

RESEARCH
ARTICLE**Kilito and the Excessive Interpretation of the Classical Narrative Text:
How Can We Read the Story Differently?**

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Abstract

Within the framework of Kilito's project in reading the Arabic narrative heritage, his analysis of a passage from Jurjani's *Asrar al-Balaghah* constitutes a site of paradox, stemming from his consideration of it as a narrative text and his search for elements of the narrated story within it through both analysis and, indeed, interpretation. In this study, we attempt to examine the mechanisms at work in this mode of reading, beginning with exploring his perspective on the literary genre and his conception of literature as a whole, aspiring to achieve unity within classical Arabic culture regardless of genre. The research also seeks to elucidate the role that narrative holds for him as both a field of study and of creativity without neglecting his methodological awareness or the place of interpretation in his thought to arrive at this form of reading described in the title as "the reading that raises its head." This concept, which has a Barthesian reference, does not, in the author's view, imply a lack of attention; rather, it signifies, on the contrary, a flow of ideas, provocations, and associations.

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Introduction

Abdelfattah Kilito's contribution to the reading of the classical Arabic heritage, and specifically its narrative aspect, is worthy of study due to the many paradoxes it encompasses. He has succeeded in unsettling the established certainties and taboos of reading by revitalising the language of criticism without introducing explicit theoretical frameworks or delineating the methods and approaches adopted in his readings. His approach neither rigidly applies nor entirely breaks with established methodologies; instead, it opens up a space for open dialogue with the text, wherein each party preserves its particularities, references, and identity. Kilito stands among the most astute contemporary Arab readers and lovers of narrative. In defining the contours of his project, he has titled its trajectory as the study of the narrative heritage, considering it sufficient in itself, as exemplified by such significant works as *One Thousand and One Nights*, *Kalila wa Dimna*, and the *Maqamat*. Alongside this significant focus, he has also read, in passing, various fragmentary texts, among them Jurjani's text, upon which our study seeks to shed light. In so doing, we seek to uncover, if only in part, the mechanisms by which Kilito's intellectual approach engages with the narrative text, as well as the methodology that underpins his reading—one which borrows from each method what enables him to produce a distinct and novel

interpretation that does not merely reproduce previous readings but instead adds to them, illuminating remote dimensions accessible only through profound critical intuition. It is not our aim here to judge or classify this type of reading, for reading in its contemporary sense has transcended the notions of criticism and debate, moving instead towards dialogue and engaging with texts as ever-renewed spaces of discourse and as sites of endless interpretative possibility. In this manner, Kilito offers his readings in a clear language that eschews the obscure jargon often claimed by elite circles, yet at the same time reveals a depth of reading in which, to borrow Barthes' expression, the voice of culture is elevated. This is achieved through his profound excavation of the meanings of meanings and the signifieds of signifiers, beginning with the language of the text itself as manifested in its lexical signifiers and what these acquire by way of further meanings when context is added. It is as if he alludes to Derrida's phrase that nothing is outside the text. However, he quickly moves to present a holistic vision of his reading, one in which interpretation, for him, pertains not only to ambiguity but to the entirety of the text.

1. Literary Genre between Permanence and the Imposition of Displacement:

While knowledge of literary genres is not considered a prerequisite for literary writing, it nonetheless represents a necessary condition for initiating the critical process, given that such knowledge enables one to identify the field in which the creative process operates and the texts it generates. Through this, one can understand the causes and motivations underlying such textual production and delimit the structures that constitute it within the boundaries of the particularity to which it belongs—particularity granted by its constituent elements. The specific criteria of genre allow the reader "to read the text correctly, for he ought not to demand of it that which is not among its constitutive characteristics; every text opens before its reader an aesthetic horizon that becomes a guiding criterion for reading."¹ However, in his endeavour to seek a comprehensive structural definition of the literary text, the researcher must, in Kilito's view, "not consider the genres in isolation, but rather approach the literary text regardless of its genre."² According to his view, this is the optimal solution for formulating a definition encompassing all literary forms. Such conceptions, in most of their stages, ultimately lead only to an empirical practice at the level of textual analysis, which presupposes (or implicitly adopts) at least to some extent the perspective of Maurice Blanchot, who maintains that "the book alone matters, in and of itself, apart from genres and outside the categories of prose, poetry, novel, testimony... under which it is supposed to be classified, rejecting their authority, which would seek to fix it in a place and assign it a form. The book no longer belongs to any literary genre; every book belongs to literature alone."³

