony with each other *('adhba*

mustahiba), meanings (*ma'ani*) refined (*latifa*), metaphors (*isti'arat*) accurate (*waqi'a*),

and similes (*tashbihat*) sound (*salima*).   A poem must also be cast in a smooth, even

mold composed from elegant and graceful meter and rhyme (*sahl al-'arud rashiq al-wazn*

mutakhayyar al-qafiya) and framed by a magnificent beginning and a unique ending

(*ra'i' al-ibtida' wa badi' al-intiha'*). The bulk of the work is devoted to the explication

and application of these 'critical criteria' or 'theoretical principles' through and to al-

Mutanabbi's poetry. Al-Hatimi painstakingly, and repeatedly, points out to al-Mutanabbi

in one example after another that he not only borrows his ideas and expressions from the

great poets of the past but also that he breaks every rule of, let us say, the book of Arabic

poetics. Al-Mutanabbi's poetry is in al-Hatimi's assessment lacking in originality and

defective in composition made up of ill-used plagiarized lines, half lines, metaphors or

similes (*sariqat*) and marred by grammatical and lexical errors (*akhta'*) and defects

(*'uyub*) in coherence, harmony and symmetry.

These dialogues or debates read like a straightforward 'treatise' in literary

criticism because they are in effect monologues in which the arguments of al-Hatimi, the

critic, dominate the work. His voice drowns out that of al-Mutanabbi, the poet, in a self-

serving reconstruction of a chain of events all leading to the total public humiliation of a

poet silenced by al-Hatimi's omniscient narrative.   Beneath the surface of this encounter

between a poet and his critic is yet another encounter, this time between two experts on Arabic poetry. Al-Mutanabbi was equally renowned for his expert knowledge of poetry as for his poetry. His first encounter with al-Hatimi takes place at his residence where he is holding a class in poetry. Students have flocked to his house to study with him the art of great poets of the past, especially Abu Tammam. Al-Hatimi, often finding al-Mutanabbi's explanations less than satisfactory, eventually and inevitably interjects with his far superior knowledge and understanding of 'ancient' poetry. Al-Mutanabbi is, we understand from al-Hatimi's 'hegemonic' storytelling, defeated on two grounds: his knowledge and artistry. His portrayal in the four chapters of the 'treatise' as completely unaware of his own deficiencies--he is frequently stunned into silence by his challenger!--is the straw that breaks the camel's back, so to speak, for it discredits him utterly and irrevocably as both critic and poet. Now wonder he goes into hiding and flees Baghdad at the first chance he gets.

The addition of the three short chapters arguably tilts our reading of *Al-mudiha* in the direction of literary criticism. In this kind of reading, the insertion of al-Mutanabbi into the discourse may be seen as a writing strategy the desired effect of which is the kind of drama that alleviates the dryness that often comes with critical and theoretical discussions of poetry. Dialogue in such a reading is not necessarily dialogic and produces no reverberations in the composition of the work, or in the texture of the text. Al-Mutanabbi's silence on, or inability to respond to, attacks on his knowledge and artistry is a writing ruse understood as part of al-Hatimi's self-glorification and exaggeration. In a less one-sided, or even less vain, representation of the debates, one would imagine, al-Mutanabbi would be given more room for rigorous and vociferous

comebacks. According to historical and biographical accounts he would be at least equal to the challenge.[1] He would present counter arguments and perhaps even retort that since when has knowledge of poetry and familiarity with literary theories made anyone a poet, after all, they did not help al-Hatimi in any major way? Al-Hatimi's later verbalized reluctance, tinged with a hint of regret, to revisit an episode in his earlier life may be interpreted as an indication of his maturity, both as person and critic, and his hope to rise above the 'folly' of his youth. But the caricature of al-Mutanabbi in *Jabha* persists in *Al-mudiha*, and so does the dialogic structure. *Al-mudiha* may have softened the sharp edges of *Jabha* but not given up, let us say, its mission. What, then, is the mission of this work, whether we think of it as the original *Jabha* or the amalgamation of a historical process that is *Al-mudiha*? The construction of al-Mutanabbi's caricature within a dialogic structure may simply be a narrative ploy that performs a dramatic role going beyond mitigation of anticipated boredom. Isolating *Jabha* from *Al-mudiha* may prove instructive. Restoration of the distinguishing 'literary' features of *Jabha* in our reading of the work, *Al-mudiha* as encompassing of *Jabha*, may lead to a different understanding of the work and the culture that produced it.

III

Tarassul and *Mu'arada*: Mimetic Duel between Poetry and Prose

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[1]Al-Mutanabbi was known for his knowledge of poetry and his adeptness in criticism (*naqd*). Abu 'Ali al-Farisi, famous scholar of the Arabic languages, gives an account attesting to the superiority of al-Mutanabbi's knowledge of the Arabic language. See, al-Badi'i, *Al-SubH al-munbi 'an haythiyyat al-Mutanabbi,* ed. Musfafa al-Saqa, Muhammad Shatt and 'Abduh Ziyada 'Abduh (Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif, 1963), 142-143.

The text of *Jabha*, or the first episode of the series of four encounters recounted in *Al-mudiha*, constitutes a complete, integral work markedly different from the later chapters, which may be called appendices. The critical ground it covers is comprehensive in that the later chapters do not contribute additional theoretical points; they rather offer more examples for application (breadth) not theory (depth). *Jabha* is, above all, distinguished from the other three chapters by a pair of attentively phrased and fastidiously polished 'prologue' and 'epilogue' framing the dialogues or debates on poetry and poetics written in the 'high' style of the 'classical' belles-lettres tradition. This set of 'prologue' and 'epilogue' places the debates in their appropriate historical and cultural contexts. These debates took place, we are given to understand, during the year al-Mutanabbi lived in Baghdad as part of the activities driven by the court of al-Muhallabi, the well-known patron of the 'arts', of intellectuals, scholars, poets and men of letter. They more importantly present the encounter in the form of an entertaining story; its characters, their movements and dialogues brought to life by the dramatic, if not melodramatic, flare of the storytelling and narration.

That al-Hatimi's self-proclaimed victory in the debates should run al-Mutanabbi out of town, which we know from other sources is fiction,[1] is the crown not of intellectual achievement but of dramatic culmination, of 'melodramatic imagination'. It is the climax of a chain of events reconstructed from facts into a narrative of visibly colourful fictive mode. Al-Hatimi may have debated with al-Mutanabbi on poetry and poetics on four

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[1]This is not the only fiction in *Al-mudiha*. Al-Hatimi bases the dramatic effect of his piece on, for example, al-Mutanabbi's denial of his knowledge of Abu Tammam, when he is portrayed as an admirer in historical accounts. See, al-Badi'i, *Al-Subh al-*

occasions, but the result and effect are not what his narration would seemingly like, or even care, to have us believe. The result and effect desired here are, in addition, the composition of a piece of rhymed prose that competes with poetry. It challenges poetry in its ability not only to dazzle its audience with the linguistic dexterity of its author, but also to bring to life with its visualizing capacity the events it represents. The dialogue here is, at a more abstract level, between poetry and prose and is necessarily dialogic; it is a battle to the death, so to speak, between two forms of discourse, of art, vying for the attention, affection and favour of the patron. It takes the form of *tarassul*, the composition of prose premised on 'mimesis' of poetry.

Al-Hatimi, invariably described in the sources as grammarian (*nahwi*), language scholar (*lughawi*), and scribe or secretary (*katib*) versed in *adab*,[1] was known for his talent in both poetry and prose (*yajmaʿu 'l-balaghata fi 'n-nathri wa 'l-baraʾata fi 'n-naʾmi*),[2] though not a prolific poet.[3] Al-Hatimi is described as follows in a unique statement quoted in Ibn al-Qifti's *Inbah al-ruwah*: '*kana adiban fadilan wa shaʿiran mutarassilan*' (3: 104).[4] *Mutarassil*, active participle of *tarassul*, used alternately with

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munbi, 143. For a convenient summary of the content of the debates, see Bonebakker, 43-51.

