



From Word to Syntax: The Evolution of the Rhetorical Concept of the Poetic Image in the Classical Heritage

Arradj ELHOUARIA

University of Oran 1 – Ahmed Ben Bella

Abstract:

This article examines the concept of the poetic image as a fundamental aesthetic element in the construction of poetry, parallel to rhythm as a defining feature that distinguishes poetic discourse from ordinary speech. The study begins by emphasizing the centrality of the image in achieving the specificity of poetic expression, as it represents the artistic medium that embodies the poet's aesthetic and intellectual stance.

The article traces the evolution of the concept of the poetic image in the Arab rhetorical tradition by analyzing the views of a number of rhetoricians and critics who contributed to shaping and refining its theoretical and artistic boundaries.

It concludes that the concept of the poetic image in classical Arabic rhetoric was not merely partial or descriptive, but rather an integrated intellectual system combining craftsmanship and imagination, rhythmic structure and figurative meaning – making the Arabic rhetorical heritage among the earliest traditions to recognize poetic creation as an interwoven linguistic and aesthetic act.

Keywords: *word; syntax; evolution; rhetoric of poetic imagery; classical heritage*

Du mot à la syntaxe : l'évolution du concept rhétorique de l'image poétique dans l'héritage classique

Résumé :

Cet article examine le concept de l'image poétique en tant qu'élément esthétique fondamental dans la construction de la poésie, parallèlement au rythme en tant que caractéristique distinctive qui différencie le discours poétique du langage ordinaire. L'étude commence par souligner le rôle central de l'image dans la spécificité de l'expression poétique, car elle représente le moyen artistique qui incarne la position esthétique et intellectuelle du poète.

L'article retrace l'évolution du concept d'image poétique dans la tradition rhétorique arabe en analysant les points de vue d'un certain nombre de rhétoriciens et de critiques qui ont contribué à façonner et à affiner ses limites théoriques et artistiques.

Il conclut que le concept d'image poétique dans la rhétorique arabe classique n'était pas simplement partiel ou descriptif, mais plutôt un système intellectuel intégré combinant savoir-faire et imagination, structure rythmique et sens figuratif, faisant de l'héritage rhétorique arabe l'une des premières traditions à reconnaître la création poétique comme un acte linguistique et esthétique entremêlés.

Mots clés : mot ; syntaxe ; évolution ; rhétorique de l'image poétique ; héritage classique



Introduction:

The image is a fundamental pillar of poetic construction, no less significant than rhythm. While one cannot ignore the rhythmic effect produced by sound elements in literary discourse – especially poetry – it is equally impossible to overlook the artistic and aesthetic impact of imagery. It is the image “that grants speech its poetic quality,” distinguishing its stylistic form and expressive uniqueness from other discourses.

Based on this distinctiveness – which marks literature as a genre differing from ordinary speech – poetry is viewed as “a unique imaginative activity distinct in nature from other human activities.” Modern criticism, adopting this perspective, seeks to penetrate the fabric of the poem, contemplating it as a structure of interrelated components whose interactions reveal the poem’s meaning and its distinctive way of enriching the reader and deepening self-awareness and experience of reality.

Hence, modern critics have emphasized the essential role played by imagery in literary – particularly poetic – texts, treating it as the means “by which the poem and the poet’s vision of reality are explored, and as one of the key standards for judging the authenticity of poetic experience and the poet’s ability to shape it into a coherent pattern that yields aesthetic pleasure and insight to the reader.”

1. Theoretical Foundations of the Poetic Image in the Rhetorical Heritage:

Critics have long differed over whether the theoretical formulation of the poetic image originated with early

Western criticism or within the Arab rhetorical and critical tradition itself. Thus, “the disagreement among critics and scholars has been evident regarding the historical rooting of the term, as this issue occupied a significant part of their studies – some defending its originality in our classical criticism, others asserting its modernity and denying any traditional roots.”

A third group sought to reconcile the ancient and modern origins, considering “the term modern in its psychological connotations, yet ancient in essence, dating back to the early awareness of literature’s distinct nature.” This approach regarded the classical heritage through a modern understanding of the artistic image, while situating it in dialogue with related fields such as philosophy and theology.

