

The Doubting Process in Interpreting Classical Arabic Poetry: From Imitation to Innovation

Al-Buhturi as A Case Study

الترجيح بين الاتباع والابتداع في تأويل الشعر العربي القديم
البحثري أنموذجا

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Abstract:

Familiarity with the aspects and conventions of classical Arabic poetry does not guarantee an easy grasp of the peculiarity and uniqueness of the specific and salient features in a given poem. It is true that classical Arabic poems contain known and familiar features that most poets strive to include in their poems; each poem, however, is a complex object of interpretation created to reflect the poet's own feelings, tone, and intention. These elements, as much as they abide by some conventional rules characterizing classical Arabic literary forms in terms of structure and themes, they remain the poets' own rhetorical creation freeing them from the familiar, the known, and the acceptable. This paper emphasizes the importance of engaging in self-dialogue and of following an interrogation process to explore the new and unfamiliar in interpreting poems. Accordingly, the Abbasid court poet Al-Buhturi was chosen to understand the way a poet's biography and history can help readers make sense of the poem's aesthetic structure and to uncover the intricate relationship between its specific local context and the kinds of meanings it conveys.

Key Words: Al-Buhturi; Classical Arabic poetry; "The Lake of Al-Mutawakkil"; "The Wolf"; "Iwan Kisra"; Self-reflection; Interrogation Process.

ملخص:

لعل الاطلاع على أعراف الشعر العربي القديم وسننه لا يعد كفيلاً لضمان سهولة فهم ما تتفرد به القصيدة من خصائص، إذ تحتوي هذه القصائد على سمات متعارف عليها دأب معظم الشعراء على توظيفها في قصائدهم. ورغم اختلاف كل شاعر في التعبير عن مشاعره الخاصة وفي الكشف عن تصوراته، فإن مكنم الائتلاف يجلو في التزام الشعراء ببعض السنن الشعرية التقليدية والمحافظة عليها بنية وموضوعاً، فما يفتأ الشاعر ينتج اللغة ويبعد فيضفي على الجاهز وعلى السابق ابتداءً وتجديداً، وفي هذا السياق يتنزل هذا البحث الذي نرمي من خلاله الى ابراز أهمية الانخراط في الحوار الذاتي عبر التحقق والاكتشاف الجديد وانتاج ما هو غير مألوف. من اجل ذلك اخترنا شاعر البلاط العباسي "البحثري" لبنينة أهمية المعطيات الماقبلية في مساعدة القارئ على فهم البنية الجمالية للقصيدة وعلى فهم تصورات الشاعر حيال الأشياء التي تحيطه وحيال العالم منحوه. الكلمات المفاتيح: البحثري، الشعر العربي القديم، الحوار الذاتي، التساؤل، إيوان كسرى، الذئب، بركة المتوكل.

1. Introduction:

The paper attempts to convert the focus of analyzing classical Arabic poetry from a traditional process based on pre-determined categories and pre-established labels and themes to an interrogative process that embraces doubt as an interpretive strategy. This process calls readers to make sense of poetic images, themes, and language by bringing doubting into self-dialogue and exploring the poem in relation to the new and unfamiliar features emerging from specific poems produced in a particular historical and social context. This analysis, however, does not start from scratch. It refers to the same features and aspects common in the analyses of old Arab poems, explores in-depth every feature, and compares and contrasts it to the way it used to be described and interpreted. To put it differently, it detects and identifies what is unique about poems and points out to the divergent, unfamiliar, and unusual aspects about them. It is based on the belief that familiarity with the features and aspects of a particular poetic form does not guarantee an easy grasp of the peculiarity of a specific feature in a given poem.

To understand the way readers should embrace a self-reflective and interrogative process in analyzing poems, a selection of Al-Buhturi odes will be presented as examples. The first example is based on an analysis of the descriptive features of "Al-Jaafari's Lake" made by Al-Mutawakkil, the second explores features of self-pride through the poem of 'The Wolf', while the third teases the analysis further to understand the poet's psychology after the assassination of Al-Mutawakkil through the poem 'Iwan Kisra'.