[1]Al-Thaʿalibi, *Yatimat al-dahr*, ed. Muhammad Muhy al-Din (Cairo: Matbaʿat al-Saʿada, 1956), 3: 108; Ibn al-Qifti, *Inbah al-ruwah fi akhbar al-nuhah*, ed, Muhammad Abu Fadl Ibrahim (Cairo: Dar al-Kutub al-Misriyya, 1950-73) 3: 103, and *Al-muhammadun min al-shuʿaraʾ*, ed. Hamd al-Jasir (al-Riyd: Ddr al-Yamama, 1970), 230; Ibn Khallikan, *Wafayat al-aʿyan*, ed. Ihsan ʿAbbas (Beirut: Dar Sadir, 1968-72), 4: 362; Yaqut, *Muʾjam al-udabaʾ*, 18: 154; al-Suyuti, *Bughya*, 1: 87.

[2]Al-Thaʿalibi, *Yatimat*, 3: 108; Ibn al-Qifti, *Al-muhammadun*, 230; Ibn Khallikan, *Wafayat*, 4: 362; Yaqut, *Muʾjam al-udabaʾ*, 18: 154; al-Suyuti, *Bughya*, 1: 87.

[3]Ibn al-Qifti, *Al-muhammadun*, 231; Yaqut, *Muʾjam al-udabaʾ*, 18: 154.

istirsal, which is in turn derived from *risala*, is used in 'classical' Arabic sources on

occasions to describe a particular mode of writing. A *mutarassil* is someone who

rewrites a poem into prose, a practice fashionable beginning in, if not before, the fourth

century. Al-Tha'alibi (d. 429), for example, gives examples of the ways in which al-

Mutanabbi's poetry was used by famous *kuttab*, writers of *rasa'il*, in their own prose

compositions. This process of mimicking poetry in prose is called *'hall nazm'* or

'tarassul'. In an examples he gives, al-Tha'alibi speaks of a piece al-Sahib Ibn 'Abbad

composed in this vein under as *'qit'atun min halli 's-Sahibi wa ghayrihi na'ma 'l-*

Mutanabbi wa 'sti'anatihim bi-alfazihi wa ma'anihi fi 't-tarassul' (1: 139). *Tarassul* can

mean a diverse array of prose writing. *Risala*, as a term, may refer to a letter in its most

general sense, or a letter in a technical sense, or a piece of belles-lettres. In its most

particular sense, however, it identifies a piece of prose that recasts a poem, a section of a

poem, or a line or two of a poem in a style that competes with poetry in, let us say, poetic

effect. The result is a piece of prose work that echoes what it rewrites in diction,

imagery, style and logic but goes beyond the 'original' in both scope and detail. Al-

Hatimi's *Jabha*, which he calls *risala*, may be read at one level as *tarassul* in its most

particular sense. It mimics al-Mutanabbi, especially his 'epic' poems. Here, as I will

explain in detail, al-Hatimi's prose follows the blueprint of al-Mutanabbi's 'ode' and at

the same time abstracts, or 'mythifies' al-Mutanabbi, elevating him to an iconic status,

symbolizing the 'glamarous' institution that was court poetry, only to 'deconstruct' this

institution in its parody of al-Mutanabbi, now 'mythified' in the form of a caricature.

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[4]Quoted in *Inbah al-ruwah* from a work identified as *Dhayl tarikh Thabit Ibn Qurra al-Sabi by Hilal Ibn al-Muhassin* (3: 104).

Jabha begins with a quote from al-Mutanabbi's poetry, a line containing the image of birds of prey feeding on the dead during a major battle: 'The birds have been feeding on their bodies so long that they almost pounce on the living among them'.[1] This image, of birds preying on the dead, recurs only in what may be called 'epic' poems dedicated to Sayf al-Dawla in al-Mutanabbi's repertoire.[2] It is used to a most striking effect as the central trope structuring what most 'critics' consider the jewel in the crown of his panegyrics, his 'ode' on the siege of al-Hadath. In his study of *The Composition of Mutannabi's Panegyrics to Sayf al-Dawla*,[3] Andras Hamori points out that the ways in which this image, or theme, of birds preying on the dead, frames the 'ode' is 'most striking' (60). He describes the framing that begins and ends what he calls 'the chronicle' (circumstances surrounding the siege of al-Hadath and the battle between Sayf a-Dawla's army and that of Domesticus) as follows:

The following lines stand at the end of the gnome-and-application preamble:

5   He demands of men [the virtues] he possesses, but even lions cannot

lay claim to those.

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[1]Translation by Andras Hamori in *The Composition of Mutannabi's Panegyrics to Sayf al-Dawla* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992), 28. Line taken from a poem commemorating one of the battles against the Byzantines, led by Sayf al-Dawla in Jumada al-ula 333 A.H.

[2]In the ode on Sayf al-Dawlah's victory over the Banu Kilab in 343 A.H. in al-'Ukbari, *Diwan Abi al-Tayyib al-Mutnabbi bi-Sharh Abi al-Baqa' al-'Ukbari al-Musamma bi al-Tibyan fi Sharh al-Diwan*, ed. Mustafa al-Saqa, Ibrahim al-Ibyari and 'Abd al-Hafiz Shalabi (Cairo: Matba'at Mustafa al-Babi al-Halabi, 1355/1936), line 4, 1:76; on the occasion of Sayf al-Dawla's victory over Banu 'Uqayl and Qushayr, Banu al-'Ajlan and Banu Kilab (date not given), line 2, 2: 103 and line 4, 2: 107; on the battle against the Byzantine in 333 (note 15 above), line 2, 2: 225; on Sayf al-Dawla's victory at Hisn Barzawayhi in 330, line 2, 3: 338; and on the battle of Miya Fariqayn, line 1, 3: 354.

[3](Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992).

6   The longest lived birds offer themselves as ransom for his weapons,

the desert vultures, the fledglings and the very old among them.

7   Having been created without claws does not harm them, his swords

and their hilts having been created.

8   Does al-Hadath the red know its color?...

Twenty-odd verses later, at the end of the chronicle, Sayf al-Dawla pursues the

enemy into the mountains, and we read:

5   Your horses trample the nests on the mountain peaks, and much food

[i.e., the dead] has accrued around those nests.

6   The eagles' chicks think that you brought their mothers to visit--

although they are strong, purebred horses.

7   Whenever they slip, you make them go on their bellies, as spotted

snakes crawl on the face of the earth.

The repetition of the motif of the dead as food for the predatory birds seems

calculated. *The hija'* begins in vs. 33; the two occurrences of the motif precisely

frame the summary and subsequent chronicle of the celebrated events (60-61).

This kind of framing is an integral part of a careful plan laid by al-Mutanabbi's

for the composition of this 'ode'. It is, as Hamori shows elsewhere in 'Reading al-

Mutanabbi's Ode on the Siege of al-Hadath',[1] 'an [...] intricate variation on an implicit

linear sequence', whose power resides in 'al-Mutanabbi's mastery of sound and phrase'

and, more importantly, in his 'design' for the poem (195). The movement of thought in

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[1]In *Studia Arabica et Islamica: Festschrift for Ihsan 'Abbas*, ed. Wadad al-Qadi
(Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1981), 195-208.

this 'ode', made up of four sections (I [1-6], II [7-13], III [14-32] and IV [33-46]), is analogous to the movement of disclosure. It follows a pattern identified by medieval critics as transition from general (*mujmal*) to particular (*mufassal*), which takes the form of '*tafsir*', explained as 'something put in summary form... followed by full exposition' (196). This movement, from general to particular back to general, constructed 'in grammatical scaffolding' (197) with later sections reverberating earlier sections, in what Hamori identifies as a 'crescendo motif' (*Composition*, 39-46), parallels movements of other kinds. It overlaps at one level with the movement of the themes from wisdom to occasion (siege of al-Hadath), event (battle), praise of Sayf al-Dawla, satire of his defeated opponent (Domesticus), and back to wisdom. At another level, it follows the movement of the battle in time (chronicle) and in place (approach to clash, advance to retreat, and halting to moving again). The transitions are punctuated by the narrative voice alternating between third and second persons, the sight progressing from glimpse to full view, and the sound cascading from the calm before the storm, to the clank of weapons and clamor of battle, then the silence of the dead ('Reading', 195-199). In short, this 'ode' is a richly textured and intricately woven piece of fabric that brings to life the sense of time, place and event through vivid and sensual evocation of sight, sound and movement through words, imagery and design.

