

Visual Listening to 'Alā' 'Abd al-Hādī's *Sīrat al-Mā'* or [*Water Epic*] (1998)

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ABSTRACT: *Sīrat al-Mā'* [*Water Epic*] (1998) is an open work in which 'Alā' 'Abd al-Hādī does not attempt to create a definitive order, but deliberately leaves the arrangement of the constituent parts of the volume fluid to allow readers to create multiple possible orders. Underlining is used to create two completely different con/texts that break into thirty-two articulations, thus creating a decentralized work that allows readers the freedom of composition and invites an infinite number of readings. The poet's contravention of poetry conventions is exemplified in innovating a unique print, avoiding meter, mixing genres, arranging words in an unusual manner, shifting point of view, deviating at the phonological, graphological, lexical, syntactic and discourse levels, crossing cultures and deferring meaning. Through its formal properties, which radically contravene established conventions of poetry writing, *Sīrat al-Mā'* represents a postmodern view of the world as senseless, disordered, and fragmented. In this paper, an attempt is made to listen visually to the form and structure of this open work and reflect on its transdisciplinary nature that inextricably mixes the auditory and the visual.

KEYWORDS: counterpoint, open work, print hypertext, visual listening

INTRODUCTION

The thematic title of *Sīrat al-Mā'* [*Water Epic*], signals its fluid structure. Like water, the volume flows smoothly taking no shape but its container, the reader. Literally as well as metaphorically, *Sīrat al-Mā'* is a "work in movement," in Umberto Eco's own words (1989, p. 12). 'Alā' 'Abd al-Hādī does not attempt to create a definitive order, but deliberately leaves the arrangement of the constituent parts of the volume fluid to allow readers to create multiple possible orders. *Sīrat al-Mā'* is thus a plurivocal work in which a multitude of different meanings coexist, and none can be said to be the dominant one. It is "its deliberate disorganization, its improbability in relation to a precise system of probability—which makes it so much more informative" (Eco, 1989, p. 54).

‘Abd al-Hādī’s contravention of poetry conventions, exemplified in innovating a unique print, avoiding meter, mixing genres, arranging words in an unusual manner, shifting point of view, deviating at the phonological, graphological, lexical, syntactic and discourse levels, crossing cultures and deferring meaning, requires “visual listening” (‘Abd al-Hādī, 2009 p. 91), an oxymoron which is a natural corollary of another oxymoron, prose poetry whose aesthetics depends less on traditional rhyme and rhythm, and more on the formation of words, their arrangement on the page, pauses and unusual punctuation; that is, on graphological, typographical and orthographic devices that require visual listening.

Structure

The volume is divided into three books: “Identity,” “Beginnings” and “Resurrection.” In the first book, ‘Abd al-Hādī contravenes conventions of poetry writing through dividing the page typographically into texts horizontally titled “Confessions” and footnotes horizontally titled “Identity”. Deviation is also evident on the graphological level: every two pages, the text font decreases by 2 points and the footnote increases by 2 points until the footnotes are foregrounded and turn into texts and the texts slip into the background as footnotes upon reaching the action verb “dawns”:

Texts (22 – 20 – 18 – 16 – 14 – 12)

Footnotes (12 – 14 – 16 – 18 – 20 – 22)

The main texts and footnotes can be read consecutively, or the main texts can be read first and then the footnotes. The same goes for the parallel texts and footnotes, that have a dialectic relationship with the main texts and footnotes. The second book titled “Beginnings” is divided into three alternating sections: The first two, “You” and “People,” are horizontally titled and numbered; the third, “Flood,” is vertically titled and numbered. The unique print of this book typographically subverts the duality characteristic of printed books, adding a third page to represent the three voices – the epic, the dramatic and the lyric – that are heard side by side. The reader is given the choice to visually listen to each voice separately or to all three voices using the split/joint and montage reading strategies. Again, there is a main text and a parallel one, which allows for six different ways of reading this book.

The third book titled “Resurrection” is divided into seven days of the week starting with Saturday and ending with Friday. Each day is preceded by a page titled “Resurrection,” so it can be read consecutively or in a zigzag manner. Once more there is a main text and a parallel one, which allows for four different ways of reading this book. The book ends with a blank page, thus signaling its open ending. *Sīrat al-Mā’* is thus an example of a printed hypertext that looks like “a tree whose twigs are tangled in a way that allows for billions of possible readings from which each reader can choose whatever s/he wants for her/his own text” (‘Abd al-Hādī, 2009, pp. 196-7).

In the present volume, ‘Abd al-Hādī deserts traditional meters and follows instead a musical composition known as counterpoint. First used by Jean de Muris, a celebrated 14th C. musical theorist, counterpoint is “an approach to musical composition based on the independence and interdependence of melodies” (Collins, 2017, p. i). When notes are set against other notes, the result is either “consonance,” creating repose, or “dissonance,” creating tension (p. 14). Simple counterpoint is composed by adding a counterpoint to a *cantus firmus*, a short diatonic passage of whole notes used as a subject for counterpointal treatment. Double, triple and quadruple counterpoints are convertible counterpoints in two, three, or four parts (pp. 16, 42). Four types of motion are possible in counterpoint: parallel motion, when the two parts move in the same direction by the same numerical interval, similar motion, when the two parts move in the same direction by different intervals, contrary motion, when the two parts move in opposite directions, and oblique motion, when one part moves while the other remains stationary (p. 16). In *Sīrat al-Mā’*, ‘Abd al-Hādī uses counterpoint throughout the text by creating a parallel text that is independent from and interdependent on the main one, thus creating two variants competing for the reader's visual listening: the *cantus firmus* c.f., and the counterpoint c.p. The result is a multilayered work whose meaning is constantly deferred: synchronically, the reader cannot listen visually to one variant without listening to the accompanying variant; diachronically, the reader cannot exhaust the possible readings that extend *ad infinitum*.