Accordingly, defining the poetic image precisely necessitates engaging multiple disciplines – philosophy, aesthetics, psychology, and literary studies – which have all contributed to enriching its theoretical and artistic framework. As a result, “its modern concept has expanded and become more complex due to this diversity and the variety of artistic and scientific approaches across historical periods.” The scholar exploring the nature of imagery thus finds a multitude of interpretations and analyses: “what the critic seeks differs from what the philosopher aims to uncover, and both differ from the linguist – all of whom may, in turn, diverge or converge with the psychologist who traces the moment of creative inspiration to its obscure beginnings.”

Moreover, even within each intellectual camp, “differences persist; one cannot place Aristotle’s views alongside Hegel’s merely because both were philosophers.”



1. The Rhetorical Perspective on the Poetic Image in Classical Heritage:

The concept of the poetic image in Arabic rhetoric developed through various interpretative stages, mirroring the intellectual evolution of rhetoric itself. Over the centuries, “rhetorical study offered distinct concepts reflecting its own understanding of the artistic image – its nature, value, and function – drawing from its analyses of poetic and Qur’anic texts and from Greek rhetorical legacy.”

Thus, classical rhetoric approached imagery from two complementary angles:

1. **The formal rhetorical dimension**, treating the image as a *figurative transformation* of meaning through similarity (as in simile and metaphor) or contiguity (as in metonymy and synecdoche).
2. **The perceptual dimension**, viewing the image as a *sensory presentation of meaning*, emphasizing its appeal to perception and its power to evoke mental pictures in the recipient’s imagination.

1.1. Poetic Craft and the Concept of Image in Al-Jahiz:

The foundational conception of the poetic image emerged in *Al-Jahiz’s* (d. 255 AH) theory of poetic craftsmanship – the art of composition and the aesthetic principles underlying it. In his famous statement:

“Meanings lie scattered on the road, known to the Persian and the Arab, the Bedouin and the villager alike; what matters is the arrangement of meter, the choice of words, the smoothness of expression, the abundance of flow, the soundness of nature, and the excellence of weaving. Poetry

is indeed a craft, a kind of weaving, and a form of depiction.”

A superficial reading might suggest that Al-Jahiz favored form over meaning and that poetic imagery derives from sound and rhythm. Yet a deeper reading reveals that his true aim was to distinguish between the *communicative* function of speech (focused on meaning alone) and the *rhetorical* function, which “concerns the beauty and quality of expression itself – residing not in meaning or wording separately, but in weaving, structure, and composition.”

Thus, Al-Jahiz viewed poetic expression as an organic unity where meaning and form are inseparable – a harmony of artistry, rhythm, and eloquence that elevates language to aesthetic creation. His notion of *taswir* (depiction) therefore aligns with the concept of *craftsmanship* – “the skilled shaping of words to sensuously present meaning and give it a perceptible form.”

1.2. The Image and the Concept of Formulation in Qudama ibn Ja‘far:

Qudama ibn Ja‘far extended this *craft-based* vision through a more systematic, philosophically influenced approach. In *Naqd al-Shi‘r*, he treated poetry as an *art* governed by rational criteria of perfection:

“Since poetry is an art, and the aim of every art is to bring what is produced therein to the utmost refinement and excellence... everything made through art has two extremes — utmost perfection and utmost defect — and the degrees in between.”

Thus, Qudama divided poetry into excellent, poor, and intermediate categories based on the degree of harmony among its elements. He likened meanings to raw material and poetry to the shaping of that material:



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“Meanings are available to all poets; they are like the raw matter, while poetry is the form imposed upon it, just as wood or silver is shaped in craftsmanship.”

Hence, the poetic image for Qudama represents the artistic act of shaping and adorning meaning – a form-giving process analogous to that of the craftsman working his material into beauty without altering its essence.

1.3. The Nature of the Rhetorical Approach to the Poetic Image in Al-Jurjani:

1.3.1. *The Theory of Nazm (Composition) and the Rhetorical Transformation:*

Al-Jurjani’s theory of *nazm* (syntactic composition) marks a pivotal transformation in Arabic rhetoric. He recognized the profound interrelation between syntax and meaning – the way structure itself generates poetic effect.

For him, poetry is not a matter of isolated words or meanings, but of *arrangement*:

“Nazm is nothing but placing words in the manner required by the rules of grammar, knowing their relations and observing their prescribed order.”

Meaning, therefore, derives from syntactic interdependence; each word’s significance depends on its position and contextual relation to others.

1.3.2.. *Composition and Structural Meaning:*

Al-Jurjani distinguished between *arranging sounds or letters* and *arranging meanings through syntax*. The poet first organizes meanings in thought, then gives them linguistic form – “for words are the vessels of meanings; as meanings are ordered in the mind, so must words follow in speech.”