There is, however, one important dimension of the visualizing capacity of al-Mutanabbi's 'ode' that has escaped the keen eyes of his connoisseurs and critics: the panorama of the Birdseye view, the swiftness of its flight, the sweep of its wings, and the deadliness of its descent. The trajectory of the flight and descent of a bird of prey, hawk or vulture, out on a hunt, I argue, structure the narrative movement of the poem. The

perspective from which the view projected by the poem is grasped is, if I may borrow a contemporary idiom, like the lens of a cinematographer's camera that moves from glimpse to full view in a motion picture filmed in the epic mode. Even as it moves towards close-ups, it maintains that above-the-scene position that gives it freedom to zoom in and out at will. But al-Mutanabbi's poem does not have to fit into the rectangular shape of a screen; rather, it takes the shape of the bird of prey that overlaps with the bird-like formation of the advancing army headed by Sayf al-Dawla. This convergence, of bird of prey with army, is effected at the outset.

> 5   The longest lived birds offer themselves as ransom for his weapons, the desert vultures, the fledglings and the very old among them.
>
> 6   Having been created without claws does not harm them, his swords and their hilts having been created (*Composition*, 10).

It becomes fully fledged when the battle reaches its climax. One could almost imagine the rush of the two armies into confrontation like two birds flying into a head on collision, then the Byzantine defeat as one bird folding the wings of the other over itself then watch it fall to the ground, crushing what is already there.

> 25   You pressed the wings of the Byzantine army back against its heart
>   ('Reading', 198), killing the under-feathers and wing-tips beneath.

Death, seen from the receiving end of it, is like the rain falling from sky above, brought on by the bird of prey in flight and on descent.

> 8   The white clouds rained upon it before he had come, and when he had drawn near it, it was watered by skulls.

9   He built it, and raised it high as spear was striking on spear, as the waves of

death were clashing about it (*Composition*, 10).

The flight of the bird of prey brings with it speed that is in turn ascribed to the

movements filling the space of the poem's canvas, especially those of horses, horsemen,

swords, spears, arrows, heads falling off, and a poet rushing to the side of his patron. The

narrative section of the 'ode' ends at this most decisive moment of triumph, when al-

Mutanabbi arrives at the scene on a flying steed to sing the praises of Sayf al-Dawla's

prowess and victory.

42 I race with your gifts into battle--neither am I blameworthy, nor are you

regretful,

43 On a flying steed that rushes to the fray on its feet, when the shouts of the

warriors fall upon its ears.

The word used for 'flying steed', *tayyar*, is an adjective derived from *tayr*, the word used

in the introductory section of the 'ode' to denote birds, only to be qualified within a few

words with *nusur*, the Arabic word for vultures. Cast in an adjectival form that denotes

repetition of the action implicit in the root, it conjures up multiple connotations in

relation to flying and flying objects. *Tayyar*, as used in line 43, can simply be a

metonym, an adjective replacing a noun, in this case, 'flyer' for 'fast steed'. It may also

denote the person experienced or practiced in flying the 'fast steed'. Stripped of its

association with the 'fast steed', it can simply mean a flyer, or, one who is 'flying' the

bird. Whether *tayyar* here means flyer in its transitive or intransitive sense, its

ambivalent implications did not escape al-Hatimi's keen sense for al-Mutanabbi's play,

with words, grammar, imagery, ideas, and his audience's, our head. He must have, as I

do now, read al-Mutanabbi's narcissistic streak into this line—*Al-mudiha* begins with a quote form al-Mutanabbi's poetry on the birds of preying descending upon the dead to feed on their flesh. Here, in the 'ode' on the siege of al-Hadath, is where the poet puts himself in a position in the social, perhaps even military, hierarchy above that of his patron. For, if Sayf al-Dawla and his army are the bird, it makes sense that the 'flyer' of the 'bird' is in command, of the immediate situation or of everything else. But al-Mutanabbi's audacity makes perfect sense visually, for he must have Birdseye view, and be physically situated far above the scene, including Sayf al-Dawla, for him to be able to take in, grasp and translate into words the panorama of activities unfolding before his eyes.

The line from al-Mutanabbi quoted by al-Hatimi at the very beginning of *Jabha* signals that what follows will be an engagement of a particular kind. It will take as point of departure al-Mutanabbi's persona as externalized in his poetry, especially the best of his panegyrics that were his claim to fame, and unravel this persona as it picks apart the fabric of his poetry. The longish narrative 'prologue' (6-11), which sets up the debates to follow, is structured around this central trope--al-Mutanabbi as a 'bird of prey'--and the images associated with this trope in his poetry. Al-Hatimi, more importantly, turns the table on al-Mutanabbi, focalized here as the court poet par excellence, the object of desire of all tenth century courts in the Eastern part of the Islamic 'Empire', and the self-fashioned 'prince' or 'commander' of poets (*amir al-shu'ara'*). Al-Hatimi is now the 'hunter' who pursues al-Mutanabbi, here the 'hunted', mercilessly, relentlessly and 'taking no hostage'. The appearance of the bird of prey in the horizon of al-Hatimi's text, like in al-Mutanabbi's, is an indication of war. Al-Mutanabbi's haughtiness towards the

Iraqis, 'he put on the robe of arrogance, trailing behind him a long tail of insolence, and turned his cheek away from the Iraqis' is spoken of as a form of challenge to war, 'and he sharpened the edge (of his sword) for his opponents' (6). Al-Hatimi's portrayal of al-Mutanabbi's self-proclaimed grandeur on the basis of his status as poet is literally constructed out of the recurring images al-Mutanabbi uses in reference to himself.

> He imagined out of self-glorification that only he, and no one else, had the reign
>
> of the literary arts, and that poetry was a sea only he had drunk from its refreshing
>
> water, or a garden only he had seen its blossoming flowers, harvested its crops
>
> and picked its fruits... And he imagined himself the champion horse undefeatable
>
> in any race, and the warrior's sword unequalled in any combat. He imagined
>
> himself the lord of speech, the only 'stud' able to deflower virgin words, the only
>
> slave-owner to have mastered eloquence in prose and poetry, and the only
>
> unconquered hero in the arena of virtue and knowledge... (6).

When al-Mutanabbi's disdain for them becomes unbearable to the Iraqis, and no one is equal to the task of defending their honour, al-Hatimi steps out of the line (formed by al-Muhallabi's desolate courtiers) and takes upon himself the task of accepting al-Mutanabbi's declaration of war. He too throws down the gauntlet, so to speak, and sets out to 'declaw' al-Mutanabbi, the 'bird of prey' hovering in the sky readying itself to feed on the dead. It is al-Hatimi who will go for the kill now.

> I heaved my chest [and straightened my back], intent on tracking his flaws,
>
> clipping his claws, broadcasting his secrets, and unraveling his mysteries [digging
>
> out the skeletons in his closet?]. I was looking out for a meeting at the home of a

patron to be designated, so that he and I will run in a race after which the winner will be known from the loser, and the champion from the runner up (7).

The moment comes. And it is al-Hatimi who takes up the offensive position, setting out to conquer al-Mutanabbi right in his home, riding his hawk-like mule (*bazi* and *nisr*) and leading the clouds.

I set out for his abode, riding [beneath me] a light and fast mule. [It runs] like a falcon blinking his eyes to better see his quarry from the sky, and like a hawk, its claws stretching before him, flying high before it descends on its prey, its tail warning of the arrival of its beak [neck]. Above it is a magnificent warship that shone like a bright star and beneath it a rain cloud led by the southern wind (8).