2. Descriptive Features: Communication to a Specific Other:

"The Lake of Al-Mutawakkil" is one of the most admired descriptive poems of Al-buhturi whereby he glorifies the Ja'afari's Lake made by Al-Mutawakkil within the walls of the Ja'afari palace in the north of Samarra. The poem will be analyzed with reference to its descriptive tools and I will use the English translation provided by Farrin Raymond (2011 p. 170-171). The poem opens with an *atlat section* (standing by the ruins) and evokes some of its related motifs including 'beautiful' 'lovely maidens', 'abodes'...

Whoever gazes upon the beautiful lake,

with its peripheral abodes of lovely maidens

Although the beginning drags us into the pre-Islamic era with *atlat* motifs stored in the memory of readers, the way these elements are designed, however, deviates from the ordinary and usual way of writing the *atlat* section by other poets. In other words, although it draws on the same features, those features are exploited and used in a strikingly divergent way. While *atlat* used to be associated with pain, disappointment, indignation, and suffering, it is, in this poem, crafted in a lively and happy way as the poet tends to draw the audience's attention to something amazing and extraordinary, to a place full of life, beauty, and fertility.

Reckons it superior to the sea;

the latter he ranks second,

What has come over the Tigris lately, like the jealous one,

vying now and then with the lake in beauty?

The *atlat* section, therefore, is expressed differently in Al-Buhturi's poem as he chooses to resort to the same old and familiar form but uses it in a new unusual way to create a new rhetorical poetic strategy. In fact, every poet has their own innovative touch and rhetorical creation, emerging from a unique individual experience. This individual experience is reflected in the structure, style, and poetic images and it brings about a new knowledge and new modes of interpretation to enrich the analysis (Sperl and Shackel, 1996). Moreover, the *atlat*, in this poem is presented as a preparation to his upcoming *madih* (praise) for Al-Mutawakkil.

Has she not seen that the guardian of Islam guards it from blame,

that the builder of glory has built it?

Through exalting the beauty of the lake, he in fact exalts its builder and in his al-*madih* section, we find reference to some traditional Arab *madih* features including sea, water, horses...

Delegations of water pour into it hurriedly

like horses on the loose.

It is as if the white silver of ingots,

flows in its tributaries.

The analysis of the poem, therefore, embraces the old and focuses on its contribution to the understanding of it. It is not, however, restricted to presenting those conventional elements and the way they feature in the poem. It is meant to unveil the salient and unique in every feature, relating it to the poet's biography and to the poem's local context, and exploring its emerging aesthetic structure and thematic development.

*At night, when stars appear in the lake's edges,
you would think a firmament had been built into it.*

*The enclosed fish do not reach its limit
due to the space between this end and that.*

*They swim in it with winged bodies
like birds flapping through air.*

*When they go down, they come to a great basin;
when they go up, a vast plain.*

*They veer oft en to the engraved dolphin
that, by the side, flirts with the lake.*

*The lake's distant flower beds, looking on, dispense with the clouds—
no need for those water skins.*

*When it swells and over flows, when its wadi is full,
it is like the palm of the Caliph.*

*On the day of the lake's naming, its standing was increased—
to a point even above where it was—when it was named after him.*

*The lake is surrounded by luxuriant gardens; at their near boundaries,
you see always peacock feathers, conversing with the water.*

*And the lake is bordered by two flat-topped hills, like Sirius and Procyonin
early morning, each trying to rise above the other.*

Once the efforts of the Commander of the Faithful are manifest to describers, however, no description comes close to the achievement.