Paratextual Elements (Peritext):

According to Gerard Genette, paratextual elements refer to those liminal devices and conventions which mediate the work to the reader: they exist both within the book (peritext), such as titles and subtitles, pseudonyms, forewords, dedications, epigraphs, prefaces, intertitles, notes, epilogues, and afterwords, and outside it (epitext) in the form of critics’ reviews, interviews with the author or any other commentary (1997b). In so far as the volume under study is concerned, only the peritext will be analyzed.

To begin with, the volume has two titles, *Sīrat al-Mā’* [*Water Epic*] and *Asfār min Nobu’at al-Mawt* [*Books of the Death Prophecy*], which are, in William Empson’s own terms, “effective in several ways at once” (1949, p. 2). First, the word *Sīrat*, derived from *sayr* which indicates movement, is a polysemous word that has several connected meanings: “course, manner, life story or epic” (Almaany, n.d.). As for *al-Mā’*, it has both a denotative and connotative meaning: water and semen. The ambiguity of these words conveys several meanings. Defined by Empson as “any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language,” (1949, p. 1) ambiguity is classified into seven types. The main title *Sīrat al-Mā’* is ambiguous in four different ways that parallel the counterpoint structure: if the word *Sīrat* is taken to mean course or manner, there are two possible interpretations: at one level, it literally signifies the water course that takes no specific shape, which metaphorically describes the structure of the present volume; at another, it signifies the course of semen inside the womb, which is the source of humankind. If the word *Sīrat* is taken to mean life story, there are again two levels of meaning:

at one level, it refers to the historical formation of water or all the past events connected with it; at another, it refers to the historical event of man's creation. The main title is thus an instance of at least four types of ambiguity: the first type because *al-Mā'* is used metaphorically, the second type because two or more alternative interpretations of *Sīrat al-Mā'* are used as one, the third type because two unconnected meanings of the lexical-semantic pun, *al-Mā'*, are given simultaneously, and the sixth type because, in its meaning as life story, *Sīrat* appears to be irrelevant to *al-Mā'* (Empson, 1949).

Similarly ambiguous is the subtitle, *Asfār min Nobu'at al-Mawt* [*Books of the Death Prophecy*], which refers both to the prophecy of Israel's death and the future annihilation of the human race. The ambiguity here results from the metaphorical use of prophecy. Seemingly contradictory, the main title recounts past events, while the latter predicts future ones. Upon reflection, however, the two titles turn out to be interdependent, just like the two parts of the counterpoint, for life and death form a cycle, a truth the allusion to the title of the previous volume, *Books of the Hidden Death Prophecy*, and the repetition of the subtitle on the back cover seem to emphasize. The ambiguity here belongs to the second type because two interpretations are resolved into one (Empson, 1949, p. 48).

The text written on the back cover emphasizes the life cycle, and the creation of living creatures from the dead, it reads:

And we sprout like the bean shoot
when breaking out of water,
dressing latency with latency.
Thus, you were under the sky cracks
so they narrate instead of/about you
when clay embraces you
and sheds your mighty drizzle! ('Abd al-Hādī, 1998)

Like the bean shoot, man is created from a seed, semen. However, the image drawn here is not only figurative but also literal: the fetus first takes the shape of a bean shoot. The text contrasts the creation of humans out of water with the creation of Adam out of clay, but are they really different? In fact, they are not. Clay is formed as a result of rain drizzles and so is the human fetus. The ambiguity here belongs to the second type because two interpretations are resolved into one (Empson, 1949, p. 48). The word narrate refers back to the main title, *Sīrat al-Mā'*, a volume which narrates in an elevated style the great historical events of man's creation. As Bahā' El-Dīn Mazīd notes, the text summarizes the main theme of the volume and points to its style through shifting the point of view from the first-person plural "We sprout like the bean shoot" to the third person singular "breaking out," and finally to the second person singular: "Thus, you were under the sky cracks." (2016, para. 1).

The volume starts with an introduction and ends with a table of contents: the introduction is imbued with different quotes from religious and non-religious sources including - *The Acts of the Apostles*, David's *Psalms*, ibn Ḥazm's and ibn Manzūr's works, ibn 'Aṭā Allāh al-Judhami al-Iskandarī's *Book of Wisdom* and Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Unpredictably, however, the table of contents is followed by a quotation from the bible that emphasizes the future death prophecy of Israel while stating the historical event of the Israelite 430-year stay in Egypt: "Now the time that the children of Israel dwelt in Egypt was four hundred and thirty years" (*Exodus* 12: 40). By underlining a few words in the text, the poet thus offers his reader two alternative readings of the grand religious narrative: the future death prophecy and the historical event of the Israelite stay in Egypt. Using the stylistic device of oxymoron, the poet asserts that the Israelite stay was exodus, thus confirming the truth of the death prophecy of Israel. However, the games of the *homo ludens* poet do not end there. After reaching the final page that lists the poet's works, the reader is surprised to see one final footnote in which the poet wonders: "*How can I separate signifiers from their signified?" ('Abd al-Hādī, 1998). The question implies the poet's unsuccessful attempt at separating signifiers from their signified and creating an open work that is self-reflexive. But is it true that the poet has not achieved this goal? The following analysis proves that he has undoubtedly reached this goal and succeeded in his quest.