Here, al-Hatimi fashions himself as the undefeatable conquering hero al-Mutanabbi sees himself in his 'ode', *créme de la créme* and a cut above the rest of the world, including his patron al-Muhallabi, who with all his literary abilities conceded defeat, though silently, to al-Mutanabbi. However, he usurps al-Mutanabbi's above-the-cloud position in his narrative of victory, in his own 'epic', and from the outset, al-Mutanabbi's defeat is a fate sealed in al-Hatimi's narrative. It is inevitability foretold, as it were, in the textual visualization of the event and inscribed in the ways in which al-Mutanabbi's imagery, one image after another, is re-deployed and re-ordered to place al-Hatimi in the position of supremacy. Al-Mutanabbi finds himself grounded, his 'flying' privileges taken away. He is now firmly tied to the ground, drinking from the sea of poetry and picking the fruits of the literary arts down below. Al-Hatimi, on the other hand, gains the leverage of flight, riding not only a 'bird of prey' but also clouds heavy with rain that will replenish the sea of poetry and water the garden of literary arts. This

slight shift in the kind of rain the clouds will bring, in comparison with al-Mutanabbi's imagery in his 'ode' (skulls), cannot erase completely the traces of al-Mutanabbi's original menace (death), and al-Mutanabbi's death is what al-Hatimi seeks.

Death in this context is and must be symbolic. It is the fall of al-Mutanabbi from 'icon' to 'caricature' premised on al-Hatimi's ridicule of al-Mutanabbi's poetic persona. Al-Hatimi's deconstruction of al-Mutanabbi's persona is paradoxically based on a parallel construction of this persona affected on the basis of an interpretation of al-Mutanabbi and his poetry. Put differently, it reads into al-Mutanabbi's 'ode' an attitude, abstracts it, and then turns it on its head. Whether this reading of al-Mutanabbi is on par with the poet's design, or not, is of no immediate relevance. It is not important to know that his self-positioning merely reflects the visualizing capacity of his 'ode', or that he intended to place him at the top of social or military hierarchy. For 'authorial intention' plays a very little part, if at all, in the process of construction of his persona that is entirely based on distortion, on 'abstraction', 'iconization', or 'mythification'. Al-Hatimi text performs two functions: it creates a 'myth' of al-Mutanabbi the arrogant court poet par excellence as it abstracts this persona from his poetry; and it turns this 'myth' on its head by casting it in the form of the 'caricature' of al-Mutanabbi the hapless poet. There is, however, an additional side effect to the creation of al-Mutanabbi myth.

'Myth', according to Roland Barthes in 'Myth Today',[1] is 'a type of speech' as well as 'a system of communication', 'a semiological system', 'a message' that takes shape in a special set of conditions (109). It is a semiological system in the second

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[1]In *Mythologies*, translated into English by Annette Lavers (New York: Nill and Wang, 1972), 109-159.

degree in that it is constructed on the ground but distorting of an earlier semiological system. The sign of the original 'system of communication', made up of 'signifier' and 'signified', now comes to be the 'signifier' which, in its dialectical or dialogical relation with the new 'signified', produce a new sign, which is the myth. Al-Mutanabbi, the word, the sign is, in the first instance, made up of 'court poet', signifier and, 'courtly panegyrics', signified, becomes the signifier that, together, with 'court poetry of al-Mutanabbi', the new signified, form the new sign, the myth, that is the 'institution of poetry' symbolized by the word al-Mutanabbi. This 'institution of poetry', built on the foundation of 'abstraction', 'iconization' or 'mythification' of al-Mutanabbi, embodies all the aesthetics, ethics and politics of the tenth century court in which poetry performed specific functions assigned to it by the court and its culture. These functions came to be institutionalized at court, and poetry, as a cultural institution, could no longer easily divorce itself from the politics of the court.

IV

Jabhat al-adab: Poet, *Adib*, Courtier

Al-Hatimi was, like al-Mutanabbi, a 'professional' courtier typical of the tenth century who relied for his livelihood on the gifts of his patrons and his 'scholarship'. His knowledge of the literary arts, including poetry and poetics, was his commodity, whether as poet, critic or scholar of language. Although he taught poetry and the craft of poetry, as he implies in *Al-mudiha*, and composed or compiled commissioned works, such as *Al-mudiha* itself, he too traveled from court to court. Al-Hatimi, a much younger contemporary of al-Mutanabbi, had a career similar in trajectory to that of his older

'nemesis'. More importantly, he too composed panegyrics in praise of Sayf al-Dawla, of which he gave an example in *Al-hilbaja* (Yaqut, 18: 157-158).[1] They, as poets and scholars of poetry as well as language, were competitors for the attention and favours of their patrons. How well they did in life depended to a great extent on their success as courtiers. The field of play, for the courtiers at least, had expanded beyond the courts of the caliph and his 'grand' vizier by the end of the ninth century, when the Islamic Empire came to be relative loose federations of 'city-states' and their umbrella dynasties.[2] In his lengthy study of the relationship between intellectuals and the state under the Buwayhids in *Al-muthaqqafun wa 'l-sulta fi al-hadara al-'arabiyya*,[3] Mustafa al-Tuwati speaks of the dire situation in which the tenth-century intellectuals often found themselves. They had two modes of livelihood: freelance work, such as copying manuscripts or giving private tuition, which brought no respite from poverty; and patronage, which came with a set of pre-requisites as well as implications in the behaviour of the patronized.

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[1]His encounter with al-Mutannabi in Baghdad was not necessarily a first; in fact, he might have met the poet at the court of Sayf al-Dawla in Aleppo when he was young man of nineteen. As he states it in *Al-hilbaja*, a work he dedicated to vizier Ibn Sa'dan, he served Sayf al-Dawla and met at his court some of the most famous scholars of the Arabic language at the time, such as Abu 'Ali al-Farisi, Abu 'Abdallah b. Khalawayhi, Abu al-Tayyib al-Lughawi, Abu Sa'id al-Sirafi, 'Ali b. 'Isa al-Rummani, and Abu Sa'id al-Mu'alla (quoted in Yaqut, *Mu'jam al-udaba'*, 18: 156-157).

[2] In the second half of the tenth century the Eastern part of the Empire, al-Mutanabbi and al-Hatimi's playground, was made up of the Hamdanids controlling the area between Aleppo (Sayf al-Dawla) and Mosul (Nasir al-Dawla) in northern Syria and Iraq today, and the Buwayhids (Buyids), ruling southern Iraq and Eastern Iran today. Instead of the Caliph and his 'Grand' Vizier, the 'heads of city-states' (*umara'*) and their viziers became chief patrons of the arts. The courts of Sayf al-Dawla, the prince of Aleppo (*amir halab*), and the three Buwayhid viziers--al-Muhallabi (d. 352/963) in Baghdad, Ibn al-'Amid (d.365/970) in Fars (Khurasan, Rayy and Isfahan), and al-Sahib Ibn 'Abbad (d. 385/995) also in Fars (mainly in Isfahan)--were now the 'Meccas' of intellectual activities.

Intellectuals of all kinds, poets, men of letters, scholars of language and poetry, even philosophers, traveled from court to court, in search for patronage and livelihood. They flocked these 'famous' courts, waited to be heard, and once invited to join the 'elite' spared no effort to shine, to dazzle, and to steal everyone else's thunder, each eager to show off his goods. Exhibitionism, or flexing intellectual and literary muscles, became the name of the game in the celebrity culture of the time. In the economy of exchange ruled by the dynamics of patronage, competition in the intellectuals' courtship of patrons was such that the rise of one 'star' often meant the eclipse of another. Many did not hesitate in conducting negative campaign (*hija'*) against each other. Both al-Mutanabbi and al-Hatimi are not above playing dirty. While his *Diwan* is full of poems composed in satire of patrons who disappointed him (such as Kafur) or competed with his patron, or other poets,[1] al-Mutanabbi was subject to mockery. During his stay in Baghdad, according to al-Badi'i in *Al-Subh al-munbi 'an haythiyyat al-mutanabbi*, the poets, egged on by their patron al-Muhallabi, competed in attacking him (*tabaraw fi hija'ihi*, 143). Al-Hasan b. Lankak, a jealous poet involved in the negative campaign described by al-Badi'i as *'hasidan lahu, ta'inan 'alayhi, hajian iyyahu'*, gloated over such a 'feeding frenzy'(145). In fact, he added fuel to the already raging fire, spreading rumours that al-Mutanabbi was son of a Kufan water carrier (*za'iman anna abahu kana yasqa 'l-ma' fi 'l-kufa*), calling him names and using foul language in his verbal attacks (145). Al-Hatimi

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[3]In two volumes (Tunis: al-Ma'had al-'Ali li 'l-lughat, 1999).