The analysis of this descriptive poem reveals that features traditionally present in Arabic poems like *atlat* and *madih* and their elements are still used, but the way they are presented diverges from the ordinary to comprise some new and unusual forms and unfamiliar meanings. These unique elements are meant to help readers make sense of the poems and reflect on the relevance of the context in which they occur to contribute to its esthetic form. Engaging in self-dialogue and bringing doubt to the analysis, therefore, unveils new features and frees the interpreter from the restrictions of the familiar and the usual. The interpretation of the poem suggests that while the primary analysis focuses on biographical, historical, and sociological facts that are common to the audience, these facts may afford different interpretations and may be associated to different meanings based on the poet's experience. Thus, one does not have to limit the interpretation of it to the pre-established forms and features and should rather engage in an attempt to identify the features and defining them (Talib, 2016).

In fact, just mentioning that *Al-atlat* and *Al-madih* features are present in *Al-Buhturi's* poem is not enough as it does not give us clues on how they are used, whether there is an interplay or a divergence in the way they feature in other poems, and on what makes this poem specific and unique and stands out from the ordinary.

Similar to praising the Caliph and glorifying his achievements, engaging in self-pride and exalting one's own courage and triumphs is a common theme in classical Arabic poetry. The following section explores the way *Al-Buhturi* maintains the same conventional and familiar theme of self-pride but presents its elements in an unfamiliar way to foster the reader's reflection on the poem's peculiarity and to explore things from a renewed perspective.

3. Describing Self–pride: Communication to the Self:

In our attempt to explore issues related to the 'self-pride' theme from a renewed and unusual perspective, a primary analysis is necessary to redirect the reader and provide a particular correlation and causal connection between the historical and sociological knowledge and the poem's aesthetic structure. In other words, it is our knowledge about the poet and the context of the poem that brings coherence and gives meaning to the features used. These connections among the features and facts about the context of the poem do not have to be determined a

priori. A profound knowledge of the facts and a close reading of the poem should be established instead. This section focuses on the way coherence is created in the internal structure of the poem "the Wolf" and the rhetorical tools used to portray the events described and link them to time and setting. The poem is translated into English by Khalidi (2016) and it appears in his book "An Anthology of Arabic Literature" in page 132.

What a night!

Dawn at its tail-end

Like an inch of gleaming steel,

When a sword is drawn from its sheath.

I wrapped myself in its gloom,

While wolves were still in slumber,

My eyes like a night thief's, a stranger to sleep,

Stirring up the grouse where they squatted,

The fox and the viper my only companions.

Suddenly, a grey wolf!

Eye-catching, forepart and ribs upturned,

Limbs at his sides lanky, spindly,

Dragging behind him a rope-like tail,

His spine crooked, bent like a bow

Creased by hunger,

his resolve had hardened:

Nothing but bones, spirit and hide.

He crunched his fangs, in whose rows lurked death,

Like the crunching of one shivering from the cold, teeth chattering

In this poem, Al-Buhturi focuses on a familiar poetic theme, 'self-pride', and presents himself as an agent of destruction who has physically transformed into a creature of the wild. While the poem revolves around a common theme frequently addressed by Classical Arabic poets, the way cohesion and organic unity is established between the different sections of the poem is new and unusual. The orderly organization of the first section of the poem is revealed through foregrounding the time and setting of the story that the poet is about to tell. By opening the poem by 'what a night!', the reader anticipates that some striking moments are to be narrated and described by the poet. The exclamatory phrase entails that 'this night' is different and distinct and that it is used for the sake of announcing the upcoming battle with the wolf. The first two lines announce that the story takes place at night and, specifically, just before dawn and this information is linked by a temporal conjunction 'when' to inform the reader that there is something that appears to the poet and obliges him to hold his sword. This piece of information, however, is not explicitly presented and is built around some suspense. Another temporal conjunction is presented in line five 'while wolves are still in slumber'. This simultaneous conjunctive item is used to show that although there are no wolves around, the poet is always careful and ready to fight danger.

The plot of the story is presented through a conjunctive adverb, 'suddenly', that is used to describe an unexpected event taking place. The analysis conducted to interpret "the Wolf" is confirmed by Masboogh and Sharam's (2018) study wherein they explain the cohesion created in the internal parts of the ode. In their study, they use a descriptive analytical method to analyze the elements of the poem and they employ Halliday's Cohesion Theory. The analysis is based on the assumption that conjunctive devices can contribute to the creation of cohesion between the scenes of the text. They find out that the ode is built on the use of various types of additive relations and these additive relations offer a full image of the battle scene with the wolf.