Analysis

From the very beginning and throughout the text, 'Abd al-Hādī follows a technique he calls "genre apostrophe" which takes the shape of mixing or merging different constituents so that they cannot be separated without destroying the whole text, in contrast to combining, the integration of different constituents and the possibility of separating them ('Abd al-Hādī, 2009, pp. 100 - 3). In so doing, 'Abd al-Hādī contravenes the conventions of poetry writing and follows those of other genres. Following the conventions of religious texts, he divides his volume into books titled "Books of the Death Prophecy." Following the conventions of nonliterary works, he quotes Arab and Western writers, borrows dictionary entries, and uses footnotes and illustrations, the most concrete form of intertextuality according to Genette (1997a, p. 2). Following the conventions of drama, he uses dialogue. Following the conventions of music, he uses counterpoint for composition. Thus, he succeeds in crossing cultural boundaries and creating a collage that seems to be heterogeneous but turns out to be perfectly homogeneous and coherent. The question is: Why is *Sīrat al-Mā'* classified as poetry despite its different genres? The answer to this question lies in what 'Abd al-Hādī's calls "poetic bloc," defined as the topography or landscape of a given genre which remains stable regardless of the different features that might be borrowed from various literary or artistic genres.

In *Sīrat al-Mā'*, the relationship between the host genre of poetry and the guest genres highlighted below is one of dissonance, creating a sense of alienation and ambiguity characteristic of open works. Thus, 'Abd al-Hādī starts his work with a quote from (*The Acts of the Apostles* 7:11): "But a famine came upon Egypt and Canaan. There was great misery, and our ancestors ran out of food"

(‘Abd al-Hādī, 1998, p. 1). To further increase the informativity of the work and fluidity of its meaning, the poet offers a misreading of the religious text by underlining certain words. Thus, in addition to the established fact that famine overtook the whole land of Egypt and Canaan and led to great suffering during Moses' time, ‘Abd al-Hādī highlights another fact: That our ancestors occupied the land of Egypt and Canaan. Thus, he makes the reader's attention oscillate between the historical event of famine that resulted from the dryness of the river, and the glory of our ancestors. Next, the poet borrows the following dialogue from the genre of drama:

You are Action & Beginnings

How can I steal fire? (‘Abd al-Hādī, 1998, p. 1)

This dialogue is surmised to be taking place between the poet and the reader. Playing on the word *fi'l* which signifies in Arabic both “a verb,” a part of speech which expresses existence, action, or occurrence, and “action,” which involves movement and time, the poet confirms the reader’s ability to make meaning. Allah Almighty taught Adam all names, but a text cannot be created of names alone; it needs verbs. The reader is the verb that is indispensable for the creation of meaning. Without the reader, there can be no poetry, only a meaningless string of words. The reader is also an action that can make change in time. The question the poet asks is culturally significant: He would like to know how to steal the fire from the gods as Prometheus did and gave it to humanity. In Greek mythology, Prometheus is credited with the creation of humans from clay as well as authorship of arts and sciences. As a punishment from the gods, he was sentenced to eternal torment. Thus, he came to stand for the lone genius who is destined to suffer for his attempts at improving humanity. The poet thus predicts to have the same fate of Prometheus as a punishment for his endeavor to make people see the world afresh through his original poetry that resists established conventions of poetry writing, and skillfully interwoven structure that mixes different genres. Theft of fire takes the form of borrowing from predecessors in this volume.

The poet proceeds to quote from (*Exodus* 10:13). Again, ‘Abd al-Hādī plays with the quote giving it a title, “Events,” and underlining words that offer readers a misreading of the religious text, in Bloom's own terms, thus subverting the grand religious narrative and inviting them to question their strongly held beliefs and fight out their biases.

Events:

When morning arrived, the east wind had brought the locusts. And the locusts swarmed over the whole land of Egypt, ... devoured every plant in the fields and all the fruit on the trees that had survived the hailstorm. Not a single leaf was left on ... the land of Egypt. (‘Abd al-Hādī, 1998, p. 3)

In the Old Testament, God punished Egypt with ten plagues when the Pharaoh refused to set Israelites free. Among these plagues was the hail, that struck down all the crops, and locusts, that swallowed up all the remaining fruits, thus bringing about destruction and annihilation. The poet, however, chooses to accent a completely different event, that of water course which is the source of life on earth, starting with the wind that carried the clouds which grew fruits on the trees when they fell on earth in the form of rain. Water is thus present despite, or rather, by virtue of its absence from the text.

To prepare the reader for the topography of the first book titled "Identity," the poet violates the topographical conventions of Arabic poetry and borrows the convention of non-literary books instead. Thus, he divides the page into a text, in which he quotes a famous Arab writer, ibn Ḥazm, and a footnote, which provides a dictionary definition of the Arabic word *naṣṣ* [text].

I am fond of the text

I seek none but it

Nor do I reluctantly defend it. (Ibn Ḥazm al-Andalusī)

Texere "to weave, to fabricate, to make; make wicker or wattle framework."

Textus "woven fabric, cloth; framework, structure; web; method of plaiting/joining."

In Medieval Latin, *textus* came to refer to "the Books, text, treatise."

In the late 14th C., *text* came to mean "The wording of anything written [is its end]". ('Abd al-Hādī, 1998, p. 5)

Although the text is borrowed from ibn Ḥazm al-Andalusī, the voice is that of the poet emphasizing his fondness of writing. Just as specialized terminology is defined in a footnote in non-literary books, the poet provides a definition for the word *naṣṣ*. When translating this footnote, the etymology of the English word "text," which comes from the Latin verb "Texere" meaning "to weave, to fabricate, to make; make wicker or wattle framework," and the Latin noun "Textus" meaning "woven fabric, cloth; framework, structure; web; method of plaiting/joining" (*Online Etymology Dictionary*, 2022) was provided. The etymological meaning aptly suits the present volume which figures as a texture woven of multiple strings none of which can be said to be the dominant one. The evolution of the meaning of the word *text* from weaving in Latin to the modern sense of "wording" took place in the late 14th C. The parallel words, "The wording [is its end]." reflects 'Abd al-Hādī's view of poetry as a literary genre that aims through its wording at creating wonder rather than conveying meaning. Poetry is fundamentally self-reflexive: signifiers harken back to themselves implying a series of meanings that expand at every new look, thus offering a miniature image of the universe.