[1]See, for example, al-'Ukbari, 1:36-41; 1:45-46; 1: 204-209; 1: 218; 1: 219-220; 1: 348; 2: 39-46; 2: 114; 2: 203; 2: 292-293; 2: 359-361; 3: 262-263; 3:263-264; 4: 121-132; 4: 150-151; 4: 151-152; 4: 242-247; 4: 248-249; 4: 263; 4: 268-269; 4: 294-296.

too often found himself in the middle of a sim[1]ilar kind of 'controversy'. His dig at Ibn al-Hajjaj in his introduction to *Al-mudiha* (quoted above) is his response to Ibn Hajjaj who, according to Yaqut, attacked al-Hatimi in bitter satires (*ahaji murra*) together with other poets (18:154). The vehemence of the kind of 'satires' prevalent in the tenth century is an indication of the fierce competition at court in a variety of 'intellectual' activities, which encompassed more than just panegyrics.

As courtiers, the intellectuals not only served as boon-companions, drinking with their patrons and keeping them company, but also entertained them with their own erudition, though presented in a way appropriate to the environment of the court. Their status in court, however, is paradoxically determined by their fame in the wider world. The ways in which the discussions of poetry are presented *in Jabha* first and *Al-mudiha* later, as I have explored elsewhere, reflect to a great extent some of the key functions of poetry at court. Poetry, as substance of knowledge, and poetic craft, as subject to mastery, are at the centre of the intellectual activities taking place at court, at 'parties' thrown or 'assemblies' held by the patron. The last three chapters of *Al-mudiha*, in which three sessions of discussions of poetry at al-Muhallabi's court are recorded, 'represent' in a biased way the kind of typical intellectual activities surrounding poetry at court. These activities mimic those of a scholarly setting outside the immediate context of court as the first chapter of *Al-mudiha*, *Jabha*, makes it clear. If this--the imitation of scholarly 'assemblies'--is a conceit of court, it paradoxically reveals its (court's) investment in the status of its courtiers in the outside world. Conversely, the scholarly assemblies outside

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[1]See Wen-chin Ouyang, *Literary Criticism in Medieval Arabic-Islamic Culture: The Making of a Tradition* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 146-154.

the world of the court are the place where courtier-wannabes receive their training, especially in the kind of discussions of poetry and poetic craft that will be instrumental in their success at court. Al-Hatimi's 'invasion' in his patron's name of al-Mutanabbi's 'poetry class' held at 'home', where an intellectual retains some autonomy, bespeaks the symbiotic relationship between patronage and scholarship but, more significantly, al-Hatimi's declaration of total war on al-Mutanabbi.

Jabha, is satire, *hija'*, in prose. The battle lines are drawn--and *jabha* means battlefront or battleground in Arabic--and the limits extend beyond the 'walls' of the court. The destruction of al-Mutanabbi, as icon, must be complete. Al-Mutanabbi, as court poet par excellence, must be discredited as poet, master of his craft, and scholar, expert in poetry, its history, language and interpretation. The result of the head-to-head confrontation--and this meaning may be inferred from one derivative of *jabha*, *mujabaha*--between an aspiring courtier and an established one, in al-Hatimi's narrativized account of the reduction of al-Mutanabbi from 'icon' to 'caricature' is the utter and complete defeat of al-Mutanabbi. Al-Mutannabi's defeat is manifest at two levels, his 'stunned-into-silence' demeanor during every encounter and his escaping town at the end when no one is looking. Al-Mutanabbi's defeat, as I have already alluded earlier, is symbolic of a defeat of another kind. In the race to the heart and mind of their patron, which clearly resides in winning their head first, belles-lettres came to be the vehicle for panegyrics, especially for those who were better prose writers than poets, including luminous figures such as al-Hamadhani and al-Tawhidi, to name but two.

Al-Hatimi's *Jabha* must be read, in one important sense, as an effort to topple poetry as the dominant 'cultural institution' at court. This effort is manifest in the style

and mode of writing. At the outset, as al-Tuwati points out, the fierce competition among men of letters for patronage led to a style of composition, of both poetry and prose that relies heavily on 'over-the-top' writing strategy. This strategy is visible in the complex games of word play, of piling one image after another, and of breaking down an image into the minutest possible details then constructing extended variations on their ashes (2: 47-101). Most important, as *Al-mudiha* exemplifies, courtiers not only try to outdo each other but also to do away with each other. As it mimics al-Mutanabbi's 'ode', *Al-mudiha* tries to outdo its achievements every step of the way. The 'enframed' debates on knowledge and artistry of poetry complement, support and escalate the war on al-Mutanabbi, starting at the level of individual, going through that of icon, and finally reaching that of cultural institution in the narrative 'frame'. The acuteness of the situation finds expression in the mode of writing, of discourse, which departs from the kind of 'realistic', 'objective' or 'neutral' representation expected of scholarly discussion and comes close to dramatization based on simplification, polarization and exaggeration found in fiction. 'Drama', sensible in portrayal of any kind of debate and the circumstances leading up to it, is elevated to 'melodrama', representation premised on heightening sensibilities.

In *The Melodramatic Imagination*,[1] Peter Brooks defines 'melodramatism' as 'the mode of excess' Balzac and Henry James used for 'representation' in a variety of their novels. It relies on 'the indulgence of strong emotionalism; moral polarization and schematizations; extreme states of being, situations, actions; villainy, persecution of the

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[1]Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

good, and final reward of virtue; inflated and extravagant expression; dark plottings, suspense, breathtaking peripety' (11-12). *Al-mudiha*, though not a novel, shares with the melodramatic novels Brook speaks of in many of its key features. The crude reduction of al-Mutanabbi to 'caricature', as both gesture and process, is a sign of the kind of 'hyperbolic figures' and 'lurid grandiose event' critics find in Balzac and James (3). The polarization into moral, political and intellectual absolutes is another distinctive mark of *Al-mudiha*'s 'melodramatism'. The 'villainy' of al-Mutanabbi's arrogance and disregard for other intellectuals is one form of excess in polarity. The same may be said of the narrative's insistence that he is the court poet of only Sayf al-Dawla,[1] the 'mortal enemy' (*'aduw mubayin*) of the Buwayhids (7). In reality, at least according to historical accounts, the Hamdanids and Buwayhids did not seek to annihilate each other and, in fact, they formed political and military alliances on occasions, albeit reluctantly.[2] Above all, the total defeat of al-Mutanabbi at the hands of al-Hatimi in the story is, to say the least, in tandem with the 'inflated and extravagant expression' of al-Hatimi's narrative prose, part of the 'final reward of virtue' won from life in al-Hatimi's triumph on behalf of 'humanity' over the 'extreme situation' of agitation caused by al-Mutannabi's 'extreme actions' in 'persecution of the good'.

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[1]Al-Mutanabbi and Sayf al-Dawla are not the ideal or perfectly matched couple (of poet and patron) mythified in the Arabic literary imaginary. Their relationship was complex and al-Mutanabbi often did not agree with Sayf al-Dawla's more aggressive policies towards the Byzantines, Buwayhids and Arab tribes of northern Iraq and Syria. For details, see R. Bikhazi, *The Hamdanid Dynasty of Mesopotamia and North Syria*, 3 vols. (University of Michigan Ph.D. dissertation, 1981), 3: 656-803.

[2]For further details, see Bikhazi, *The Hamdanid Dynasty of Mesopotamia and North Syria*, 3: 690-915.

Melodrama, Brooks argues is in a sense 'a form of theatricality which will underlie novelistic efforts at representation' (13). *Al-mudiha*'s theatricality, however, is less akin to the nineteenth century novel and more in line with the pre-enlightenment type of 'drama accompanied by music' used by Rousseau. This kind of drama, or melodrama, is often made up of 'spoken soliloquy, pantomime and orchestral accompaniment' (Brooks, 14), but with music replaced by visual 'pomp and ceremony' in a written text. I have already spoken of *Al-mudiha*'s monologism in Section II. Its textual visualization of 'fantastic' events leading to and during the events is pantomimetic; the characters reduced to caricatures and the events to occasions for theatricality. The way al-Hatimi rides his falcon-like mule, his descent upon al-Mutanabbi's circle populated by young students, al-Mutanabbi's going all aflutter, the thread-bare robe he uses as his cushion, his wearing seven robes of different colours in the peak of Baghdad's summer heat, his panic and ignoring of the presence of his guest, the initial coyness feigned by both, their readiness to pounce on each other, the exaggerated gestures of censure and apology, and finally the eruption of their debates, are not only done in the style of 'pomp and ceremony' but also heralded by the 'orchestral' incitement of their audience (8-11).