At that point, the scholar's concern becomes the essence of literature rather than its genre—in a broader sense, the whole rather than its part. Kilito, in another context, observes that the fragmentary and partial nature of the hypotheses advanced in the study of the *Maqamat* stems from a failure to recognise their complexity,⁴ Complexity arises from their richness and the participation of other genres in their textual composition. "One who reads al-Hariri," Kilito asserts, "will observe that all literary genres have their place within his *Maqamat*."⁵ This multiplicity of genres within texts necessitates a designation for each genre. Kilito cautions against being misled by such designations, which might suggest that a literary work belongs to a specific genre when, in fact, it does not. Conversely, he warns against excluding a text from the domain of a literary genre simply because it does not bear that designation. By way of example, he points to the term "maqama," which is not an appropriate designation for the *Maqama al-Fāsiyya* of Abu Sa'īd al-Wahrānī, given the absence of structural characteristics linking it to the works of al-Hamadani and al-Hariri. In contrast, the *Aḥādīth* of Ibn Sharaf al-Qayrawānī, although not explicitly labelled as maqamat by their author, contain many of the genre's defining features. This is because, as he states, "the maqamat indicates that being is manifested only within the limits of a particular genre."⁶ He rejects the pursuit of specialisation in the study and analysis of texts to the extent that he holds, "it is hardly an exaggeration to assert that the barriers we place between narrative genres have no real foundation: it is not possible to study a narrative genre in isolation from other genres."⁷ In this assertion lies an explicit call to re-examine what is read with care and to avoid advancing prejudgements, for a sudden flash of light is but a temporary blindness and the impression we gain from mere designations connects us to a particular horizon of expectation and a specific conception of the work, leading us to entertain ready-made evaluative judgements: "for a set of pre-existing rules directs the reader's understanding and automatically provides him with an evaluative reception."⁸

2. Method and the Duality of Representation and Transgression:

This generic disposition inherent in the literary text undoubtedly places the Arab critic before the persistent concern of seeking a method capable of encompassing this distinct mode of representation and the free association of the text's meanings and its cultural and sociological outputs. The Arab critic "feels today that it is no longer possible to establish a critical method or theoretical approach based on purely impressionistic, subjective, or arbitrary foundations, and that it has become necessary to undertake a profound contemplation of the phenomenon of the literary text as both a linguistic and social phenomenon—an integration of the particular and the universal—in order to arrive at a comprehensive vision of literature, culture, life, and the universe."⁹ As one of the manifestations of Kilito's holistic perspective in critical practice, it appears that he pays little attention to the illumination supposedly provided by a preconceived method based on the presumed genre or type of the text. For, in his view, the method implicitly carries a decision written in invisible ink to the effect that "when we study a text in the light of this or that method, we assume that the text is obscure, ambiguous, shrouded in thick and utter darkness; otherwise, what need would there be for light?"¹⁰ Suppose it is necessary to regulate the study and analysis of a text according to an approach framed by the procedures of a particular method. In that case, it must be borne in mind that the method is merely a mechanism—a means and not an end—and that its outcomes should not be considered final. The result is one reading among a sequence of many readings, guided by both reader and method rather than by the method alone; within this practice, objectivity is inevitably interwoven with subjectivity. In this regard, Kilito states unequivocally and without ambiguity: "Modern methods should always be placed in quotation marks, being procedural tools whose usefulness is relative and which are not magical instruments that achieve what we desire. Literature is studied in the light of literature and may also be studied in the light of other sciences."¹¹ The sensitivity and particular intimacy of the text are such that its author may find it difficult to comprehend after some time has passed since its creation. Thus, to suppose that a method or theory could fully unveil its meanings is a rare occurrence, if not an improbable one. For "reading—reading any literary text—is not something that any theory can definitively resolve. The procedures of reading theory do not resemble a recipe for preparing a meal, to which a novice cook might refer when she wishes to cook in her kitchen: should she adhere to its quantities, timings, and all specifications, she would achieve a good or at least acceptable dish."¹²