Crossing cultures, 'Abd al-Hādī borrows from Barnabas, one of the twelve apostles who wrote about Christian origins in a way that conforms to Islamic views and contradicts the teachings of Christianity in the New Testament. 'Abd al-Hādī writes: "Verily I say unto you; naught is more perilous than speech. For so said Solomon: 'Life and death are in the power of the tongue'" ('Abd

al-Hādī, 1998, p. 7). The wisdom here is changed by the poet who shifts emphasis from speech to life, thus reminding the reader of the death prophecy, which constitutes the title of the three books. Simultaneously, the borrowed text is set in contrast with writing, which constitutes the main theme of the first book. Unlike writing, which is described as a capital for harmonious living, speech is described as the most perilous because, as Solomon says: “life and death are in the power of the tongue” (p. 7). Indeed, a death sentence is uttered by the tongue; likewise, an acquittal decree is issued verbally. Writing, on the other hand, is a wide capital inhabited by people from different cultural backgrounds, but it allows them all to live harmoniously together.

Next, the poet borrows from Sufi Writer ibn `Ata 'Allah al-Iskandarī the following wisdom: “The most ignorant of all people is the one who abandons the certitude he has for an opinion people have” (p. 7). Again, ‘Abd al-Hādī offers his readers a misreading of the borrowed text that seems to contradict ibn `Ata ‘Allah’s wisdom that one should not trade what one is certain of for what other people think is right. ‘Abd al-Hādī emphasizes that isolation from people is a sign of ignorance. To further confound the reader, the poet addresses his own wisdom to his people as if it were a quote, he writes: “The difference between the wise and the ignorant is that the former argues for an opinion while the latter discusses facts!” (p. 7). The contradiction between the main text and the parallel one obviously gives the reader the choice of belief. In other words, ‘Abd al-Hādī imitates religious texts only to deconstruct their grand narrative. No longer do religious texts espouse an ideology or exercise power over readers in *Sīrat al-Mā’*.

‘Abd al-Hādī skillfully uses Dante’s *Divine Comedy* as a prelude to introduce the Sufi poet and his guiding Sheikh. The Sheikh guides the Sufi out of the abyss and asks him to follow in his footsteps and keep climbing the mountain until they find a cognizant guide. The Sufi poet starts his “Confessions” typed in 20 pts. with a comment on writing followed by a reflection on the four elements in the footnote titled “Identity” and typed in 12 pts. He writes:

Writing is a capital for harmonious living
Opened by bloodshed .. a storm blowing through the vein
Absurdity ignites two embers:
An ember .. catches with the fishing rod of pain.. a lake for memories;
an ember .. sets fire
on a hill of emptiness.
Fire:
People are its fuel
a weak spot for ashes
so who will kindle warmth for fire
and pour wake in its eyeballs?
Water:
And we made from water a wound

anointing its vessel with features.

How often did the skies bathe in it without a wash?

So who will remove water impurity? (p. 11)

The main text and footnote represent the outer parts of the counterpoint while the parallel text and footnote represent the inner parts. The Sufi poet says: "Writing is a capital that brings people closer." However, capitals are not opened peacefully, but through shedding blood; just as blood gushes out of the veins of warriors, it flows like a raging storm (which brings in the element of air) through the veins of writers, thus confirming the traditional metaphor that compares a pen to a gun. The act of writing catches faraway memories to create an oasis out of pain (which brings in the element of water), or inflame feelings and set an empty hill (which brings in the element of earth) on fire. As for the main footnote, it reflects on the two seemingly contradictory elements of fire and water. Using logos, it provides a definition of fire and describes men as its fuel; indeed, men's corpses turn into coal after millions of years. Then it borrows part of the Quranic verse "And we made from water every living thing" ('Al-Anbiyā', verse 30) but changes every living thing into a wound: "And we made from water a wound." The wound is no more than man himself who is made when semen turns into a clot of blood. The footnote asserts the impurity of man's water no matter how often the skies, or women, bathe in it. Despite the apparent contradiction between the two elements of fire and water, the footnote emphasizes their unity: man is created from water and turns into a fuel for fire.

Not only the two elements of fire and water, but all four elements emerge as interconnected as the four parts of the quadruple counterpoint composition. The definition of fire evokes the four elements: fire is fueled by people, who are made of earth. When they get burnt, they turn into ashes; that is, they return to their original form, earth. The poet-cum-musician wonders: if all people turn to ashes, who will keep the fire ablaze? Wes the verb "ignite," he calls to mind the element of air that is necessary for keeping fire burning. The verb "pour," on the other hand, calls to mind the element of water, but is unpredictably complemented by the noun "vigil" to denote the continuously raging fire. Thus, all four elements are united into one whole. Likewise, the description of water evokes the four elements simultaneously: man is created out of water. In the first phase of creation, the fetus is nothing but a wound. In the next phase, this wound is covered by features. In English, the word "features" can either refer to terrain or human features; thus, its two senses evoke earth. (In Arabic too, the word *taḍārīs* can either refer to terrain or human features; however, since the second sense is less common, the poet uses *khaṣā's* an interjection to guide readers to/ or divert their attention from the terrain sense he means). The poet then reflects on the evaporation of water and the formation of clouds in the skies that cannot happen without the heat of the sun, i.e., the element of fire. No matter how the skies bathe in water, they are never clean. In Islam, cleanliness from *Janāba* or preclusion, which arises from sexual intercourse, seminal emission, menstruation, and childbirth, requires intending to perform lustration. Mere bathing does not render a precluded person clean or ritually capable. Intention, therefore, is an

important condition in ritual purity. Similarly, the writer's intention is what turns a mere sequence of words into a work of art. Suddenly, one realizes that the two contradictory goals of writing, recalling a soothing memory and inflaming feelings, as well as the two seemingly opposite elements of nature, fire and water, are one and the same. The two outer parts of the counterpoint that seem at first glance dissonant and independent turn out to be consonant and interdependent. Upon reading the parallel text and footnote, however, a new meaning arises as the inner parts of the counterpoint have a dialectical relationship with the outer parts, or so it seems. While the outer parts compare the act of writing to opening capitals and emphasize that men unite all the four elements of fire, water, air and earth, the inner parts focus on the opening of capitals and the two elements of fire and water. Upon filtering the parallel text and footnote, the following emerges:

A capital Opened through

Absurdity:

An ember of pain;

an ember of emptiness.

