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**Digital Rhetoric and the Reproduction of Beauty in the poems
of Tamim al-Barghouthi**

بلاغة الرقمي وإعادة إنتاج الجمال في قصائد تميم البرغوثي

Dr. Rima Laouas
University of Khemis Miliana -Algeria
rima.laoues@univ-dbkm.dz
د/ ريمة لعواس
جامعة خميس مليانة (الجزائر)
rima.laoues@univ-dbkm.dz

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Abstract:

It is widely acknowledged that literature, in the wake of the electronic revolution witnessed by the world, has worked to renew its modes of thought in order to reconfigure its image, thereby giving rise to a new form of literature known as digital literature. The latter aims at releasing the creative energies of the text upon the electronic medium in ways that surpass, in their aesthetic dimensions, those available on the paper medium, and this through the deployment of the resources of digital technology — namely sound, image, music, and mise-en-page (audiovisual production). It is noteworthy that, although all literary genres have come to acquire a digital presence, poetry has registered an especially significant presence compared to other genres.

The present study is primarily concerned, to uncover the aesthetics of digital poetry, specifically through the poems of Tamim al-Barghouti broadcast on YouTube, by answering a set of questions, including: What is the nature of digital poetry and what are its artistic features? To what extent do digital media affect the realization of poetic aesthetics in al-Barghouti's work?

Keywords: digital poetry; electronic media; audiovisual effects; Tamim al-Barghouti; aesthetics; YouTube.

المخلص:

لا يخفى على أحد أن الأدب في ظل الثورة الإلكترونية التي شهدها العالم عمل على تطوير وسائل تفكيره من أجل تجديد صورته مما ولد لنا أدبا جديدا يدعى الأدب الرقمي، هذا الأخير يرمي إلى تفجير الطاقات الابداعية على مستوى الحامل الإلكتروني تتجاوز في جمالياتها تلك التي تتوفر في الحامل الورقي، وذلك من خلال استثمار معطيات تقانة الرقمية ونقصد بلك الصوت والصورة والموسيقى والإخراج، واللافت للنظر أن كل الأجناس الأدبية أصبح لها حضورا رقميا غير أن الشعر سجل حضورا كبيرا مقارنة بغيره من الأجناس.

يتنزل تصور بحثنا في المقام الأول إلى الكشف عن جماليات الشعر الرقمي وبالتحديد من خلال قصائد تميم البرغوثي على اليوتيوب، وذلك بالإجابة على جملة من الأسئلة من بينها: ما هي طبيعة الشعر الرقمي وما هي مميزاته الفنية؟ ما مدى تأثير الوسائط الرقمية في تحقيق جماليات القصيدة لدى تميم البرغوثي؟

الكلمات المفتاحية: الشعر الرقمي، الوسائط الإلكترونية، المؤثرات السمعية والبصرية.

Introduction

In the wake of the digital revolution that the world has undergone, literature has witnessed an unprecedented transformation. Thanks to its alliance with modern technology, the means and mechanisms of literary thought have themselves been redefined, giving rise to what is now called digital literature. This literature constitutes a major turning point in creative practice, mobilizing the technical affordances of digital media — together with their audiovisual effects — in order to unleash the artistic and aesthetic energies of the literary text, whether in poetry or in prose.

1. The Concept of Digital Poetry (Digital Literature)

Digital poetry is that poetry which is presented to the reader through digital

media, drawing on every available computational technique. In this sense, "we call digital literature any narrative or poetic text that uses the computer as a medium and that exploits one or more of the properties of that medium,"¹ with a view to producing a text endowed with aesthetic dimensions beyond those of the paper-based poetic text.