This theatricality of *Al-mudiha*, derived mainly from the revised *Jabha*, especially its 'framing' narrative, is arguably a fictional reconstruction from the perspective of hindsight. This fictive mode employed in this much later, carefully revised 'edition' is, it is possible to argue further, an integral part of the design of the work. The animosity between al-Mutanabbi and al-Hatimi, like al-Hatimi's account of his 'victory', is grossly exaggerated too. A number of accounts in the biographical and literary sources of al-Hatimi, Bonnebaker points out, indicate that after the initial debate they parted as

friends.[1] At the end of his 'quotation' from a relatively short version of *Jabha*, al-Badi'i

quotes al-Hatimi as saying, 'and I saw enough of his virtue, of the purity of his mind, and

of the excellence of his artistry, that made me decide to compose *Al-hatimiyya*. Our

friendship strengthened and I began to visit him frequently' (142). More revealing is

perhaps the final design of *Al-mudiha*, which now mirrors the structure of al-Mutanabbi's

'ode', even though *Al-mudiha* comes nowhere close to the intricacy in the fabric of al-

Mutanabbi's iconic 'ode'. It is, however, possible to see that *Al-mudiha* is now made up

of '*fusul*', with the movement from one section to another following a linear

(chronological) sequence. And, a set of carefully phrased 'prologue' and 'epilogue' now

frame the debates in a more tightly constructed edifice. This edifice, lacking in earlier,

short versions quoted in biographical and literary sources, particularly Yaqut (18: 159),

Ibn Khallikan (4: 362-367) and al-Badi'i (128-142), is constructed in a mirror image of

the central trope of al-Mutanabbi's 'ode'. The addition of the key images associated with

a bird-of-prey (quoted above) noticeably puts *Al-mudiha* in the position of 'mimesis' or

'parody' (*mu'arada*) of al-Mutanabbi's poetics and poetic persona. The 'melodramatic'

theatricality of *Al-mudiha* is, in other words, premised on the escalation from the

theatricality of one particular situation recounted in an earlier version of *Jabha* to another

theatricality that transcends the immediate dynamics of two poets or scholars competing

for income, fame and status. What sense, then, is one to make of an old man's reflection,

reconstructed here, as it were, of his youth and of his career?

V

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*Adab***: Literature as Performance**

The melodramatic excess in Balzac and James, Brooks argues, 'is the basis of a vision of the social worlds as the scene of dramatic choice between heightened moral alternatives, where every gesture, however frivolous or insignificant it may seem, is charged with the conflict between light and darkness, salvation and damnation' (5). The world represented in melodramatic novels 'is so often being used metaphorically, as a sign of something else' (11). 'The violence and extremity of emotional reaction and moral implication' of Balzac and James, 'may in part derive from their lack of clear foundation, their location in an ethical consciousness that cannot be shown to correspond evidently and necessarily to the way life is lived by most people' (11). The conflict portrayed in *Al-mudiha* is clearly not of the moral kind that leads to salvation or damnation in the religious sense-- for here the world of the court is squarely situated in the secular domain, but of the kind that can only be resolved by death, albeit symbolic. More important, alternatives are heightened as extreme polarities closely associated metaphorically with light and darkness; voice or silence, victory or defeat, staying power or flight, life or death. Al-Hatimi's voice equals al-Mutanabbi's silence, the triumph of the former is necessarily premised on the latter's downfall, the stay of one in Baghdad requires the other to flee, and the longevity of the victor anticipates the death of the loser. Al-Mutannabi's death, would not the narrative like to have us believe?, is the consequence of his losing the war to al-Hatimi! Yet this all-or-nothing world represented in *Jabha*, its violence and extremity of emotional reaction', is a sign of its lack of morality--it is a world of the survival for the fittest and its ethical consciousness cannot be shown to correspond to the

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[1]Bonebakker, 18.

way of life lived by 'ordinary' people. What, then, can the meaning of existence be for intellectuals who must give up the sovereignty of their self, their soul, in the winner-takes-all world of patronage as represented by al-Hatimi?

Melodrama, Brooks argues, 'will provide a model for the making of meaning in fictional dramatizations of existence' (13). 'The nineteenth-century novel needs such a theatricality,' Brooks adds, 'to get its meaning across, to invest in its renderings of life a sense of memorability and significance. With the rise of the novel and melodrama, we find the entry into literature of a new moral and aesthetic category, that of the "interesting"' (13). The impulse for theatricality in *Al-mudiha*, it is possible to argue, may be located in its search for memorability and significance. Al-Hatimi, after all, is most memorable in, perhaps even immortalized by his caricature of al-Mutanabbi. It also points to the emergence of a new category of prose that sets itself against poetry, which, by its association with court, has the status of a 'cultural institution' necessarily of court. More importantly, it bases its legitimacy, significance and cultural power on its simultaneous mimesis and parody, not to mention incorporation, of poetry. But, perhaps most importantly, it engages with the aesthetics, ethics and politics of a world not anchored in a clearly defined ethical consciousness, and performs, melodramatically, the event in which it finds itself.

The literary work, Derek Attridge suggests in *The Singularity of Literature*,[1] exists only in performance. Performance, as meant by Attridge, may be said to have four loci. The first resides 'in creative literary reading' (95). 'Literary fiction', for example,

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[1]Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004).

'involves the *performance* of fictionality, occurring as the experience of an event of a series of events whereby the characters and occurrences apparently being referred to are in fact, and without this fact being disguised, brought into being by the language' (96). Al-Hatimi's reading of al-Mutanabbi, one may argue, is performance of this kind, a creative literary reading of both the poeticality of al-Mutanabbi's poetry and the fictionality of his poetic persona that were brought into being by language. But it may also be performance of another kind, of the creation of a literary work. Literariness, or the singularity of a literary work, Attridge posits elsewhere, is located in the 'linguistic event' embodied by and in a literary work (56-58), which is in turn an 'event of invention' premised on 'creating the other' (17-31), 'the unprecedented, hitherto unimaginable disposition of cultural materials that comes into being in the event of invention ' (63). *Al-mudiha*, in its 'reformulation of existing norms' found particularly in *risala* and *tarassul*, is this kind of literary work Attridge speaks of, carving a space for its alterity out of not just familiar literary conventions but also cultural practices. In this, its singularity resides in a third locus of performance, that of performing the cultural event out of which the literary event emerges. *Al-mudiha* acts out the aesthetics, ethics and politics determined by the dynamics of a court culture, be they of the politics of patronage (governing the relationship between patron and patronized or among the courtiers), of the aesthetic sensibilities valued, or of the absence of an ethical consciousness. It is of the event it is in, or in the event it is of; it acts out the event that led to its creation, or remains mired in the very event it represents.

Al-mudiha, in its very foundation on these familiar literary and cultural practices, 'can be experienced only as a process of adjustment in norms and habits whereby it is

recognized, affirmed, and, at least partially accommodated' (63). As a treatise on 'literary criticism', *Al-mudiha* acquires a new frame constructed out of facts narrated in a fictive mode while following the familiar themes of discussions of poetry. As a piece of *tarrasul* that takes imitation of poetry as its motto, it feigns the objectivity of 'scholarship' and presents itself as such. Here, it also serves 'as a peculiar nexus within the culture that is perceived as resisting or exceeding all pre-existing general determinations' (63). There is resistance everywhere in *Al-mudiha*. Al-Hatimi the old man is reluctant to endorse what al-Hatimi the young man had done. *Al-mudiha* is uncomfortable with the fame of *Jabha* and reformulates its. Its fictive prose narrative erodes the objectivity of 'scholarship'. Its caricaturization of al-Mutanabbi and his poetry challenges the status of the poet and the cultural institution that is court panegyrics. In contrast to its portrayal of al-Mutanabbi as the court poet associated with only Sayf al-Dawla, it resists being tied down to one patron. It is dedicated to al-Muhallabi first, then to Ibn Fasanjus, all the while with an eye to Mu'izz al-Dawla, the Buwayhid Amir at the time.