Fire:

a weak spot

for fire

wake in its eyeballs?

Water:

from water

did the skies bathe? ('Abd al-Hādī, 1998, p. 11)

The emphasis in the parallel text is on the opening of capitals, an act which is described as absurd, painful, and empty of meaning. However, a trace of writing can still be seen/ heard when one listens visually to the parallel text. Eco describes this type of ambiguity characteristic of all open works as entropy, the measure of disorder, and emphasizes that as entropy increases, so does the informativity and the aesthetic value of the text. "In other words," Eco explains, *the information carried by a message is the negative of its entropy*" (1989, p. 51) Redundancy, on the other hand, is meant to "enrich the organization of a message and make its communication more probable (1989, p. 51).

In contrast to the main footnote, which presents the idea that men are made from water and turn into a fuel for fire, the parallel footnote asserts that fire hides blazing fire and that water is made from water. The apparent circulatory "fire: a weak spot for fire" and "water: from water" turn out to make perfect sense for nothing can hide fire but fire itself and rain is formed from the evaporation of sea water. Therefore, fire is always fed by fire and the skies bathe in water. However, a trace of the meaning of the main footnote remains; men still figure as a fuel for fire and the wound of water that makes it impure despite the times of bathing can still be seen. Despite their apparent contradiction, the inner and outer parts of the counterpoint are in fact complementary. They just need an attentive listener who does not get distracted by the different

voices that make up the musical composition but can listen visually to all four voices simultaneously. The reader has the choice to read the main text and footnote on the following page:

On the lung of the heart is a flower,
playing its double in a free life!
on a sheet of honey ..
A young boy, I plate wishes
with sheets of marble steps.
I go confined .. to a stream of mountains
whence fall virgin snakes
on the rats of my young heart.

Dust:

Wish we were ..
sand we breastfed our dreams
wherever it stretched
we built
our defeats on it.

Air:

It is running toward its stopping point
kindling in the universe a heart .. of space
and a lung of winds. (p. 12)

First the flower which plays its double in a free life is an allusion to Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857) that gave rise to the symbolist and modernist movements in France. A controversial volume of French poetry which deals with themes of decadence and suffering related to original sin, *Les Fleurs du mal* breaks with tradition, using suggestive images and unusual forms. Just as Baudelaire shifts “style from the rhetorical to the impressionistic, from the abstract to the intensely physical, ... balances banality and originality, the prosaic and the melodic, to emphasize the eternal interdependence of opposites” (Britannica 2018), so does ‘Abd al-Hādī in *Sirat al-Mā’*. The Sufi poet invokes the spirit of Baudelaire conveying information that is connected “to some *unusual and unpredictable non-order* ... containing within itself *all* probabilities and *none*” (Eco, 1989, p. 55). He tells about his green heart when he was a young boy full of shiny hopes and sweet dreams of a luxurious future towards which he would walk on marble steps. However, he soon found himself confined to a stream of mountains from which virgin snakes, i.e., young women, fell on his young heart eating it up. The mountains restricted the Sufi's movement and progress while the affairs with young women scared him. The main footnote reflects on the other two elements of earth and air. The Sufi wishes humans were made of sand which they fed with dreams and on which they built their defeats. He reflects on the air that is running to its stopping point, an allusion to the Quranic verse about the movement of the sun: "And the sun runs [on course] toward its

stopping point" (Yā-Sīn, 38). The Sufi reflects on the formation of space, which he regards as the heart of the universe, and the wind, which he considers as its lung. The air creates the heart and the lung of the universe, he thinks, thus tying the footnote to the text. To stimulate readers' visual listening, the text includes: oxymorons such as "the lung of the heart," "a sheet of honey," and "a stream of mountains," antonyms such as "free" and "confined," and repetitions such as "heart" and "sheet." To create unity, both text and footnote evoke the four elements: "the lung" and "the wind" evoke the air; "the stream" and "running" evoke water; "the mountains" and "the flower" evoke the earth while "defeats" evokes fire.

If the reader chooses to read the parallel text and footnote, i.e., the inner parts of the counterpoint, another meaning emerges that seems to contradict the meaning of the outer parts:

On the lung of the heart is

a sheet of wishes.

I go to mountains,

fall on my heart.

Dust:

Sand

We built on it.

Air:

Kindling space of winds. (p. 12)

The Sufi here emphasizes the wishes of the heart and his futile attempts at achieving them. He says that whenever he climbed mountains to fulfill his heart wishes, he fell, thus alluding to the myth of Sisyphus who was punished by Zeus for cheating death twice by having to endlessly roll a large boulder up a hill. The allusion thus enriches the main theme of death and endless suffering of man on earth. As for the parallel footnote, it focuses on building civilization and kindling winds, which cause rainfall and cultivation of the land. Thus, it contradicts both the parallel text, which emphasizes man's endless suffering and futile attempts at achieving his wishes, and the main footnote, emphasizing defeat and kindling of the heart. Upon deep reflection, however, the parallel text and footnote turn out to be consonant with the main text and footnotes. In the main text, the Sufi describes his wishes as shiny and his dreams as sweet; however, his confinement to a stream of mountains prevents him from reaching his dreams and lets young women eat his cowardly heart out. Likewise, the parallel text expresses the Sufi's inability to fulfill his wishes, albeit for a different reason, i.e., falling from the mountain. Similarly, the apparent contradiction between the main and parallel footnote is no more than reiteration of the same idea: it is defeat that drives men to build civilizations and it is the air that creates space and wind so that the universe can breathe, and the rain fall and cultivate the land.