These aspirations are what have shaped, throughout Kilito's project of reading the narrative heritage, the particularity of his interpretive approach, his experience described as exceptional, and his discourse, which Abdellkebir Khatibi characterised as "the professorial discourse endowed with a repertoire of references and sources, and with endless debates among professors—serious, often pedantic—who listen to themselves as they speak, without furrowing their brows, as if the world were a stage for a seminar."¹³ This voracious appetite for reading and assimilating drives him to seek out the latent meanings within texts and to interrogate them. "the interpretive task undertaken by Kilito is, fundamentally, to awaken a profoundly deep origin after it has been dispersed into infinite versions contending with it for authenticity, and then to accompany the life or death of this origin within its versions."¹⁴

Moreover, suppose interpretation is a process of reading that benefits from the procedures of the method and is enriched by its intellectual and theoretical references. In that case, it is, nevertheless, a mechanism that draws more deeply from the critic's culture and draws upon his inner knowledge. Interpretation, as a particular mode of practice—undertaken by the select few in the cognitive sense of the Sufis¹⁵—yields its interpretative fruits only when received by a critic endowed with a high degree of culture, memory, and intelligence. To this point, Hamid Lahmidani alludes when he states: "As for the qualities required of the critic (or reader) if he wishes to discover the aesthetic value produced by the organic unity of the plot in the novel, they are intelligence and memory; these are, as is evident, subjective qualities for appreciating the beauty of the novel. Memory enables the reader to retain all the important elements and not forget them in interpretation, and intelligence allows him to perceive the nature of the relationships that exist among those very elements."¹⁶

Section Two:

1. Reading with Head Held High / Kilito as a Reader with Head Held High:

When the idea of the article had become settled and its purpose clarified, there arose an initial hesitation in choosing its title, wavering between "Excessive Interpretation" and "Reading with Head Held High." Both expressions serve to encapsulate its aim and indicate its central theme. While excess in interpretation may occur in the reading of any text, regardless of its genre or material nature—no matter the mode in which this type of interpretation operates, the language in which it is written, or the aspects it seeks to reveal in the work—reading with head held high is, at its core, derived from an

idea found in Barthes's *The Rustle of Language*. This notion encompasses a kind of reading that he calls "living reading," which Abdessalam Benabdelali explains as "a reading that does not respect the text—*irrespectueuse*—and does not submit to it; rather, it continually raises its head, pausing intermittently."

The author of *The Pleasure of the Text* does not claim that such reading is conducted in isolation but rather in a manner that does not respect the text. It is a reading that lifts its head from time to time—not out of negligence or lack of attention to the text, but as a result of the overwhelming influx of thoughts, the influx of insights, and the associations that arise, drawing the reader away from the text without alienating it from themselves. This is a fitting description of what Kilito accomplished in reading Jurjani's *Asrar al-Balaghah* after quoting a passage from it and asking: "To what meaning do tearing, splitting, diving, ascending, striking, and digging refer? If I were to claim that these images have a sexual meaning, my interpretation might seem crude and repugnant to some. However, the matter will be different for those who possess a degree of intellectual curiosity." This question posed by Kilito is the very spark that ignited the ideas in the chapter "[Jurjani and the Original Story; from the book *Al-Hikayah wa al-Ta'wil*, p. 13]."

Moreover, suppose we state that Kilito, in this chapter, offers a reading of this kind. In that case, the intention is not to classify it but rather to describe it and subsequently to examine the mechanisms he employed to support and demonstrate this interpretive achievement in order to understand [and interpret] this exposition—which, at first glance, may seem to some an audacious reading, especially given that it concerns an eminent authority and master of rhetoric, and may, as he says, "appear crude and repugnant to some." Nevertheless, reading in its contemporary understanding is generally less invested in the author than in the text itself, referring, of course, to Barthes and his notion of the "death of the author" and to Eco, who asserts: "When the work is completed, a dialogue commences between the text and its reader (the author is excluded from this dialogue),"¹⁷ For "writing has become an independent being; it does not depend for its existence on its reader and their conditions, nor even on its author and their context. It is free writing... deviation... unruliness."¹⁸