It is, above all, a self-conscious literary work, its singularity residing in a fourth locus of performance. A literary work, Attridge theorizes, is 'an act, an event, of reading, never entirely separable from the act-event (or acts-events) of writing that brought it into being as a potentially readable text, never entirely insulated from the contingencies of the history into which it is projected and within which it is read' (59). What Attridge says is relevant to what Brooks says of melodrama as 'a model for making meaning in fictional dramatizations of existence' and to what Barthes says of myth as a 'semiological system' simultaneously constructed on and distorting of another 'semiological system', for

meaning in Attridge's theory emerges in the contact zone, what he calls performance, between the writerly text, one semiological system, and the readerly text, another semiological system. The meaning of a writerly text exists in the performance of the text in the event of reading, in the readerly text. The two 'texts' and their performance are, however, always enmeshed in the ethics and politics surrounding the events of both writing and reading. *Al-mudiha* is an embodiment of this 'theory' of 'meaning making'. It is conscious of the memorialization effect of al-Mutanabbi in its reading of his poetry and persona; it is only when a literary work is perpetually performed, read, that it will have meaning, significance, and staying power. It takes pride in its popularity. It re-reads itself, performed in the act of re-writing, and addresses itself to a new, second patron. It addresses a third party that falls outside the immediate bilateral addresser and addressee of a communications act presented in the form of a 'letter'--*risala*: Mu'izz al-Dawla who had no immediate role in al-Hatimi's encounter with al-Mutanabbi or his writing of *Jabha* first then *Al-mudiha*. A potentially even more powerful patron aside, Mu'izz al-Dawla, the textualized 'third' party, anticipated, and desired in this instance, is symbolic of the reader out there—you and me—wholly unrelated to the immediate 'event', of the encounter and of writing. A silent plea is addressed to this third reader, 'please read me!', for only a constant readership will ensure the memorability of the work, that it will always have meaning and significance.

Résumé et commentaire de Gerald Prince

Dans sa très riche communication, Wen-chin Ouyang examine *Al-risala al-mudiha*, un texte en prose écrit par al-Hatimi vers 365 ou 370 de l'Hégire, qui révise et amplifie des textes parus plusieurs années auparavant (y compris une *Jabhat al-adab* dédiée au grand vizir al-Muhallabi). Al-Hatimi y raconte son duel littéraire, en 351 ou 352, avec le célèbre poète al-Mutanabbi et y consigne son éclatante victoire. Relevant les multiples "plagiats" et les nombreux défauts de ce dernier, al-Hatimi se montre tellement supérieur qu'al-Mutanabbi ne peut que fuir Baghdad ignominieusement. Vu la carrière d'al-Hatimi en tant qu'érudit, critique et poète, vu également la vogue des discussions sur la poésie à l'époque d'*Al-mudiha*, enfin, vu le terme bien vague de *risala* (dont l'acception la plus générale est "lettre") et vu le contenu même du texte, il est normal que celui-ci soit considéré comme un traité de poésie, un ouvrage de critique littéraire, une "lettre" qui se voit qualifiée par ses origines auctoriales (*Al-risala al-Hatimiyya*), par son mode (lorsque le texte est appelé "dialogue", "débat", "dispute", "querelle"), par sa virulence tonale (*jabha* veut dire "champ de bataille", "front de bataille") ou encore, et bien évidemment, par l'épithète du titre (*al-mudiha*, celle qui dévoile et révèle, celle qui lacère et met l'os à nu).

Cependant, Wen-chin Ouyang fait ressortir qu'*Al-risala al-mudiha* est au moins partiellement fictive, qu'elle imite les poèmes "épiques" d'al-Mutanabbi (et, en particulier, son "ode" sur la victoire de Sayf al-Dawla contre le domestique byzantin) tout en les critiquant, qu'elle les récrit tout en les déconstruisant. Elle en défie et concurrence la poésie par sa prose. Elle est mélodramatique dans ses contrastes et ses polarités, ses exagérations et ses excès. Elle représente l'esthétique, l'éthique, la politique même dont elle émerge. Elle attend des lecteurs qui en garantiront la survie. Si *Al-risala al-mudiha*

est une lettre, c'est également un exemple de belles-lettres; si c'est un ouvrage de critique, c'est également un texte littéraire; si c'est un débat ou une discussion, c'est également une fiction, une parodie, un *tarassul* (ou "réfection" et surpassement en prose d'un poème) ou encore une sorte de mélodrame. Quant à la mission du texte, elle ne consiste pas seulement (ou pas tellement) à dégager les faiblesses poétiques et personnelles d'al-Mutanabbi ou à conduire une enquête sur la poésie. Il s'agit aussi pour *Al-mudiha* de mettre fin, par la force de sa prose, à l'empire artistique et culturel de la poésie et, tout bien considéré, de garantir sa propre immortalité.

Outre qu'elle illumine des aspects négligés d'*Al-mudiha* et qu'elle éclaire le milieu culturel (seigneurs et courtisans, protecteurs et protégés, mécènes et artistes) dont provient le texte, l'étude de Wen-chin Ouyang en souligne la multigénéricité ainsi que l'abondance des éléments textuels ou contextuels—forme, ton, sujet, origine—à la base de cette multigénéricité. De plus, elle rappelle que les conventions de lecture, les postulats critiques, les présupposés interprétatifs constituent en partie le texte à interpréter ou à commenter. Notre vocabulaire, notre terminologie même n'est pas sans jouer un rôle dans ce processus et c'est d'ailleurs ainsi que j'expliquerais la profusion de guillemets employés par l'auteur. L'exploration de Wen-chin Ouyang soulève aussi plus ou moins directement beaucoup d'autres questions sur les textes, la littérature, les taxinomies ou les appréciations qui en dépendent. J'aimerais donc en poser quelques-unes de façon explicite.

Récit, parodie, traité poétique, débat, *Al-risala al-mudiha*, comme tous les textes sans doute, relève de plusieurs genres; mais, peut-être comme la plupart des textes, *Al-mudiha* ne va pas sans dominante générique. Quels sont alors les facteurs qui déterminent celle-

ci? Dans quelle mesure le paratexte générique ou bien les commentaires péritextuels de l'auteur (préface, postface, mémoires, interviews) devraient-ils gouverner l'interprétation?

D'autre part, jusqu'à quel point la parodie, en ce qu'elle repose sur l'exagération, la caricature, l'excès, est-elle toujours mélodramatique et pourrait-on s'interroger pareillement sur la critique littéraire, qui met tel trait en relief et non tel autre, insiste sur certaines qualités tout en gardant le silence sur certains défauts et dramatise pour mieux convaincre? (En d'autres termes, votre étude est-elle mélodramatique?)

Enfin, vous soulignez à quel point le texte d'al-Hatimi est un texte pluriel. Cette qualité lui est-elle relativement spécifique à son époque ou non?

Réponse de Wen-chin Ouyang : - Subject to Reading: Writing, Reading and the Production of Meaning

The paper I have written, above, is the manifestation of an anxiety attack about interpreting texts, about the reading process and the production of meaning. How do I, as a reader born and raised in the second half of the twentieth century, the present, understand a tenth century text, the past? Does the meaning I find in a tenth century text faithful to or even appropriate to what the author meant or what his audience understood? What tools do I have that will allow me to come as close as possible to the meaning of a text as meant, or dare I say intended, and understood when it was first written and made available to its public? What are my handicaps, the things that prevent me from getting there?

I want to start by drawing attention to the 'subject', to the involvement of who we are in the process of reading. Putting aside that I am a product of the twentieth century—that my reading habits are shaped by the priorities and strategies of reading prevalent in the twentieth century, I am also conditioned by my objectives and experience in reading tenth century texts. As a consumer of literature, I read literature for pleasure and find in it contemporary meanings. As a historian, I want to know the past. I want to know what life was like and what the texts from the period can tell us about this life. And as a critic, I am interested in the structure of a literary text, its narrative trajectories, and semiotic networks in order to interrogate the relations between discourse and meaning, or the way we use language in order to impart messages.