Thus, poetic beauty lies not in verbal succession alone but in the harmony of conceptual and syntactic relations – “the coordination of meanings and their convergence as reason dictates.”

1.3.3. Composition and the Artistic Value of the Poetic Image:

Within this framework, the poetic image becomes an essential product of *nazm*. Its artistic value arises from the organic unity between literal (syntactic) and figurative (rhetorical) meanings – metaphor, simile, and representation being integral to composition itself, not external embellishments.

Unlike earlier rhetoricians who treated imagery as ornament, Al-Jurjani viewed it as a constitutive element of expression – a *psychological and aesthetic fusion* between intellect and emotion, syntax and imagination. Hence, the poetic image, in his theory, is “the artistic formulation of meaning,” where *form and content, syntax and sensation*, interpenetrate to produce true poetic creativity.

And although the conception of the image presented by al-Jahiz falls within foundational frameworks, the originality introduced by Abd al-Qahir al-Jurjani lies in “extracting formulation from the dispersion of generality to the limits of particularity. This was achieved through his realization that the measure of similarity is not an artistic criterion, so he disregarded it and made the specificity of the image the artistic basis required in evaluation. The concept of the image in our ancient criticism developed significantly when he linked the parts of this image through relations, starting from his taste and relying on grammar to regulate what can be regulated of these relations or links between words,



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believing that they are absolute and not limited.” The ancient rhetorical and critical schools contributed to strengthening the formalist trend, to the extent that the focus “became directed toward rules and laws that were of little use, as they did not understand the image as an inseparable part of the idea, but rather considered the image [...] as an end in itself. The image in its partial sense here – metaphor, simile, metonymy, and the like – is nothing more than a means of embellishing meaning, not of adding a new one,” through which the image acquires its effective dimension that stems from the harmony between form and meaning in an intrinsic relationship where neither is superior to the other.

Abd al-Qahir al-Jurjani was among the first rhetoricians to enthusiastically provide an artistic and aesthetic description of the poetic image, treating it as “an essential part of formulation or composition.” Thus, he transcended the sensory aspect entrenched by the formalist tendency, for he did not see “in the image sensory attributes and aesthetic features easily grasped by the mind, but rather linked this image to an emotional bond that connects it to the soul and fuses it with the heart.” He also considered its aesthetic activity an inseparable part of grammatical operation, for the technical concept of the image, according to him, arises as “the artistic formulation of meaning, or the arrangement of words within an interactive linguistic context,” founded upon the interdependence between the structure and meaning of poetry, where neither precedes the other.

This approach adopted by al-Jurjani contributed to an epistemological breakthrough comparable to what Western scholars would later achieve, in that “the components and

elements of the image are organized through continuously renewed and unlimited forms and relations." Western critical approaches have affirmed that one of the essential conditions for perceiving the aesthetic value of a poetic text lies in "continuous discovery through images within that model, rediscovering and renewing old relations. Since the model is constantly changing, there is no poetic image that achieves absolute truth because it is boundless." The rhetorical accomplishment of al-Jurjani was, in fact, "a qualitative leap in theorizing the poetic image, thanks to his delightful study *Asrar al-Balagha* (*Secrets of Eloquence*). The reader feels, from the very beginning, that the man is fully conscious of the subject he is addressing," particularly in outlining the distinctive and unique features of poetry as a literary genre with a rhythmic and semantic specificity marking its unique structure and formation. Thus, as Muhammad al-Wali notes: "Al-Jurjani became aware of the function that Roman Jakobson calls the 'poetic function,' which encompasses the diverse qualities that adorn speech and make it have an aesthetic effect on the receiver. Although these qualities are diverse, contemporary rhetoricians, despite their methodological differences, almost unanimously agree that they are distributed between two domains: one phonetic-repetitive, and the other semantic."

This perspective intersects with the theoretical framework indicated by John Cohen, whose viewpoints branched into two levels: "the first phonetic, the second semantic. Poetry differs from prose by features realized at both these levels. The phonetic features have already been codified and named, and a verse is any linguistic form whose phonetic aspect bears these features. Because these features are



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directly perceptible and rigorously regulated, they still represent, in the public's eyes, the criterion of poetry."

However, these criteria do not constitute the sole measure by which the poetic distinctiveness of a literary text is determined. The features related to the semantic level "form the second poetic source of language. These features were also the subject of attempts at codification within the art of writing known as rhetoric."