However, a reading of this [risky] kind is considered a venture, for it constitutes an encounter between a classical text—one whose meanings are held sacred within its cultural context—and an interpretative proposition that, while not implying the reader's disregard for the text, is nonetheless marked by its impulse towards initiation, being "a flow of ideas, provocations, and associations."¹⁹ In this sense, it represents at its core a personal reading, which—like interpretation—emanates from an inherently individual and subjective centre. This does not, in any sense, entail a repudiation of method, nor its literal adoption [with head bowed]; on the contrary, it is a mode of reading arising from an awareness of the necessity of comfortable positioning before, during, and after the reading, through a conscious and free (yet non-obligatory) appropriation of method, which affords the reader a measure of autonomy, in Todorov's terms: "To imagine that we can think without prejudices is the worst prejudice of all."²⁰ Barthes states, "In criticism, precise speech is possible only insofar as the responsibility of the 'interpreter' vis-à-vis the literary work coincides with the critic's responsibility towards his discourse."²¹

Here, the features of Kilito's self-awareness and methodological consciousness become manifest, as observed in such a [unrestrained] reading of Jurjani's *Asrar*:

A. Self-awareness: By providing sufficient justification to both the sympathetic and the reserved reader regarding such a reading, Kilito finds himself, at the very moment when the intellectually sensitive reader interrupts and initially rejects it as a crude and unsightly interpretation, obliged to demonstrate his hypothesis satisfactorily to the intellectually curious reader.²² He accomplishes this by pre-emptively responding to the questions he anticipates from his implied and actual readers. Kilito expects questions such as: "How did these images, for instance, transition from the latent fire in the flint to sexuality? Moreover, one might add: Surely you have taken this idea from the philosopher Bachelard, who wrote a book examining the sexual meanings associated with fire, but your recourse to this philosopher will be of no avail, for he analysed texts entirely remote from Arab culture..."²³ Of course, Kilito undertakes to answer such objections, as will be discussed in the following sections of this article.

B. Methodological awareness: This is evident in his oscillation between the outcomes of method and Western culture [Barthes, Bachelard], as well as the sensibilities of the heritage and intimacy of Arab culture. In this context, he believes in the dialogue between text and method, expressing this in his statement: "It will not benefit me to cite this or that scholar, this or that philosopher, if the Arab texts do not respond to the analysis I propose. I must present my interpretation to as

many classical texts as possible for verification and review; I must convince others that this interpretation is appropriate to Arab culture."²⁴ Returning to the book's title containing this reading, *Al-Hikayah wa al-Ta'wil (The Story and Interpretation)*, we recognise the necessity of "shifting from the illusion of the option of interpretation to the acknowledgement of the compulsion to interpret."²⁵ For, in short, reading here is "a method that surveys the text and re-explains its elements in light of assumptions that are nothing more than an understanding of the original contexts of the text: an image of an originating source text, or an absent text; in short, it is interpretation."²⁶

2. Kilito and the Evidence of Reading (The Text in the Presence of Poetry, the Lexicon, and Narrative):

Kilito's perspective on *Asrar al-Balaghah* is not limited to viewing it merely as a rhetorical discourse concerned with the discussion of metaphor in all its forms and varieties; rather, his view extends to observing all the ramifications of discourse embedded within its core, which collectively constitute its substance and express the value-richness of this source. This richness goes beyond theorising about the levels of rhetoric—representation, simile, and metaphor—to include their demonstration through his explanations and the citation of a considerable number of poetic verses. In so doing, Kilito identifies three types of discourse in Jurjani's work:

1. The rhetorical discourse that systematises the arts of metaphor.
2. The figurative discourse comprises the metaphors and similes employed by the author.
3. The poetic discourse comprises the verses invoked on nearly every book page.

