

The Genesis of the Poetic Image in Classical Arabic Poetry

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Abstract:

This study explores the possibilities of renewing the poetic image in classical Arabic poetry, proceeding from the widely held view that classical Arabic poetry is a genre open to renewal, continually renewing poetic writing whenever it is touched by the heat of monotony. The study addresses the concept of the poetic image as a semantic building block and a baroque procedure that refuses to settle within the accumulations of tradition, submit to its prescriptions, or draw mechanically from its reservoir. This has made Arabic poetry as a whole a scene that transcends the immediate moment, moving beyond the boundaries of simile, metaphor, and rhetorical embellishment to encompass the poet's manner of organizing his relations with existing things and transforming sensory experience into an abstract energy that seeks interpretation as its flash of illumination. The study therefore begins by examining the threshold of the poetic image in al-Jahiz, Ibn Tabataba, and Abu Hilal al-Askari. Its practical section also engages with dynamic models of the poetic image represented by Imru' al-Qays, al-Nabigha al-Dhubyani, Bashshar ibn Burd, Abu Tammam, al-Buhturi, Abu al-Tayyib al-Mutanabbi, and Muslim ibn al-Walid, with the aim of revealing diverse alternative strategies whose semantic and aesthetic configurations were not familiar to classical critics.

Accordingly, the study adopts a stylistic approach based on the mechanism of deviation, capable of reconciling opposites and rendering the visible transparent. It also raises a number of questions, including: Is the poetic image's departure from the corpus of classical Arabic poetry an aberrant poetic event deserving critical reproach? Has the renewal of the poetic image in the fabric of classical Arabic poetry gone deep, or has it remained merely a scratching of the surface? Why, then, did classical critics specifically close the door to renewal in the poetic image?

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The study concludes that the renewal of the poetic image was not an act of rebellion against, or a departure from, the teachings of tradition; rather, it was an indispensable stage. Otherwise, Arabic poetry would become like stagnant water, or like a flower that is smelled for a day and then withers and is discarded.

Keywords: poetic image; imaginative representation; embodiment; mimesis; renewal; classical Arabic poetry; classical Arabic criticism; dynamism.

Introduction:

Classical Arabic poetry became closely associated with the emergence of critical mechanisms that functioned as a wall of immunity against anything that might unsettle the identity of Arabic poetry, which was and remains the Arabs' register, as it embodies lived reality and the desired art. It is well known that the earliest critical attempts to engage with Arabic poetry as artistic building blocks and pictorial flashes remained inseparable from the polemical issue of form and meaning. Most of the discussion focused on the integrative, connective, or disjunctive relationship between wording and meaning. Hence, early critical observations emerged concerning simile, metaphor, representation, imaginative construction, and good composition—concepts that were not known under the modern technical term “poetic image,” yet pointed toward it in various ways.

The classical critical corpus revealed the substance of the image, which classical critics had often regarded merely as an ornament added to discourse after the completion of meaning. Al-Jahiz connected poetry with craftsmanship and representation; Ibn Tabataba viewed poetry as a structure requiring good composition and harmony between meaning and wording; Abd al-Qahir al-Jurjani broadened the field of inquiry into the image by relating its value to the relationships formed between meanings and words and to the manner of syntactic arrangement; while Hazim al-Qartajanni regarded imagination as an essential flash in the maturation of the image and connected creativity with the poet's ability to reshape existing things rather than merely represent them in a concrete form.

From this perspective, speaking of the renewal of the image in classical Arabic poetry does not imply the existence of a rigid old image followed by a new image that severed its connection with the past. Rather, the poet draws upon familiar and conventional material and then changes the angle from which it is viewed, connects it with previously unfamiliar elements, transfers it from the sensory sphere to the abstract or psychological sphere, or invests it with symbolic energy that exceeds its descriptive function. Renewal, therefore, occurs in the manner in which the image is constructed, in the relationships organizing its elements, or in its psychological effect, and not necessarily in its manifest subject matter.