Other possible readings of the first book include: reading the main texts only, reading the main footnotes only, reading the parallel texts only, reading the parallel footnotes only, reading the main

The second book titled "Beginnings" uses the technique of shifting point of view at the discourse level from the first-person plural "People" to the third person singular "Flood" to the second person singular "You," which addresses the reader, and back again to the first-person plural "People," thus emphasizing the circularity of life and death. Though apparently unrelated, the three sections are interrelated: the second person pronoun, Muhammad Samīr 'Abdul Salām notes, refers to a transcendental self that derives its spiritual energy from the roaring flooding water, and transcends the absence of individual voice in the context of the voice of the people (2015, p. 7). Each of the three intersecting sections consists of ten scenes: each section can be read separately or consecutively with the other sections. Thus "People" which uses the first-person plural tells the story of mankind who turned a deaf ear to Allah's messenger. 'Abd al-Hādī offers a misreading of the verse (*Deuteronomy* 9:4) as: "Instead, the LORD will drive out these nations before you because of their wickedness" ('Abd al-Hādī, 1998, p. 24). Instead of driving out the wicked nations that did not believe in God, 'Abd al-Hādī places them at a position before Allah's messenger. The second scene draws an image of the flow of years, which is reminiscent of water, and describes people's escape from God's message to erotic poetry. In the third scene, people confess all past historical sins, thus establishing unity with the confessions of the "Book of Identity," from crucifying Jesus to throwing Joseph down the well. 'Abd al-Hādī deconstructs the grand religious narrative about the king's dream that was interpreted by Joseph, peace be upon him, as a sign of seven years of prosperity followed by seven years of draught and suffering, this time through the following illustration that represents the circularity of the volume.

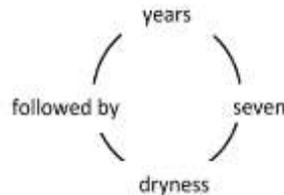


Figure 1 (p. 30)

The illustration points to the endless draught and suffering of mankind, thus bringing in the element of water despite its absence. In the fourth scene, 'Abd al-Hādī draws an image of roads wetting people; however, the image does not imply the presence of water, but sweat and toil. In the following scene, the toil is emphasized when people themselves turn into a road: "its cheeks are reddened by the multitude of passersby" (p. 36). The sixth and seventh scenes are characterized by draught: although there are a hundred fields, there is not even a single ear of wheat. People believe: "in the mud is the tiding of the ear of wheat" (p. 42), but the whole land is dry sand. In the eighth scene pure water is still lacking; in the ninth, axes are used for killing rather than cultivating lands. In the last scene, people imagine the land soaked with water: they draw a painting of windmills and feature themselves sowing grains of ray behind the cotton of eyes and sprouting "like the bean shoot/ when breaking out of water" (p. 51).

The next section titled "Flood" and written in the third person singular consists of ten scenes that describe the events of Noah's Flood. It starts with a scene that prepares the atmosphere for the impending disaster:

The wind is a service for tombs
and the horizon ... is a wolf.. howling .. in ambush
The moon face is pock-marked
and time towards you ... is a re-neighing night.
Space is narrowing down" (p. 25).

Through the parallel text created by underlining certain words, 'Abd al-Hādī offers a misreading of the following verse (*Genesis* 7.4): "The flood continued for forty days on the earth ... Every creature perished— those that crawl on the earth, birds, livestock, wildlife, and those that swarm on the earth, as well as all mankind ... Only Noah was left, and those that were with him in the ark" (p. 25). Contrary to the historical fact, the survivors of the flood are Noah's people. The following scene reiterates the image drawn in the section titled "People," thus creating consonance. It describes how the dark face of the earth has turned white, i.e., the fertile land turned into sandy cities where soil is not moistened by water and therefore, not suitable for agriculture. The following scene portrays the waste land, slowing of time and narrowing down of space. All seasons have turned into autumn, symbolizing death, and annihilation. The fourth scene returns to the description of the flood: Water is rising, filling out holes and stopping time. The fifth scene creates dissonance by portraying water as gathering every single wrinkle into a huge wave to rescue the grieved and prejudiced. In the sixth scene, water is seen gushing out of every crack of earth and the sky is hatching rain, thus forming an immense ocean. In the seventh scene, the flood genie wraps the round earth with water; nothing stands still; every living creature is hungry. In the eighth scene, the ship is sailing towards Noah who is facing the flood by calculating holes and burning them with distance matches, another oxymoron which conveys in an original manner the meaning of the banal expression burning distances, in contradiction to the religious narrative where Noah boards the ship with believers. In the ninth scene, the birds Noah sent out to bring him news about the other side of the earth return with mud under their wings, which means that the floodwater has receded. In the last scene, the people are crowded around an old well to drink from its fount of abundance. The message of the mud is now visible to everyone; shadows are fading because the sun has died out and the dark has wrapped the earth. The section ends with this instruction borrowed from the Quran: "Read in the name of your Lord" (Al-'Alaq, 1). However, it is the poet who addresses the reader of *Sīrat al-Mā'* and asks him to reconstruct history as s/he pleases.