From the sum of the relationships among these types, Kilito attempts to discern the features of the book's original story "and to sketch its outlines in a partial manner and with no small measure of hesitation and uncertainty."²⁷ Fully aware of the possible consequences of such a general vision and the proposed division—fragmentation and stumbling. "To base a critical judgement on a segment isolated from the remainder of the narrative text [narrative, in Kilito's case] constitutes a flagrant breach of methodological analysis and a complete distortion of the writer's conscious or unconscious intentions."²⁸

In truth, casting a spotlight on selected passages from *Asrar al-Balaghah* alone does not suffice to speak of the work or to judge it; indeed, to characterise such a focus, as in the previous statement, would be a flagrant violation of the author's intentions. However, to the extent that we may judge such a study as producing results limited to the textual passages examined, this does not preclude, on the other hand, the attempt itself, so long as the analysis of those areas remains within the scope of its priorities. In our study of Kilito's reading of what he terms the "original story" [within the first and second types of discourse], we shall confine ourselves to those aspects we consider unrestrained, unprecedented, and initially unacceptable, owing to the analysis they contain of meanings seemingly remote from those conventionally attributed to their signifiers and the intentions to which they have been interpreted. The focus here is on two texts by Jurjani in which Kilito delved deeply, scrutinising their constituent language and the accompanying use of representation and simile.

3. The Text and the Pleasure of the Signifier:

3.1 - The Text:

Jurjani, speaking of the "common vernacular" and discourse "belonging to the category of the particular," says of the latter:

"And if it is something that a speaker arrives at through deliberation and reflection, attains by seeking and striving, and is not like the former [...] but rather is concealed behind a veil that must be pierced by insight, and is covered by a sleeve that must be split through contemplation, and is a pearl at the bottom of the sea that can only be reached through the effort of diving, and is inaccessible atop a lofty height that is attained only by the exertion of climbing, and is latent like fire in flint that is not revealed until it is struck, and is interwoven with other things like veins of gold that do not show their surface easily but are obtained only by excavation and the sweat of one's brow in striving to master them. Indeed, if this is its

nature [...] then it is fitting that in such cases there be talk of distinction, precedence, priority, and of forerunners and successors."

3.2 – The Pleasure of the Signifier in Kilito's Reading of Jurjani's Text:

Kilito begins his analysis of the meanings of this text with a series of questions that he employs to achieve his aim, which, without exaggeration, entails an implicit accusation regarding Jurjani's intentions. He reproaches him for his excessive use of similes, arguing that "if the similes were incidental," as Kilito puts it, "if their purpose were merely clarification, Jurjani would have been content with one or two similes. Instead, he offered six, and this prolixity is not found only in the text we are studying but on every page of *Asrar al-Balaghah*."²⁹ He suggests that this prolixity is no less significant than the book's chapters and should not be overlooked. It is as if Kilito does not disregard Jurjani's admonition and counsel: "Put aside your passions, consult your reason, be truthful with yourself, and the grossness of your error in what you have seen and the ugliness of your mistake in what you have imagined will become clear to you..."³⁰

Within Jurjani's rhetorical discourse, Kilito identifies six images whose interpretation, he argues, refers to sexual connotations: "To what meaning do tearing, splitting, diving, ascending, striking, and digging refer? If I were to claim that these images have a sexual meaning, my interpretation might appear crude and repugnant to some. However, for those who possess a measure of intellectual curiosity, the matter will be different." Thus, he faces a grave accusation—against Jurjani's language and its meanings—which requires, for its substantiation and clarification, a series of evidences of the same kind, which must be derived from the language of the Arabs and from meanings that such expressions might bear in other contexts similar to that of Jurjani's phraseology. It is worth noting that all these meanings fall within the domain of earnest pursuit and diligent attainment, whether this effort is of an intellectual and conceptual nature—requiring faculties such as insight and contemplation—or whether it be represented in concrete terms, such as venturing into seas, scaling heights, kindling fire, or excavating for gold. However, Kilito does not suffice with merely tracing these images but delves further into the accompanying images, which possess a hidden metaphysical dimension relating to the pleasure of the text, independent of its author, influenced by the structuralists' conception of the text—specifically Barthes's view in his 1971 essay "From Work to Text," where he posits, in one of its aspects, that "the text is connected to a kind of pleasure akin to sexuality; it is an amorous event."³¹ Kilito's endeavour in this section thus constitutes the realisation of this active reading. This Barthesian view of the text manifests in creating something that transcends mere pleasure to reach *jouissance* in engaging with the text—a reading conducted at an advanced level of interaction, employing all the reader's thoughts, associations, and provocations. To the extent that Barthes himself asserts, "the pleasure of the text lies in that moment when my body yields its ideas, for my body has ideas other than my own."³² Thus, he shifts from criticism to the notion of reading, "which Barthes continually practised and theorised in his various writings, and within the notion of reading, *jouissance* operates not as a nucleus, but as a force."³³