In addition to the use of additive relations, adversative conjunctions are also used in the poem to unveil its semantic and structural contrasts. As the poem progresses, a causal relationship is established to describe the cause-effect relationship between the events and their corresponding descriptive features. According to Masboogh and Sharam (2018), the prominent conjunction used is the temporal device and it is employed to describe the night, on the one hand, and the hunger state of the wolf, on the other hand, preparing the reader for the

battle scene. They advocate that the description of the poet's battle with the wolf requires the use of temporal relations as time is involved in every event. That is why a sequencing and temporal continuity is established between the lines. The poet, therefore, builds his poem on some conventions common in Arabic classical literature such as having a battle with a dangerous animal in the darkness and exhibiting courage to defeat it. The devices used to create unity between the different parts of the poem, however, are innovative as the poet manages to create harmony and cohesion in the internal structure in spite of the chaos and lack of unity among the different parts of the ode. In other words, the poet moves from describing the setting to describing the battle, to talking about his triumphs and victories, and to addressing people who abhor his achievements; and all these parts appear disconnected from the outside. Al-Buhturi, however, successfully creates harmony and cohesion in the internal structure through the use of various conjunctions. In fact, he has been admired for this ability of relating events and linking different parts in a beautiful creative way:

"Those who prefer al-Buḥturī do so because of their predilection for the sweetness of expression, beautiful transitions, proper placement of words, correctness of expressions, ease of comprehension, and clarity of meaning that they attribute to him." (Rabdawi, 1967 p. 333)

The importance of creating a particular tool to link verses and lines together is further reinforced by Al-Harthey (2016) who advocates that readers of the Abbasid era no longer judge literary texts with reference to the language used but rather through its method of composition. In the following section, another indicator of the way the analysis of classical Arabic poems builds on the conventional while presenting it in an unusual and unfamiliar way is presented through the "Iwan Kisra" Ode.

4. Describing Feelings: Connecting with Humanity:

The "Iwan Kisra" poem was written during the decline of Abbasids and the murder of Caliph Al-Mutawakkil. This period was known by the Turkic Guards' taking over. Al-Buhturi, in this poem, imitates classical Arabic poetry in terms of the tropes dating back to Jahilia (pre-islamic era) and the atlat section contemplating abandoned camps. The expressions of disappointment and feelings of betrayal after the assassination of Al-Mutawakkil are overwhelmingly referred to in the poem. The tone of despair and disappointment conveyed is

quite similar to the tone common in Bedouin brigand poetry where poets tend to give the impression that they are cast out from society and are alone in the world. The poem, however, is unusual at both the structural and thematic levels.

Structurally, the poem does not strictly abide by the tripartite pattern of an elegiac prelude (Nasib), a journey part (Rahil) and a praise for a patron (madih) (Ali, 2006). In fact, unlike his other poems, this poem does not address a specific person and does not praise any one in particular. In the outset, the poem begins by expressing disappointment after the murder of Al-Mutawakkil, followed by describing his journey to Iraq, and concludes with paying tribute to the Sasanian palace. Although the beginning of the poem resembles Bedouin brigand poetry in describing feelings of disappointment, reactions to the betrayal are different as Al-Buhturi chooses to resort to pilgrimage to reduce his pain and give some sense of purpose to his life instead of departing in depression.

At the thematic level, the poet evokes universal and human values emerging from his bitter experience as he leaves the abodes to seek solace in a different place and encounter other people and other cultures. While the poet starts his poem by expressing his disgust to humanity because of the assassination of his preferred Caliph, he concludes with an outpouring love for humankind and an honor to humanity. The uniqueness of the poem features in presenting stages of transformation by describing a state of mental metamorphosis transformed from a desperate creature deceived by his own people to a loving man holding universal values (Sperl, 2006). These stages are presented through sequences of symbolic images showing the transformation process. The first stage is related to feelings of despair whereby the poet calls meaningfulness in his life into question. He chooses to dissociate himself from the people who deceived him by leaving Syria and escaping to Iraq. The psychological stage described in this phase is that of despair.