Al-Sayyid Najm offers one of the simplest definitions: a digital text is one that is displayed on digital screens — what is termed the "electronic carrier" — rather than on the paper carrier. He writes that it is "any text that is shaped in accordance with the data of digital technology by employing digital language and the programs available within the computer, in such a way as to incorporate (image, sound, color, motion,

word) within a single artistic configuration."²

In another definition, the digital text — whether poetic or prosaic — is characterized as a "combination of linguistic and extra-linguistic effects, in which the components of the creative system are altered and the conceptual apparatus is renewed, so that the creator becomes a producer and the reader a user, while the processes of reading and writing themselves change. It is, therefore, a new manifestation of literature with a wholly different aspect, embodied in a material dimension that relies on novel data and elements absent from traditional literary material, which is grounded in the word alone — elements such as sound and image. These elements blend in a partial combination that destabilizes literary theory at its very core, demanding the elucidation of this new literariness."³

The transition of poetry from the paper carrier to the electronic carrier places the poetic text within the realm of experimentation and creative adventure at the levels of both form and content. All audiovisual effects interact within it, since it depends upon the interweaving of sound, image, motion, and color with the poetic text. In this context, Fatima al-Buraiki describes it as "that mode of poetic writing which can only manifest itself in the electronic medium, drawing on the techniques made available by modern technology ... and approaching, in its style of presentation and mode of address, the user-receiver,"⁴ which makes it possible for the receiver to interact with the text and to participate in its production.

It should be noted that there are texts that gained no reputation, and which found their way to the receiver only through the deployment of computational techniques in the presentation of the poetic text. Indeed, "dozens of poets about whom nothing was previously known, and who shared no common aesthetic or literary references, came from other horizons such as video and the visual and plastic arts."⁵

The term "digital poetry," like other terms borrowed from the West, has known a plurality of designations that has produced a certain confusion within the literary and critical arena alike. Among these designations are:

Digital Poetry
Electronic Poetry
Hypertext
Interactive Poetry

Fatima al-Buraiki is among those who have provided a detailed discussion of the problematic surrounding this terminology, observing: "As for digital poetry and electronic poetry, they do not differ from one another in their general meaning ... The reason for calling poetry presented on the screen 'digital poetry,' for example, is that it is presented digitally on the computer screen, while the reason for calling it 'electronic poetry' is attributable to the nature of the carrier medium."⁶

In the midst of this problematic, the critic adopts the term "interactive poetry" or "interactive poem," on the grounds that it "employs static and moving images, graphic forms, both living and non-living sounds, and everything capable of imparting a new form of vitality and interaction to the text."⁷ She has provided her own justifications for the use of this term rather than any other by tying the characteristics of this writing mode to the receiver interacting with it,⁸ as follows:

It presents an open-ended text (open ended texte), a text without limits.
It grants the receiver the sense of being the owner of everything offered on the network.
It does not recognize a single creator of the text, which makes the receivers-users of the interactive text co-participants in it.
Endings are non-uniform, owing to the multiplicity of paths and choices available to the receiver.

As for the term "hypertext" (al-naṣṣ al-mutarabī), it appears in Arabic critical studies on the basis of Sa'īd Yaqīn's translation of the French Hypertexte, which

he employs to designate "that text which results from the use of the computer with its advanced software, both in the production and in the reception of the text, so that it is constructed upon (linkage) between internal and external structures"⁹; that is, the interlinking of external effects — sound and image — with the internal construction of the poetic text.

The critic Jamīl Ḥamdāwī has followed his lead in preferring the term "hypertextual poetry," though he defines it as that text which "is realized through the computer, where this text permits the movement from one piece of information to another by activating links that, by their very nature, transcend the linear dimension of reading."¹⁰

Alongside these terms, there exist others used to refer to digital poetry but which are less current in critical circles, such as branched poetry (al-shi'r al-tash'ibi-Abir Salama), forked poetry (al-shi'r al-mufarra'-Abd Allāh Muḥammad al-Ghadhdhāmī and Ḥusām al-Khaṭīb), and interrelated poetry (al-shi'r al-muta'aliq-Jabir 'Uṣfur).