Kilito, drawing upon the lexicon and texts from the *Maqamat* and *One Thousand and One Nights*, searches for evidence to support his opinion regarding the signifiers of tearing, splitting, and the pearl, thereby achieving a kind of sufficiency in absorbing the meanings that serve his approach in considering them signifiers related to pleasure—meanings whose loci in the text Kilito does not so much reveal as produce himself. Here, the discourse is on the language of pleasure as an inherent dimension within the discourse itself. In invoking these linguistic [lexicographical] and narrative references, he echoes Jurjani's statement in *Dalā'il al-Ijāz*: "When you embark upon interpretation, engage in the science of exegesis, compare some opinions with others, and wish to distinguish the sound from the unsound, and as you proceed, begin, add, and subtract... then all the doors ought to be presented to you one by one, and you must ask about them, door by door."³⁴

One might well ask to what extent Kilito has succeeded in his interpretation, his exegesis, and his adherence to Jurjani's words in this context. Our question here does not exclude Kilito's right to raise such questions, for, as the poet of reason Abu Tammam suggests, one places hope in the sky when it is veiled. The more the meanings of the text withhold and resist, the greater the stakes in pursuing them, and the more intensive the efforts of rigorous reading to uncover their secrets, as the reader-Sinbad seeks to capture the prey of meaning with the interpretive nets he casts. Kilito, as a reader, practises this craft and masters this pursuit. When faced with a master of Arabic and its sources, he exercises caution in such proximity, maintaining a distance that allows him to oscillate—touching the text without colliding. Thus, he preserves the text's authenticity and the integrity of his reading. Since reading seeks to rival the text and add to it, it draws its impetus from it and derives its legitimacy therefrom. Consider, for example, reading the poetry of al-Mutanabbi: would this not

excite you to learn about the scholar, estimating from the outset that such a reader must be competent even before beginning the act of reading?

The reader's struggle to understand the discourse "belonging to the category of the particular," to which Jurjani ascribes this description and which attracted Kilito's attention to the extent that it occupies a prominent place in his *Al-Hikayah wa al-Ta'wil*, is the very subject Kilito addressed in his earliest work when he sought to illuminate the concept of strangeness. Kilito marvels at Jurjani's words because such linguistic behaviour is unfamiliar to him; he finds it strange that Jurjani would use this manner of expression to describe and illustrate the reader's state with such sexual connotations. Ambiguity, in this sense, is intertwined with the concept of strangeness, and both fall within the category of the particular, for ordinary speech, in comparison, reveals its condition; it does not provoke investigation, questioning, or the effort to penetrate and explore it. In contrast, the marvellous and the strange—especially since both concepts border on and overlap with the notion of the fantastic—invite such inquiry.³⁵ In the same context, a researcher has argued that the connection between the strange and the marvellous lies in their shared characteristic of "transgression" (kharab), stating: "The marvellous is a matter of transgression, and the strange is likewise a matter of transgression. The justification for the attribute of transgression lies in the fact that the marvellous produces the same effect on the recipient; it appears that the attribute of transgression is what unites them."³⁶ This may explain why these two terms so frequently appear together in titles, such as "the marvellous and the strange," "the literature of marvels and oddities," and "accounts of wonders and rarities."

Mysterious art is founded upon a vision of transgression that penetrates beyond the surfaces of things—what Jurjani described as splitting, digging, and diving—to reach their essence. Its ambiguity arises from the fact that it originates from a realm previously unknown to the recipient, which psychologically affects the receiver, propelling them towards realms of pleasure and textual jouissance. As for the exposed and obvious vision, it neither provokes the soul nor compels its beholder to plumb its depths, for it harbours no latent meaning; its possessor has expended no effort in its pursuit, and thus it appears plainly before them, precluding any accompanying sense of pleasure or jouissance in reading, for familiarity has effaced it and obliterated its charms.