The third section titled "You" is written in the second person singular and addresses the reader. However, the speaking persona, the Sufi, adopts the point of view of the first person singular. He speaks about rising to deliver Allah's message before reaching the age of forty, thus deconstructing the religious narrative. To establish unity with the whole volume, 'Abd al-Hādī quotes the

following text from *The Hymn to the Aten* in the footnote and offers a misreading of it by underlining certain words:

When you dispel darkness and you give forth your rays,
the two lands are in festival,
alert and standing on their feet,
now that you have raised them up.
They clean their bodies,
and put on their clothes;
their arms are <lifted> in praise at your rising. ('Abd al-Hādī, 1998, p. 26)

Addressing the reader, instead of Ra', 'Abd al-Hādī suggests the reader has power to effect change. In the second scene, the Sufi portrays himself when he was a kid. Again, there are two texts competing for the reader's attention: a main text and a parallel one. In the main text, the Sufi is "hiding the secret like the universe" (p. 29). What secret is it: the secret of man's creation? The Sufi never mentions. In the parallel text, the Sufi is hiding his revelation. The quote from *The Wisdom of Ibn `Ata `Allah* [2:102] placed in the footnote helps explain both texts: "And hardly do the external aspects of created beings display their charms than the voices of their inner realities call out, 'We are only a trial ...'" ('Abd al-Hādī, 1998, p. 29). The wisdom points to the importance of seeing through creatures rather than being deceived by their external appearance.

In the following two scenes, the Sufi speaks about his journey on earth unafraid of death. His vision outpaces his steps and flies away like birds. He extends his eyesight to the hills awaiting revelation; like David in (*David's Psalms* 121:1), he says: "I to the hills will lift mine eyes, from whence doth come mine aid" ('Abd al-Hādī, 1998, p. 35). In the fifth scene, the kid is seen collecting sun rays and fondling with his shadow. In the sixth scene, the Sufi has grown "like raw messages" (p. 41). Soon years pass by in the following scene: the Sufi is leaving and "eyes are looking up at the rustle of my clothes" (p. 44), which establishes consonance with Joseph's story in the section titled "People." Thanks to the use of the first person singular, the reader identifies with the Sufi and experiences the different phases of life firsthand. In a footnote, 'Abd al-Hādī quotes the famous saying of Sufi Sheikh 'Abdul 'Aziz al-Tabba' to Mohammad ibn 'Issa, Sheikh al-Harethi's *murid* or disciple: "Your sheikh purified your Dirham and did not print it for you, and unprinted currency is not accepted in the market, so I printed it for you" (p. 44). From a Sufi point of view, righteousness is not enough; a righteous man needs a sheikh, i.e., a guide to attain a high mystical rank. This is what happened to Mohammad ibn 'Issa, founder of 'Isawiyya, an Islamic mystical group, after following Sheikh 'Abdul 'Aziz al-Tabba'. In the eighth scene, the Sufi is saving steps, i.e., time on earth, and extending his wait into sails. He likens the ghosts he sees to the dove that blocked entrance of disbelievers into the cave where Prophet Muhammad and Abu Bakr were hiding. In other words, mysticism prevents him from accessing true religion. Again, he deconstructs religious narrative about the miracle of protecting Prophet Muhammad and Abu Bakr

by the spider's web woven at the entrance to the cave. Instead, the Sufi tells of “the spider shearing the wool of words into a garment for my fire” (p. 47). The image drawn by the Sufi contradicts that of religious narrative: instead of the spider weaving a web, it is shearing wool. Since wool is used to extinguish fire, the garment made from the wool of words is meant to hide the Sufi’s meaning. In the ninth scene, the Sufi figures as a messenger arriving from “a wrinkle on the forehead of departure” (p. 50). His miracle appears in “releasing the early wind to gain mastery” and “picking from the water berry the sway of waves” (p. 50). Again, the mention of berry alludes to the berry leaf that Adam and Eve used to hide their genitals after eating the forbidden fruit. As a messenger from God, the Sufi's voice is likened to the lion's roar and is meant to wash the voices of the people with daylight, i.e., to purify them. In the last scene, the Sufi again compares himself to Prophet Muhammad by suggesting turning his secret call into a public one. He says that resurrection has its signs, and he, as a prophet messenger who dispels people's fear, is one of these signs. Therefore, he is asking people to wait for his arrival.

The last book titled “Resurrection” immediately follows the Sufi's request, which signifies the approach of the day of Resurrection. The first page of this book creates consonance with *The Wisdom of Ibn `Ata `Allah* in the section titled “You,” warning people against being deceived by appearance because “a person who is disheveled/ and driven away from the doors of kingdoms/ may have a fulfilled wish” (p. 56). This person is understood to be no more than the Sufi himself who is described on “Saturday” as hidden, wise, and truthful. His silence is described as sacred, but he grinds it with his wisdom teeth, which deconstructs grand narratives about mystical characters. On Resurrection, people are scared, so the master advises the Sufi to paint his fingernails red as a cover so that they do not appear burnt from clutching ember. On Sunday, the master addresses the Sufi whose condensed words hide the Truth. He asks him not to be afraid when houses push him away and demolished homes turn into guiding blood. On Resurrection, the point of view shifts from the first-person plural that speaks about the misfortunes and agonies of the Sufi, to the first person singular that wonders about the reason behind his distress, to the second person singular who is described as honey, making room for purities to sprout among treachery. On Monday, the master addresses the night that “draws its tattoo on the morning womb” (p. 61) and wishes the obituary of its death counted the experiences of its sails. On Resurrection, people's mouths are full of the morning prophecy and the Sufi is calling for resurrection and his feet are biting orbits, i.e., the earth has stopped revolving. On Tuesday, the people address the Sufi as the Prophet Messenger who thrusts his hedges in the heavens, calls on winter and draws the sky from its eye to drop rain in the form of tears. During the Resurrection, the people address the Sufi asking him to recite wheat and feed their souls a return to earthly life. On Wednesday, they ask him to purify them from their sins and revive the memories of their conquests and invasions. On Resurrection, the people continue to address the Sufi asking him to blow his place out for the tired, so it expands and contains them; on the other hand, they feature themselves as making great commotion in their wound. On Thursday, the people say that they have seen the signs with the Sufi knocking on doors, i.e., tombs, to awaken the dead for Resurrection. On Resurrection, the

people vow white vows, which is borrowed from Egyptian folklore, to reap whatever was cast off the Sufi's visions and turn them into ropes to save men. They also vow to hide behind their blood what years have abundantly given them, i.e., sperm, because on "Friday," the last day of creation, they pull their artery from the silent dust and extend the veins so that embryos are created.