In my experience as a reader of texts produced in cultures not my own, whether we think of cultural differences in terms of history, geography or worldview, the interpretive process must begin with/from a text. My training in a particular methodological system tells me to look for clues in the text that would lead me to the first step towards an accurate and appropriate interpretation of the text and its context. These clues come in many forms. I start with paratexts, such as generic designations found in the text itself or commentaries on the text, title of the text, a string of adjectives describing the text, and the author, particularly the author-function that may be reconstructed from adjacent sources: autobiographies, biographies, histories, and/or *adab* anthologies. There is, in addition, the 'introduction' to the text by the author where the authorial intention is stated and explained. I then look at a set of other adjacent texts from the same period or later periods which classify the text or engage with it in such a way that prompt a kind of recognition in me and that would help me to locate the text in a

particular literary field. I finally turn to a body of theories that would enable me to derive in a conceptually disciplined fashion meaning out of the structure of the text, its narrative and its sign system.

My initial reading of al-Hatimi's *Al-risala al-mudiha* as a treatise on al-Mutanabbi's poetry and a work of literary criticism is grounded in the methodological priorities and strategies prevalent in the field of Arabic literary studies in the Arab world, Europe and North America. It is premised on, on the one hand, what is known about al-Hatimi from contemporary and later sources. He has been critically assessed as a minor poet but an important commentator on poetry. His major works that have come down to us are all discussions of poetry. My reading is also based on, on the other hand, the subject matter of the work. *Al-mudiha* is focused on the plagiarism in the poetry of al-Mutanabbi and its shortcomings, including grammatical errors, prosodic irregularities, and semantic oddities. This kind of methodological consistency, necessarily framed by a particular ideology governing reading texts for the purpose of deriving knowledge about a linguistic, geographical, historical or cultural other, allows for generalization about a body of texts out of whose plurality common impulses, objectives, concerns, features and conclusions may be deduced. The discussion of poetry in the tenth century, based on a reading guided by a specific set of priorities and strategies, one understandably concludes, focused on narrow technicalities.

This reading is, from a certain perspective, problematic. It ignores the text's attentiveness to literariness,[1] its own literariness that finds expression in what it considers

literary artifice: hyperbole or exaggeration (*ghuluww* or *mubalagha*),[1] or what I have termed melodrama. It privileges 'content' over 'form', one may say, and does not take into consideration the melodramatic prologue and epilogue that frame the four debates between al-Hatimi and al-Mutanabbi on al-Mutanabbi's poetry in particular and Arabic poetry in general. These four debates, as narrated by al-Hatimi, are highly theatrical and equally melodramatic. Al-Mutanabbi, to those who are versed in his poetic persona derived from generations of reading and writing about him, is more often than not uncharacteristically stunned into silence by al-Hatimi's intellectual prowess, critical acumen and linguistic dexterity. The treatise reads like a play made up of four acts. The fictive mode of the discourse in this treatise alerted me to the unreliability of our current assessment of it as literary criticism reducible to a trend, a school, a culture. It needs re-reading. I, again, started from the very beginning.

I re-examined paratexts, looking at *rasala* as a possible generic designation and when that proved unhelpful, I turned to the series of adjectives qualifying it found in comments made by the author in the work and by his critics in other sources. A careful examination of these qualifiers in the context of the discussion of this work in the sources makes is possible for us to have a glimpse of a possible history of the work. In addition, each of the qualifiers used by the author and his critics to identify this *risala—mudiha*, *mukhataba*, *munazara*, *jabha*, or even *mu'arada*—sheds light on some but differing

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[1]Geert Jan Van Gelder discusses briefly some literary dimensions in his forthcoming piece on 'Literary Criticism as Literature', *The Evolution of Artistic Classical Arabic Prose*, ed. Behmardi and Behzadi (publisher?).

[1]For a summary of al-Hatimi's discussion of *ghuluww* and *mubalagha* in *Al-mudiha*, see Amidu Sanni, 'The Historic Encounter between al-Mutanabbi and al-Hatimi:

dimensions of the work. It is less clear, however, what the generic dominant may be at present. *Mudiha* is clearly unique to this work. *Munazara* (debate), very similar to *mukhataba* (dialogue or discussion), may be another possibility, for these were two popular forms that structured teaching and learning, as well as scholarly exchanges, at the time. To what extent do these forms structure writing and give it meaning will have to wait until further research is done. *Jabha* may be unique to this work as well, but it may also be linked to *mu'arada*, therefore, *tarassul*, and allows us to locate the discourse of *Al-mudiha* in terms of its relation to poetry, and see the literary field from a broader perspective. In this literary field, poetry and prose interact and compete for attention, cultural power, even dominance. *Al-mudiha*'s intertextuality with al-Mutanabbi's poetry, especially his 'ode' on the siege of al-Hadath, it is possible to argue, is one manifestation of the tensions strife in this literary field. Poetry and Prose, it is also possible to argue, are two cultural institutions embodying art and scholarship that vie with each other for livelihood in a culture defined and structured by its system(s) of patronage. The hyperbolic fictive mode of *Al-mudiha*, or its melodramatism, seen from this perspective, comes to be a performance of an existential crisis promulgated by the loss of meaning, or meaningfulness, in a hedonistic world where a patron's pleasure may mean life or death for an author, a work. In such a world, the search for memorability, a sign of immortality, is acted out in a text that interrogates its own hedonism. Is meaning possible in such a text, in its engagement with other texts, in its interrogation of the world that brought it into existence?

Its Contribution to the Discourse on *Ghuluww* (Hyperbole) in Arabic Literary Theory', *Journal of Arabic Literature* 35: 2 (2004), 159-174.

My reading of *Al-mudiha* as search for meaning and meaningfulness is, however, plagued by uncertainties compounded by two equally possible and substantiated readings. More poignantly, the distances—linguistic, geographical, historical, ideological, epistemological, ontological, cultural, to name but a few—that separate the reader from the writer make it impossible for the reader to master the details of the event the writer performs in his text and, more importantly, the choices he made in the construction of the text. The readerly text, my interpretation, is a narrative construction of a number of choices I have made about what clues to pick up from the writerly text(s) and how to read them, including taking at face value the author's peritextual comments and theoretical insights borrowed from Barthes, Brooks and Attridge. The rhetorical drums sounded by al-Hatimi in *Al-mudiha* are sufficient ground for dismissing his peritextual comments, and Barthes, Brooks and Attridge may easily be replaced by, for example, Bakhtin and my interpretation could have easily gone into a 'carnivalesque' direction. Is my reading of *Al-mudiha* as a readerly text of al-Mutanabbi, then, is al-Hatimi's reading or mine? Is it at all possible to distinguish between al-Hatimi's readerly text and my own, al-Hatimi's writerly text from my readerly text, or al-Mutanabbi's writerly text from al-Hatimi's readerly text? Is my interpretation of *Al-mudiha* as a search for meaning a performance of my own search for meaning in a text caught in a labyrinth of a complex network of writerly and readerly texts?

The interpretive path I have chosen is in part made up of a set of identifiable and accountable priorities and strategies and in another part of instinctual choices that are unpredictable and undisciplined. The hegemony of subject in my reading ought to be instructive. Al-Hatimi's reading of al-Mutanabbi must have been equally determined by

the hegemony of his subject. The workings of a subject are, thus far, impossible to theorize. Under such circumstances, any reading, marked by two sets of impulses, one predictable with a discipline of knowledge and another utterly wily, is necessarily and inevitably manifestation of the subject that is situated in here and now; it is premised on grappling with the present, a particular instance of the present, not knowledge of the past. Any meaning derived from this kind of uncertainty is at best tentative. More important, it is located in the ways in which a readerly text reconstructs the writerly text and performs not the event of the writerly text but that of its reconstruction, of the readerly text. Meaning is produced in the performance and as such it is singular, unrepeatable; my next reading of *Al-mudiha* will certainly be different. Conditioned as I am to search for meaning and the certainty of this meaning, my reading is unavoidably melodramatic. While it acts out the existential crisis provoked by an epistemological impasse—when truth, imprisoned in a text and its language, is subject to reading—it also does its best to convince less the other but more the self that meaning is possible, that there is such a thing as truth, and that certainty is within grasp.