2. The Position of Critics on Digital Poetry

Most experiments in literature have provoked diverging critical opinions, and digital poetry, too, falls within the domain of experimentation, as noted above. Accordingly, the views expressed concerning the legitimacy of this literature are divided between supporters and opponents.

Among the critics who have rejected the very existence of digital poetry — and of digital literature more broadly — on the grounds that it is a hybrid genre, one finds Sa'īd al-Wakīl, who in a study entitled "The Digital Realist Myth" wrote: "Clay-bound intentions are not enough to create a new literary genre, by way of comment on what the Arab press has habitually done ... In the most recent stage of our reading, we are treated to tidings of the birth of a new Arab literature and the dawn of an age of electronic realism ... but, by my life, all of this is mere confused dreams."¹¹

Alī Za'la supports him in this view, refusing to recognize a literature produced in a virtual world: "Digital literature remains marginal among us, and the digital writer is a writer of the second or third order; he cannot be properly recognized unless he publishes a paper book or disseminates his output through print media."¹²

By contrast, a number of critics have sought to defend this literature and to support its existence in the Arab arena, even calling for the transcendence of traditional literature in the light of modern technologies. Among them is Zuhūr Karām, who affirms that "engagement with digital literature is a civilizational requirement par excellence, and not a whim or a fashion; the matter is settled cognitively, culturally, and anthropologically."¹³ For technology has supported the creative process by adding aesthetic dimensions to the poetic text, becoming a tributary of enrichment for literature in general.

Abīr Salāma, for her part, reinforces the idea of digital literary production by arguing that "digital literature will attract a new, different reader, one who wishes to participate in deed and in effect,"¹⁴ such that the receiver becomes an active element in the production process through his response to the digital text, after having been a mere consumer of literature, no more.

In the same vein, Fatima al-Buraiki encourages poets to engage in digital poetic writing, since she considers that digital literature "breaks the regime of censorship that characterizes traditional literary texts and liberates them from rigidity, while also helping to sharpen minds and stimulate innovation through the unlimited possibilities it makes available, so that the writer in turn produces a creativity that is itself unlimited. Beyond all this, digital literature offers a measure of vitality and freedom in interacting with literary texts that is unavailable in traditional literature."¹⁵

3. The Aesthetics of Digital Poetry

The question of whether digital poetry possesses any aesthetic dimensions remains, among scholars, a matter of contention, in

contrast to the case of literature presented through the paper medium. For "the structure of the digital text differs greatly from that of the paper text, which has made both its reading and its writing entirely different. The fragmentation and splintering of digital texts have generated apprehension among many scholars and have led them to question the literariness of this text; but an acquaintance with the new literariness of this text will dispel many of these obstacles. Material aesthetics are integrated, linguistic aesthetics are already agreed upon, and the question of the receiver's participation is what makes the difference with this new literary text. The space that these texts have secured for the receiver was not available with paper texts; but the absence of a genuine model has made the idea of interaction non-renewable, scarcely venturing beyond the circle of what is already agreed upon."¹⁶

In light of this, some studies have come forward to defend the aesthetics of the digital poetic text and to grant it remarkable importance within communicative-interactive spaces, presenting it as a renewable text within an aesthetic system, on the grounds that its aesthetic construction relies on a set of semiotic elements for which the various tools and media available in the digital world — sound, image, motion, and so on — converge, as we shall clarify below.

Interactive digital poetry sets out to construct for itself distinctive signs that single it out from others: "In the light of this orientation, the interactive narrative seeks to interrogate the concept of literariness itself, by displacing the principles of literary aesthetics and shifting from an aesthetics of language to an aesthetics of the textual material; and on the basis of this transformation, the interactive narrative can reinterrogate the concept of criticism by transforming its sphere of operation from the criticism of the text to the criticism of the support of the text. Likewise, value criteria can come to appreciate the creative dimension through the exploration of the

semantic dimensions of the digital support,"¹⁷ a support that has now become an integral part of the structure of the text.