While many studies adopt the division between phonetic and semantic levels for poetic analysis, the method followed by Abd al-Qahir al-Jurjani rests on the idea of interrelation within the limits of composition. In this regard, he says: "If you see someone knowledgeable in the essence of speech admiring poetry or prose and then praising it for its wording, saying: sweet and graceful, elegant and pleasing, delightful and smooth, charming and wonderful, know that he is not informing you of states relating to the sounds of letters or the apparent linguistic structure, but rather of something that occurs in the heart, a virtue kindled by the intellect from its spark."

From this view, al-Jurjani points out that the appreciation of poetry based on its wording is, in fact, not due to its phonetic material, but to its suggestive meaning that stirs emotion in the heart. To clarify this expressive effect of meaning, al-Jurjani offers an in-depth explanation: "As for comparison, metaphor, and other types of *badi'* (rhetorical embellishments), there is no doubt that beauty and ugliness in speech arise only from meanings, without words having any share, or any role in enhancing or diminishing that beauty."

This text highlights the fundamental role of meaning in elevating “or lowering the value of the phonetic ornament called *jinās* (paronomasia). Al-Jurjani insisted that meaning is what gives *jinās* its poetic value. As for the other forms of *badi'*, he affirmed that words have no part in their elevation or degradation.” Thus, meaning “is the source of merit in making all forms of *badi'* occupy a lofty position in the poetic text.”

In another context, al-Jurjani strongly defends the word and its formal expression, as shown in his statement: “It is known that speech is like depiction and crafting, and meaning is like the material in which the depiction and crafting occur, like silver or gold shaped into a ring or bracelet. Just as it would be absurd, when judging the workmanship of a ring, to look at the silver or gold rather than at the crafting itself, it is likewise absurd, when discerning merit in speech, to look only at its meaning. And just as preferring one ring over another because its silver is purer or its gem finer is not preference based on craftsmanship, so preferring a verse for its meaning is not preference as poetry. This is decisive, so understand it.” Following this logic, al-Jurjani’s stance reveals his clear advocacy of form and image—an inclination “that raises the question of preferring one verse over another. Such preference, if based on meaning as a criterion, would not treat the verses as poetry.”

An initial reading of the text above reveals a convergence between the visions of al-Jahiz and al-Jurjani—a convergence that is, however, justified: “If there is a Jahizian influence [...], it must be a transformed influence. Al-Jahiz likely emphasized the sonic image—the phonetic configuration—whereas al-Jurjani insisted on semantic



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configuration,” which serves the principle of interconnection between structures stemming from composition itself. “Composition (*nazm*) is the essence of poetics in artistic expression; poetics does not arise from phonetic play or rhetorical devices [...] but is founded on arrangement and structure within textual context, not on words as mere deviations from ordinary use.” Thus, the artistic value of the poetic text is distinctive: in poetry, it cannot be achieved through an isolated view of verse. Indeed, “this is the logic by which Abd al-Qahir responded to linguists and grammarians, who were obsessed with confining linguistic activity to rules that are memorized and applied.” However, al-Jurjani’s position was different with regard to poetry. Therefore, his concept of the image is defined as “the artistic formulation of meaning, or the arrangement of words within an interactive linguistic context,” linking the image intrinsically to composition—both conceptually and analytically.

1.4 The Poetic Image and the Criteria of Classification in al-Sakkaki’s Theory

Al-Sakkaki’s rhetorical project is based on a taxonomy of inquiries fundamentally requiring “the integration of discourse levels (phonetic, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic), as well as the non-separation between the rhetoric of persuasion (al-Jahiz) and the rhetoric of delight (al-Khafaji). This project appears fully developed in al-Sakkaki’s *Miftah al-‘Ulum (Key of the Sciences)*, where rhetoric is the ‘key of sciences’ and their meeting point—it is the ‘discourse of discourses’ and the ‘science of sciences.’”

Based on this structure, it is evident that the epistemological path of *Miftah al-'Ulum* takes into account "the word (lexeme), the sentence (composition), and context (the appropriateness of discourse to situation). Although al-Sakkaki's rhetoric has been criticized for leaning toward rigidity due to its didactic side, which overshadowed the creative dimension of Arabic rhetoric," this characterization does not negate the pioneering contribution he made to the history of Arabic rhetoric, "particularly through his attention to the pragmatic aspect of literary language, achieved by integrating rhetoric with logic, morphology, syntax, prosody, and linguistics."