'Abd al-Hādī's original language use is evident in his revival of archaic words, *intisāgh* [dispersion], *washī'* [hedge], *tanātal* [wrapped], *shafanat* [glanced scathingly], *rudnayk* [wide sleeves], and *fūdayk* [the sides of your head]. In addition to creating a sense of wonder, the use of such archaic words bestows sacredness and prophetic characteristics to the volume. Another example of 'Abd al-Hādī's original language use is neologisms: he coins new parts of speech such as *tumasreh* [play], *yartaṭib* [moistened] and *ghāṭṭeyya* [floods]; he uses the diminutive form of some nouns such as *naweyyat* [atoms] and *dameyy* [my little blood]; he pluralizes the plural such as *alladheyūn* [who] and *adhrāwāt* [virgins], and coins exaggerated forms such as *alqadūm* [arriving] and *mutamaṭṭerat* [strutting]. To create wonder and invite readers to listen visually to his poetry, 'Abd al-Hādī uses oxymoron that invites readers to reflect on the meaning of familiar words such as *ysh'il* [kindle warmth for fire], *istahamet fih assamāwāt* [how often did the skies bathe without a wash?], *faman yudhib lilmā' ganābathū?* [who will remove water impurity?] *Ummī allatī zawwagatnī lilmadfin* [my mother that married me to tombs!] *Taqqus sūf alkalām* [shearing the wool of words] *tutṭarrez fi alfrāgh raghwit assunbulah* [stitching in the empty space the foam of the ear of wheat].

To involve the reader in an act of visual listening, emphasize meaning and create cohesion, 'Abd al-Hādī uses parallelism, orthographic neighbors, repetition, synonyms, and antonyms. An example of parallelism is the following original image about absurdity:

Absurdity ignites two embers:

An ember catches with the rod of pain

a lake for memories;

an ember sets fires

On a hill of emptiness. (p. 11)

The poet emphasizes parallelism by representing absurdity as both an ember of pain and an ember of emptiness. In addition to parallelism, 'Abd al-Hādī uses orthographic neighbors; for example, *naṣṣ- naṣr/ 'aāsemah- 'aāsifah/ thuqūb-thiqāb* the impact of which is lost when translated into English, and repetition such as, *naṣṣ, annār, almā', arrūh*, for emphasis. The use of synonyms like *hawā - riyāh* and antonyms such as *almawt - alhayāh* also meant to involve the reader in an act of visual listening.

Furthermore, 'Abd al-Hādī uses phonological & graphological deviation as *in dāg minattam* [brown of cloud] which is written as a slip of tongue while the persona means *tāg min addam* [crown of blood] to impart to the reader his fear of the king that affected the way he pronounced/

spelled words. In fact, this deviation which gives primacy to speech is a clear example of ‘Abd al-Hādī’s ability to involve his readers into the act of visual listening. However, this is not the only example: ‘Abd al-Hādī uses other forms of graphological deviation, unorthodox topography, and evocative blank space. As mentioned above, ‘Abd al-Hādī underlines certain words to create a parallel text which forms together with the main text the foundation of counterpointual composition. In addition, he often uses two dots to allow the reader to pause and reflect on the significance of words, three dots for ellipsis to give the reader the freedom to construct meaning, and numerous dots to signal the ellipsis of a long piece of discourse. He uses inverted commas to enclose newly coined words and brackets for quoted materials. Following the tradition of non-literary works, he uses superscript to insert a footnote. As mentioned earlier, he uses colons to enclose some words to allow the reader to read them horizontally as well as vertically. Moreover, ‘Abd al-Hādī creates deviant lexical collocations such as *zayt adduā* [the oil of prayer], *raghwit assunbulah* [the foam of the ear of wheat], *arṣifat alkitabāh* [the pavements of writing], *guzām azzaman wal makān* [the leprosy of time and space] and *baḍai’ arrīh* [the wind goods].

Deviation at the syntactic level also catches the attention of the reader and invites him/ her to listen to the text visually. Words perform more than one grammatical function and have different inflections; for example, *atagarra’ a’ada’ī yan’atunī alqawmu/a bimadīnah la manārat laha* where *alqawmu/a* is both a subject of *yan’atunī* and a direct object of *atagarra’*. ‘Abd al-Hādī starts the text in *medias res* as in *walḡurh rahim tanākaḥthu almadā’in*. He uses nouns as adjectives as in *naḥnu intisāgh* and *anā adhdhihāb*. He uses fragments from Quranic verses and leaves the reader the choice to complete them as s/he pleases; for example, *inna almulk idha dakhalū qariattan...*

As explained earlier, deviation at the discourse level appears in ‘Abd al-Hādī’s contravention of poetry conventions by arranging words in the first “Book of Identity” in the form of a text and footnote, his contravention of book conventions by creating three pages instead of the customary two for the three voices of the flood, people and the reader in the “Book of Beginnings,” and his contravention of man's work by imitating God's creation of the world in seven days, and deconstructing this grand narrative itself by making each day preceded by resurrection and ending the work with a blank page that signals its openness.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, *Sirat al-Mā’* is, in ‘Abd al-Hādī’s own terms, a print hypertext that looks like “a tree whose twigs are tangled in a way that allows for billions of possible readings from which each reader can choose whatever s/he wants for her/his own text” (*The Prose Poem* 196-7). Its unique print, mixed genres, complex structure that is based on the musical counterpointual composition as well as original language use require attentive recipients who can visually listen to some of the endless possibilities suggested. The analysis provided above is only one way of visually listening to the myriad of voices provided by such an open work. As slippery as water itself, any attempt at interpreting *Sirat al-Mā’* is doomed to failure.

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