In any case, the aesthetic value of the digital poetic text can only be judged by referring to two fundamental functions: the literary function and the digital function. On the other hand, digital literature can only be evaluated in light of three essential criteria: the technical criterion, the semiotic criterion, and the interactive criterion."¹⁸ On this basis, we may summarize as follows the principal aesthetic dimensions possessed by the digital poetic text.

3.1 The Aesthetics of Language and Poetic Performance

The aesthetic dimension of language scarcely departs from that available in paper texts, for "language draws its aesthetics not only from its intrinsic constitution — as sounds, structures, and tropes endowed with an immediate affective force — but also from its relation to the literary genre toward which it is oriented in the formation of its structures. By virtue of this relation, language becomes embodied in a new aesthetic horizon. Consequently, the affective energy of language resides in the literary genre itself, qua artistic space of aesthetic communication, to which language responds with its forms and aesthetic functions."¹⁹ This is precisely what is realized in Tamim al-Barghouti's poem "How Did I Fall in Love With a Woman I Have Never Met?" (Kayfa 'ashiqtu imra'atan lam alqahā?), where the poem is composed in a poetic language saturated with dense connotations and suggestions, owing to the metaphors and figurative images it bears. The poet says:

*How did I fall in love
with a woman I have
never met?*

*I loved her until I came
to fear my very love for
her,*

*For love, when it
touches the hearts,
cleaves them in twain;*

*And even if those hearts
be free, it enslaves them
all the same.*

*How sublime is she,
and how delicate!
If she but knew my
right, she would know
hers also.*

*How did I fall in love
with a woman I have
not even seen?*

*Nor have I known her
good from her ill;
And yet I am neither
choosing nor
compelled.*

*Love, when it gladdens
the hearts, harms them
too,*

*And it enslaves none
but the free.*

*If she but knew my
worth, she would know
hers also.*

*The soul is like a bird
that loves its own kind;
Unseen, my soul has
known her soul.*

*Her estrangement has
become its
companionship,*

*So that the heart cannot
forget her, even when it
falters.*

*Her passion has
wearied both her
human and her jinn;
Beautiful one — if she
forget me not, I shall
never forget her.*

The first thing that strikes the receiver of the poem "How Did I Fall in Love With a Woman I Have Never Met?" is that professional poetic performance which combines mastery, brilliance, and singularity. Tamim al-Barghouti was careful to draw in the receiver through his recitation, which was carried out in a high voice and with a clear intonation that rises at

one moment and falls at another, in keeping with the inner and outer musical structure of the poem. His poetic delivery thus established an intimate relation with the language and style of the poem, as if the poet wished to convey his very feeling to the reader rather than merely his words, so as to make the reader's enjoyment of his writing assured.

3.2 The Aesthetics of Color, Image, and Motion

The directors of poetic videos on YouTube work to transform the written material into an electronic material pulsating with life, attractiveness, and movement, by distributing the various units across the empty electronic page so as to compose pictorial panels that throb with beauty and meaning, in a manner suited to the receiver's capacity to engage his different senses, especially sight and hearing. The element of balance — whether symmetrical or contrasting — must be preserved on the electronic page ... as must the element of color, which differentiates between components, foregrounds elements, facilitates the perception of relationships, and contributes to attracting attention and suspense.²⁰

For this reason, what digital poetry leans upon most is the "culture of the image," or what is termed "visual culture." For sight, unlike hearing, has more than a single dimension: it possesses several dimensions, including a documentary function and a function in the clarification of insight. Visual culture is constituted by sight, monitoring, and reading; and on the screen, sight shares its operation with other faculties.²¹ Visual discourse thus attracts the receiver more than any other form of discourse.

Tamim al-Barghouti has invested in this technique in the poem "How Did I Fall in Love With a Woman I Have Never Met?" where the visual image, with its various components, has formed an essential element embodying the form and artistry of the poem through its interaction with the remaining digital components, in order to

yield dense suggestions and semantic dimensions. Among the images employed are the following:



Figure 1. Selected stills from the visual setting of the poem.