Al-Sakkaki's rhetorical view of the poetic image becomes evident through his discussion of *bayān* (figurative expression), which he defined as follows: "Discussion of it requires establishing a principle – that attempting to express a single meaning in various ways, by increasing or decreasing the explicitness of its signification, is impossible." Through this, he distinguished between denotative meaning and connotative (suggestive) meaning, i.e., between the literal usage of words and the evocative meaning acquired through associative relations enabled by the power of imagination.

1.5 The Poetic Image and the Concept of Imagination in Hazim al-Qartajanni

In his *Minhaj al-Bulagha wa Siraj al-'Udaba'* (*The Method of Orators and the Light of Writers*), al-Qartajanni proposed a textual approach to literature, seeking to highlight the poetic and artistic features that elevate ordinary speech to the level of literature.



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This book represents a pivotal stage in the history of Arabic rhetoric, for “while it draws upon the efforts of earlier critics, linguists, rhetoricians, and scholars of prosody, rhyme, and philosophy, it simultaneously seeks to present a new formulation of the theory of poetry in Arabic.” This theory constitutes a key component of his rhetorical system, based on distinguishing between rhetoric and poetry according to “the distinctive element in each: poetry is founded on imagination (*takhyil*), though it may use persuasive elements under the dominance of subjectivity, whereas rhetoric relies on persuasion, with imagination serving it.”

Hence, while the primary function of rhetoric is confined to persuasion—“it is constructed argument by argument”—poetry “is constructed image by image, due to the dominance of the imaginative function.” These are the essential differences between the mechanisms of persuasive and aesthetic discourse.

Examining the rhetorical stance toward the material and imagery of poetry across the history of Arabic rhetoric allows us to distinguish between two positions: “one holding that poetic material plays a key role in the poeticity of the text, and another maintaining that poeticity arises from the mode of expression rather than its material content.” Thus, “the first position may be called ‘substantialist,’ and the second ‘formalist,’ though a third position, combining both, can be conceived”—a stance exemplified by Hazim al-Qartajanni.

The features of this stance appear in al-Qartajanni’s conception of poetic material, as shown in his statement: “The conceptions naturally ingrained in souls and in their

ordinary beliefs that evoke joy, sorrow, or passion are what we should call original conceptions. Those that do not exist in souls or in ordinary beliefs are foreign conceptions—meanings acquired through learning and practice, such as the aims belonging only to certain sciences or crafts. The meanings connected with such specialized fields do not suit general poetic purposes, which appeal to what the public naturally delights in or is moved by. If such are used, they are flawed, being foreign to the purpose of speech; they become original in poetry only if the poem’s purpose is built upon imitating them and intentionally evoking imagination through them.”

This passage shows that al-Qartajanni distinguishes between two kinds of meanings: those “innate to human nature and universally affecting people, either negatively or positively—forming a shared reservoir of emotional understanding—and those acquired through learning, representing specialized knowledge not shared by all.”

Accordingly, the material of poetry should rely on innate conceptions, while acquired conceptions “can only be used if their scientific value is disregarded—that is, if they are treated not as knowledge but as material for imitation and imaginative evocation.” For this reason, al-Qartajanni sought to exclude discourses lacking imagination from poetry, since their “nature contradicts that of poetry and its essential characteristics. Poetry is imagination, meaning that it is far removed from abstraction and neutrality; sensuality is its foundation, tied to imagination as an activity, and emotional stimulation—toward things or ideas—is the measure of poetic success.”

From al-Qartajanni’s perspective, poetry thus serves his theory of imagination, being “an imaginative arousal of the



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recipient's emotions, intended to move him toward a specific attitude—leading him to perform or seek something, or to abstain from or reject it. [...] That is, the poetic images stimulate particular mental representations stored in the receiver's memory. When these stored images are reactivated by the poem's imagery, the recipient's imaginative and affective faculties connect these poetic representations with the revived memories." Hence, poetic discourse is founded on the principles of emotionality and sensuality. If "emotionality denotes the goal of poetry—its power to stir the recipient," then sensuality concerns "the nature of the perceptions forming the substance and meanings of poetry." Thus, "emotionality indicates the aim of poetry as an imaginative activity," while sensuality "refers to the material of this activity—the sensory images preserved in the poet's memory after the disappearance of the perceptible objects themselves."

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