Accordingly, we propose a number of questions related to the genesis of the poetic image, including: What is the concept of the poetic image according to the approaches of classical Arabic criticism? Can the poetic image be confined to simile and metaphor? What mechanisms did classical Arab critics formulate for approaching the poetic image? And how did imagination contribute to penetrating the concrete image?

1. The Nature of the Poetic Image:

Classical Arab critics did not know the term “poetic image” in its modern terminological formulation. This does not, in any way, mean that the poetic image was absent from, or erased from, the framework of classical Arabic heritage. Early critics employed numerous terms that

paralleled the modern concept both lexically and artistically, most notably representation, simile, metaphor, exemplification, imaginative construction, and mimesis.

At first glance, this terminological plurality surrounding the poetic image reveals the possibilities of classical Arabic criticism, particularly its treatment of a single artistic phenomenon—especially one that branches and expands—through numerous key terms intended to encompass all of its artistic, psychological, sensory, and imaginative dimensions.

Accordingly, the term poetic image may be understood as “a linguistic imaginative construction that transforms the poet’s sensory, psychological, or intellectual experience into a form open to perception and interpretation through the organization of new relationships among things, actions, and qualities, thereby producing an aesthetic and emotional effect on the recipient.” This concept integrates the two poles of simile and metaphor in order to generate a total image whose parts fragment only to unite, and unite to become poetry itself. Such is the nature of the poetic image: above all, it is developing, dynamic, kaleidoscopic, composite, fragmented, and phantasmal.

Accordingly, the poetic image may be viewed from six complementary perspectives: the image as representation; the image as imaginative construction; the image as a relationship between the concrete and the abstract; the image as movement; the image as a composite structure; and the image as an echo whose effect emerges through context and reception.

2. The Poetic Image in Classical Arabic Criticism:

2.1. The Poetic Image According to al-Jahiz:

The poetic image is closely connected with poetry to the point of cohesion, interpenetration, interaction, and interweaving, making the two sides of the same coin. The poetic image is one of those terminological formulations whose significance is disclosed within itself. In this regard, the concrete manifestation of the poetic image appears in al-Jahiz’s conception, expressed in his statement: “Poetry is a kind of weaving and a genre of representation” (Al-Jahiz, 1968).

2.2. Abu Hilal al-Askari:

Abu Hilal al-Askari defines the image by stating: “When you say: ‘He reached,’ this indicates that he arrived at a state in which meanings are adequately conveyed in an acceptable form” (Al-Askari, 1971). He then proceeds to explain and elaborate the acceptable image so that the poet does not deviate from sound craftsmanship, commenting that the poet should not rely on the merit of his own invention or be deceived by its novelty, lest he become indulgent with himself in distorting his image, thereby destroying its beauty and extinguishing its light, making it closer to blame than praise (Al-Askari, 1971).

Abu Hilal al-Askari emphasizes a minimum semantic criterion that must be present in the poetic image and that makes it an acceptable image from which beauty radiates. Thus, he establishes a semantic proximity between the terms “acceptable” and “commendable,” making them a firm foundation for the quality of poetic craftsmanship. At the same time, he warns the poet against becoming enamored of his own achievement, lest his images falter and their beauty disappear, like that of one who unravels what has been firmly woven (Al-Askari, 1971).

2.3. Ibn Tabataba (d. 322 AH):

Ibn Tabataba sought to construct the poetic image in accordance with the status of its addressees, making the discourse of the image dependent upon transformation and elevation.

He required the poet to address “kings with what befits them of elevated forms of address,” avoiding lowering them from their rank or mixing them with common people, just as he should avoid elevating common people to the rank of kings. He should assign to each meaning what suits it (...). The poet therefore needs to connect his discourse, in its movement among its various forms, through a subtle connection: moving from censure to praise, from praise to complaint (...), from describing wild animals to describing horses and weapons, from describing deserts and wildernesses to describing pursuit and hunting (...), from boasting to recounting the exploits of ancestors, from submission and humility to reproach and apology, and from refusal and resistance to response and accommodation, “with the gentlest transition and finest narration, without separating the second meaning from what precedes it, but rather making it connected with and blended into it” (Ibn Tabataba, 2005).