From these images, it becomes clear that the poet endeavored to select forms and colors that suit the content of the poem, since the images moved in synchrony with the poetic performance. He sought to represent the woman through the figure of the butterfly, with its joyful colors that reflect her beauty; and because he had never seen her, he used the symbol of the butterfly — emblematic of beauty — to express her. He made her move so as to alight upon his

hand, expressing the state of love that had taken up residence in his heart and seized his emotions. In the second image, the poet attempts to express the state of brokenness that so often afflicts the one who has fallen in love, for he fears that his love may not be reciprocated; and this is what the symbolism of black, imprinted upon the shape of brokenness shown in the image, conveys. For love, when it strikes the heart, makes the lover a captive in the hand of the beloved, unable to bear separation, as is shown in the third image. In the third image, the poet reflects the state he yearns to live with his beloved, where each would recognize the worth of the other, and she would return his love so as to render them both happy — hence the butterfly alighting upon his palms, as if under his care, signifying that her love has entered a safe heart. All this is in keeping with the poet's words:

*How did I fall
 in love with a
 woman I have
 never met?
 I loved her
 until I came to
 fear my very
 love for her,
 For love, when
 it touches the
 hearts, cleaves
 them in twain;
 And even if
 those hearts be
 free, it
 enslaves them
 all the same.
 How sublime is
 she, and how
 delicate!
 If she but knew
 my right, she
 would know
 hers also.*

Through these images, it becomes evident that the emphasis placed upon image-discourse in the digital poem "is grounded in scientific and aesthetic justifications. The image has become the

principal source for the transmission of culture, and indeed for the dissemination of civilizational appearance, given the elements of suspense, the speed of communication, and the embellishment of represented subjects that it possesses. To these creative artistic and aesthetic qualities must be added the necessary integration and convergence between the two texts or two discourses: the discourse of language and the discourse of the image."²² This claim does not mean that the presence of the word has receded in favor of the image and the colors and movement that accompany it; rather, all these elements share among themselves, together with the word, in such a way that each interprets the other — as in the following images:



Figure 2. Further visual sequences accompanying the recitation.

Through these images, with their faded and lifeless colors, the poet endeavors to reflect the sorrowful state into which this lover has fallen, depicting him in a glass enclosure that has sunk with him to the bottom of the sea. He is thus akin to a prisoner and to one drowned by love. Beyond this, the poet portrays him in a state of longing, wishing that the beloved might be worthy of all the love he bears for her, when he says: "The soul is like a bird that loves its own kind." To bring this idea closer, he provides us with the image of two birds exchanging love, for he hopes that his beloved will return the same feelings to him. These accompanying images are nothing other than a projection of his words:

*Love, when it
 gladdens the
 hearts, harms
 them too,
 And it enslaves
 none but the
 free.*

*If she but knew
 my worth, she
 would know
 hers also.*

*The soul is like
 a bird that
 loves its own
 kind;*

*Unseen, my
 soul has known
 her soul.*

*Her
 estrangement
 has become its
 companionship*

*So that the
 heart cannot
 forget her,
 even when it
 falters.
 Her passion
 has wearied
 both her*

*human and her
jinn;
Beautiful one
— if she forget
me not, I shall
never forget
her.*

We may infer from the above images that the visual discourse accompanying the poem carries broader implications than its linguistic discourse. The images employed, with their colors and movement, constitute a psycho-physiological element that determines the process of reception, in that "the animated image has become a space built upon many elements of seduction and the cultivation of the human taste that every soul yearning for the aesthetic and the delightful seeks. Among such aesthetic delight in the animated digital image is the harmony and appropriateness of its colors — its computer-rendered colors — which form a background that anchors and frames space, opening the scene onto a spontaneous visual perception that takes pleasure in the whole as a vision that opens upon the possible equivalent of reality. Digital computer technology has gone to formidable lengths in this respect, especially at the level of the rhythm of colors and of their visual music."²³ A vivid, moving life is thus capable of rendering the text pulsating with life and with beauty.