It is not surprising that Jurjani's poeticism prevails in his representation, as he describes elusive meanings as virginal, because they are unprecedented in speech, writing, or understanding. Consider what Abu Tammam said in praise of al-Mu'tasim regarding his poem:

سِمطان فيها اللؤلؤ المكنون	جاءتك من نظم اللسان قلادة
وأجادها التخصير والتلحين	حُذيت جذاء الحضرمية أرففت
حركات أهل الأرض وهي سكُونُ	إنسية وحشية كُثرت بها
خليّ الهديّ ونسجها موضُونُ	ينبوعها خضيلٌ وخليّ قريضها
نُصّت، ولكنّ القوافي عُونُ	أما المعاني فهي أبكارٌ إذا

English Translation:

A necklace of eloquence has reached you,

Fashioned after the fine Hadrami style, delicately wrought;

Human and wild alike are found in it in abundance,

Its source is lush, and the jewels of its verse are plentiful;
 As for its meanings, they are virginal—
 Twin rows in which hidden pearls reside;
 It is perfected by embellishment and adornment,
 Earth's people are in motion, yet are at rest;
 It is the adornment of a noble gift, its weave finely wrought—
 It has been strung, yet the rhymes are its support.

It is neither surprising nor blameworthy that such a notion should occupy the master's mind, as he describes the condition of the beautiful meaning that does not bestow its words plainly or easily. This is wonderfully manifest in Abu Tammam's description in the aforementioned verses: the pairings (human and wild / virginal and experienced) are, in truth, an extension of the signification of the strange and the familiar, the ambiguous and the clear, the common vernacular and the unique particular. Because its meaning is reclusive and unyielding, the intellect circles it while it remains still. For example, the people spent sleepless nights debating the meanings of al-Mutanabbi's poetry while he was oblivious to their far-reaching interpretations. If words are the embellishment of the text, then the meaning is its treasure, and it can only be reached through splitting, digging, and diving. The purpose of presenting this is to provide examples of what the ancient critics were accustomed to in this domain—specifically, this kind of tangible, corporeal simile in their critiques of meanings and texts. This is something Kilito himself mentions in an article entitled "On Descriptive Metaphorical Language among Arab Poetic Critics," where he discusses the vertical form of the poetic text, stating: "The verticality of the poem should mirror the verticality of the body," citing al-Hatimi: "The poem, like the human being, is defined by the connection of its parts; whenever one part is separated from another, and this separation occurs in the soundness of its composition, it leaves a defect in the body that undermines its beauty and obliterates its features of grace."³⁷

Kilito's deliberate focus on this particular passage prompts questioning. However, it is not surprising given his method of eliciting what is hidden and remote, the unthinkable—what one of his scholars described when noting Kilito's conception of writing as a site of ambiguity: "An ambiguity that may be considered among the interpretive foundations which enabled Kilito to discover things outside their familiar domains, restoring them to their distant origin before the proliferation of their forms."³⁸ Added to this is "Kilito's keenness to orient the subjects of his studies toward what Roland Barthes calls the realm of pleasure."³⁹

What truly provokes consideration, however, is that Kilito has previously addressed Jurjani on this very point when discussing the notion of "the meaning of the meaning" in *Dalā'il al-Ijāz*. As is his custom, he extracts select passages from their original contexts in that work to support his argument. While these texts do indeed accommodate feminine meanings—or, instead, are themselves such—for "the primary meanings understood from the very words themselves are brocades, embroideries, garments, and the like, and the secondary meanings alluded to by those primary meanings are those adorned with such brocades, beautified by such embroidery and ornamentation"—a process of corporealising and personifying meaning in the image of a beautiful woman whose appearance is enhanced by the brilliance of jewels and adornment. However, one senses in Kilito a particular sensitivity in tracing the semantic dimension and anticipating its hidden aspects—an approach that will later be amplified in the context of his search for the "original story" of rhetoric, or as he phrases it.