Ibn Tabataba made the flash of the image in poetry multiple and diverse, just as people differ in their forms, voices, intellects, fortunes, and dispositions. He likewise maintained that poems compete in beauty despite being equal in genre, and that their place in people’s preferences resembles the place of beautiful things among what they choose to admire (Ibn Tabataba, 2005). Despite this desirable semantic variability in the image, the rational criterion remains a stable foundation at its core. Ibn Tabataba constructs the image upon justified logical coordinates; his artistic relationships and semantic formations are based on sensory perception and limited observation. They do not exceed semantic fields bounded by a specific trajectory of beginnings and endings, as manifested in the prepositions “from” and “to” (Ibn Tabataba, 2005).

3. Practical Study:

It is worth emphasizing that the critical treatment of the poetic image should not be confined to conventional patterns. The practical study also seeks to merge the boundaries separating metaphorical and simile-based images in order to produce the total image discussed in the preceding section. On this basis, the elements of the image interact within the poetic context, broadening the angle of vision toward entities, whether sensory or abstract. This is what the practical study will address without evasion.

3.1. The Simile-Based Image:

Simile is one of the oldest and most conspicuous means of representation in classical Arabic poetry. Yet its frequent occurrence does not indicate simplicity or immediate access to its semantic flash, nor does it constitute a pictorial surface that reveals itself in a rapidly passing moment like lightning. On the contrary, recurring simile in classical Arabic poetry often eludes the recipient at the moment of manifestation, revealing a radical paradox that sets the stationary in motion or stills the moving. Therefore, one should search for the point of resemblance linking the two terms and for the significance that this relationship adds to the poetic experience. Among the poetic examples that engage with the simile-based image is the following verse by Imru’ al-Qays:

“Swift to attack, swift to retreat, advancing and retreating together, / like a boulder hurled down from above by the torrent” (Imru’ al-Qays, 1958).

The verse is based on comparing the horse to a boulder driven by the torrent. The power of the image does not lie in solidity alone; the verbs “attack,” “retreat,” “advance,” and “withdraw” draw a successive and rapid movement, while the image of the rock descending with the torrent intensifies the sense of momentum. Thus, two dynamic images intersect: the

movement of the horse and the movement of the rock. The simile becomes a procedure of deviation that reconciles the opposing poles of the binary: movement, manifested in the verbs “attack,” “retreat,” “advance,” and so on, and the stillness associated with the rock. The phrase “hurled down by the torrent” adds an element of natural violence, making the horse, in the recipient’s imagination, an unstoppable force (Asfour, 1992).

Among other scenes in which the simile-based image recurs without semantic equivalence is the following verse by Tarafa ibn al-Abd:

“I dispel my anguish when it is nearing its end / upon a swift she-camel that goes forth and returns” (Tarafa ibn al-Abd, 2000).

In this context, the she-camel becomes a psychological stimulus that propels dark emotional states in a scene where physical movement meets psychological condition, or what may be termed the binary of inside and outside. The psychological meaning is not mentioned in isolation; rather, it is translated into bodily movement. Thus, simile and description become a means of bringing together spirit and body—the poet’s body and the she-camel’s body—as though Tarafa ibn al-Abd were responding, in anticipation of time, to Ghadamer’s proposition concerning the human being as spare parts.

3.2. The Metaphorical Image:

In most of its manifestations, metaphor works by masking and distorting the external image of things and entities. It thereby transfers meaning into a new imaginative field, and its value increases when it renders the abstract concrete, the concrete transparent, or transforms inert nature into an active force. It also turns synesthesia into a phantasmal sense that does not see things so much as it sees their shadow. Zuhayr ibn Abi Sulma excels in employing a technique that plays upon established semantic registers, as illustrated in the following verse:

“I saw death, striking blindly, from among those it strikes / killing him; and whoever it misses is granted life until he grows old” (Zuhayr ibn Abi Sulma, 1988).