3.3 The Aesthetics of Sound and Music

The sonorous level is considered one of the most important elements upon which digital poetry focuses, given that it is laden with connotations and meanings, and given that it constitutes a fundamental pillar of the text through the accompanying musical pieces that serve the linguistic discourse and the image attached to it. Despite this importance, sound and image were long regarded as complementary elements — that is, as not essential to the structure of the text. "Literary texts that have resorted to the technological apparatus did not reach a level that genuinely expresses the quasi-complete technological age in which we live until they began to view the elements borrowed from

electronic space as an essential part of the structure of the text, as one of its important elements — an element whose loss or disabling deprives the text of part of its artistic and conceptual value."²⁴

Tamim al-Barghouti has presented his poetic discourse accompanied by calm piano music, in order to lend his recitation a still greater distinction and to reinforce the image embedded with the linguistic discourse. Through its interaction with the other elements, this music achieves connotations and suggestions tied to hidden meanings; moreover, it produces an artistic and aesthetic effect upon the receiver and governs the process of his reception. The piano music inserted into the clip carries dense emotional charges, reflecting the energy of love that besets the poet and that brings him to a state of disclosure of his feelings and sensations.

3.4 The Aesthetics of Production (Mise-en-Scène)

The mere realization of all the elements enumerated above — language, style, image, sound, motion, and so on — does not, in itself, grant us the right to speak of the literariness of any given text, unless these elements are produced and staged in a manner that does justice to them. For this reason, "one of the important matters in the digital interactive work is the productional vision (al-ru'ya al-ikhrajiyya), since its producer seeks to present virtual worlds with which the receiver may coexist in a complete or near-complete fashion. This is achieved only through a creative capacity that masters the productive tools; accordingly, the creator may avail himself of a technical executant or an artistic director who assists him in realizing his ultimate vision of the work — on condition, however, that the planning and the productional vision proceed from the creator himself. Otherwise, he will remain merely the realizer of the literal text, which is but one level of digital interactivity. If, however, he is able to combine both design and execution, this is undoubtedly more complete."²⁵

It is worth noting that "this synthesis between the various constitutive elements that make up the hypertext — namely language, image, and sound — will be successful to the extent that it leads to an overwhelming dynamism within the text, thereby making it pulsate with creativity and renewal. Digital literature, in the end, is nothing but a coordination of its constitutive components in a skillful manner that renders them susceptible to reconstruction and reconfiguration."²⁶ It is therefore impossible to regard the discourse of language, the discourse of the image, and the discourse of music in the digital poetic text as discourses isolated from one another. For the discourse of the image, for example, plays "a complementary, illustrative role accompanying the discourse of language, which is precisely what digital poetry strives to refute: it has sought instead to present a model in which these discourses (the discourse of language, the discourse of the image, the discourse of sound ...) converge, and in which the boundaries between them collapse so that they are fused into a unified form."²⁷

Conclusion

From the foregoing analysis, it becomes apparent that digital poetry constitutes a qualitative leap in the history of contemporary Arabic poetic creativity. By migrating from the paper carrier to the electronic carrier, the poetic text has acquired new aesthetic horizons in which language, image, color, motion, sound, and production-design converge to form a single semiotic configuration whose meaning resides in the interaction of its components. The case of Tamim al-Barghouti's poem "How Did I Fall in Love With a Woman I Have Never Met?" as broadcast on YouTube, illustrates how digital media reproduce poetic beauty: the poet's recitation, the gentle piano accompaniment, the symbolic iconography of the butterfly, and the chromatic strategies orchestrated by the director cooperate to render the receiver an active participant in the aesthetic experience, rather than a passive consumer.

Digital poetry, far from being a hybrid or marginal genre, thus emerges as a legitimate field of experimentation in which the rhetoric of the digital reshapes — without abolishing — the rhetoric inherited from the Arabic poetic tradition.

Notes

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