The first line of the poem is designed to describe his lone soul and a moral exaltedness to produce the image of an alienated self (Sperl, 2006). We notice a focus on the self whereby the poet describes his state of depression and despair and his choice to exalt himself (I have risen) from whatever makes him feel inferior.

I have shielded myself from what defiles myself

I have risen above the pittance of every niggard.

After describing the stage of despair, the poet, during his journey, comes across a painting depicting the battle of Antioch. He starts feeling the painting through his hands and this sensation leads to a complete transformation in his mood. He is driven by the magic spell of the painting and its symbolic meaning (Ali, 2006). We notice that as the poet moves to another stage, a profound change in the mood is generated and this new state of affair is also reflected in the style of writing. While the first two lines emphasize "the self", the lines in the second stanza focus on a communal moment whereby the poet is honored to meet the other.

Such wonder over them rises up within me that

My hands explore their features by touch.

Poured into the cup of every heart,

Thus, dearly loved by every soul/self.

Built to delight for a time, their quarters

Now belong to grief and mourning.

Similarly, the third stanza focuses on the poet's honor in encountering the other but this time the transformation is presented through getting back to the past and depicting its glory. This glory is generated not from a painting but from his own imagination.

So, it behooves me to aid them with tears

In alien ably bequeathed to them through love.

This I do have and yet the abode's not mine

By kinship, nor is the race my race.

The poem concludes with a total transformation in the psychology of the poet as he ends up loving the other instead of rejecting him. He experiences a moment of reconciliation with the self and the other generated by different symbolic images including the paintings and his memories with Al-Mutawwakil.

I now find myself in love with men of honor

Without exception, from every root and stock.

Sperl (2006), in his reading of Al-Buhturi's ode 'Iwan Kisra', focuses on the structure and thematic development that generate a transformation in the poet's psychological state. He builds his paper on the assumption that this poem contributes to universal literary themes as the alienation experienced by the poet and the need to find healing and solace in another place make him look for the self within the enemy. The communal moments of encountering the other in his journey to Iraq is significant as it represents a moral command leading to a moral response (Sperl, 2006). In other words, the alienated self of Al-Buhturi is rescued by finding significance and meaningfulness in encountering the other.

5. Conclusions:

This paper uses an interrogative self-reflective method of analyzing classical Arabic poems with the aim of bringing the unique and unfamiliar to the forefront attention of readers. An interrogation process to what poets are able and capable to do through their rhetorical creations is deemed necessary to explore poems from a renewed perspective; a perspective that explores issues from the inside.

A selection of Al-Buhturi's odes is used to support the claim that every poem should be treated as a complex object that underlies different kinds of meanings and that is distinct from other poems in spite of the seemingly common features and shared motifs. In the poem 'the Lake of Al-Mutawakkil', features and elements familiar in classical poetry are used, the meanings they convey and the themes they foreground are, however, different. Similarly, in the poem "The Wolf", the specific theme of self-pride is common and familiar to readers of classical poetry, Al-Buhturi, however, deviates from the ordinary by using specific language tools, namely conjunctions, to establish unity and coherence in the internal structure of the poem. Finally, focusing only on the elements and features used in poems does not do justice to the poet. For example, in the poem "Iwan Kisra", Al-Buhturi describes a state of despair and disappointment as a result of the betrayal of Al-Mutawakkil. This element is common in brigand poetry and just saying it is there makes the uniqueness of the poem fades away. "Iwan Kisra" is different from other classical poems as it focuses on human and global values and describes the poet's mental metamorphosis and psychological transformation. It is, therefore, this exploration from the inside that brings coherence to the poem and gives meaning to the features used.



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