Zuhayr depicts death and the fates as a being moving in an arbitrary, random manner—“striking blindly.” Thus, the idea of death moves from the level of abstraction to a sensory, kinetic scene. Zuhayr ibn Abi Sulma thereby harmonizes the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign with the randomness of the oppositional binary of abstract versus sensory.

Al-Mutanabbi presents us with a striking manifestation of the power of the metaphorical image, making it reproduce and proliferate from within itself and for its own sake. He says:

“Does the red fortress know its own color, / and does it know which of the two legs the clouds are watering?” (Al-Mutanabbi, 1944).

Al-Mutanabbi begins his description of the Red Fortress with a sudden interrogative that sets in motion everything accustomed to remaining fixed. The first disruption of the reader’s settled conceptual field lies in the fact that the discourse is addressed to an inanimate entity. Yet the impact of the event and the intensity of the shock cause the inanimate object to acquire reason through implicit metaphor. The red color is also the fortress’s garment, and the secret of its beauty becomes an omen of ill fortune: al-Mutanabbi’s clouds have watered it and covered every span of it with blood.

Al-Mutanabbi depicts the strength of his army and the magnitude of his victory in a heroic scene marked by bewilderment and saturated with astonishment, prompting us to ask: Is what al-Mutanabbi tells us about the events at the Red Fortress a reality, or a reading of an omen?!

3.3. The Metonymic (Kināyah) Image:

Kināyah operates by suggesting meaning through a sign or an attribute intrinsically associated with it. It therefore makes the recipient a partner in producing meaning: the meaning is not received in complete declarative form, but is inferred from the indicative contextual clues.

Zuhayr ibn Abi Sulma says:

“Among the wealthy, there is provision for those who visit them; / and among the poor, there are generosity and giving” (Zuhayr ibn Abi Sulma, 1988).

In this poetic configuration, the metonymic image reveals the value of generosity and liberality. Qualities and behaviors become indicators by which moral character is measured. Kināyah thus reveals the nature of an authentic Arab culture in which generosity constituted part of the individual's image reflected in the mirror of society. Consequently, the image does not present an abstract quality; rather, it makes that quality perceptible through collective behavior.

The context of classical Arabic poetry never ceases to produce astonishment through paradoxes that, in some poetic configurations, exceed the accumulated critical conventions of the period. An example is the following verse by Antarah ibn Shaddad:

“He who witnessed the battle will tell you that I / enter the fray, yet refrain from taking spoils” (Antarah ibn Shaddad, 1983).

The poetic context continually draws the recipient in and eludes them through several strategies, including participation (“he who witnessed the battle will tell you”) and the creation of contrast and rupture between physical movement and psychological state. The former emerges from the intensity of violence, whereas the latter springs from feelings of chastity and moral elevation.

Conclusion:

The foregoing makes clear that the poetic image in classical Arabic poetry was full of movement and dynamism. It continually escapes the stillness of fixed patterns, as demonstrated by the extension of the poetic image into the realms of abstraction and imagination, refusing to submit to the critical standards established by classical critics, which impose a particular form from which one should not depart. This does not, however, fully characterize the poetic image, for it is more elusive—like a chameleon that takes on every color without settling on one—turning into a scene resistant to depiction in colors. This resembles the baroque genesis of the poetic image, governed by a strategy of reformulation according to a different configuration: appearing only to disappear, emerging only to dissolve, suggesting and whispering instead of stating and declaring.

The poetic examples examined also demonstrate that renewal is not limited to producing something entirely new. Rather, it is driven by the creation of astonishment and strangeness within what is familiar and conventional; that is, by unsettling accumulated patterns and established certainties until only a thin thread remains between them, torn apart by the first gestures of reading.

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