Thus, in the opening scene of *Al-Hikayah wa al-Ta'wil*, we find Kilito wholly devoted and prepared, like a vigilant seeker eager to capture the elusive prey of meaning—on the hunt for that which is both possible and impossible: possible because the lexical meanings and traditional references from narrative works support him, and impossible insofar as its interpreter may be described as crude and audacious since the remoteness of such interpretations would scarcely occur to either the ordinary or even the exemplary reader. To reach the farthest limits of such significations and their interpretation in this

manner—within a rhetorical context governed by a major scholar such as Jurjani and framed by the even broader pursuit of the secrets of rhetoric, not merely a single secret—remains rare. It is as if Kilito, in his turn, is searching for the secret behind the text and its latent semantic depths, drawing on Jurjani's concept of "the meaning of the meaning" and the content of rhetorical devices such as double entendre, allusion, and metaphor. Jurjani's text, in its textual immediacy (as if written with a single proximate meaning), offers Kilito the opportunity to turn over the meanings of this writing and, in reflecting upon it, to awaken distant images, uncover Jurjani's innuendos and the circumstances of his figurative expressions, and bring the distant close with the telescope of interpretation. Interpretation is the knowledge and understanding of the text's total context and compositional structure. To put it more clearly, "The study of structure in the composition of discourse transcends its surface, for the structure of discourse refers to other structures, and the significance of studying reference and anaphora lies in establishing an analytical structure that deepens our understanding and awareness of internal structures, and then in extracting indications that possess semantic representation within the cognitive domain."¹⁰

As a reservoir of meaning, the text requires a force to move it from a state of neutrality to a sphere of activity. This activity is realised through conscious and productive reading that believes in the energy of the text and the possibilities of the language in which it is articulated. Here, the reader does not remain confined to the singular semantic dimension of the text as presented in its verbal form and superficial meanings; instead, he seeks to lift his head and engage the intellect in the play of depths, investigating its other distant and profound semantic dimensions. According to Kilito's reading experience in *Al-Hikayah wa al-Ta'wil*, depth often arises from deficiency and ambiguity. There are words that, in the language of heritage texts, metaphorically signify depth. Kilito draws our attention to them: the walnut fruit within its shell, the virgin girl (the hidden pearl), the womb, and the sea, the most profound depth being the pearl within the oyster at the bottom of the sea. In his exploratory journey to read (textual) depths and to apprehend all that is latent and possible within them, he draws upon whatever he believes might support his associative reading—critical methods, cultural systems, and human knowledge, from criticism as an approach to a text to reading as the production of a text upon a text; from structuralism to deconstruction, passing through theories of reading and assuming the various roles of the reader,¹¹ And interpretation as reality, method, and existence.

However, the possibilities of interpretation and the potentialities of reading are themselves bound by the constraints of rationality, for the task of the intellect about the text "is to labour continually in probing for the irrational that surrounds, envelops, and lies within it, to engage in dialogue with it, and to confer upon it a degree of rationality."¹² This is precisely what Kilito wagered on from the outset, as evidenced by the proofs he assembled to demonstrate the pleasure of the signifier in Jurjani's text, which challenges those who steadfastly maintain the innocence of the text's meanings. Among the criteria that determine the reasonableness and legitimacy of reading—or, more precisely, grant it the force to be more readily accepted based on its outcomes—is research that relies on a strategy aimed at uncovering hidden relationships and seeking to establish connections with its verbal carriers as lexemes that assume different semantic directions within their contextual environment, to link or relate the message or its components to a particular subject. Among these strategies is recall, which consists of retrieving from memory whatever is relevant to the subject, relying on reflection and the review of linguistic, logical, and pragmatic facts, and insight, which involves relating the linguistic message to the sphere of social concepts surrounding the producer of the text and to the system of usage familiar to the speaker. Finally, there is intuition, despite the controversy regarding its value as a reliable factor in reading or its rejection as subjective and thus non-objective, as in Bloomfield's behaviourist linguistic school.¹³

Endnotes and References

¹ Mohammed Mishbal, "Rhetoric and the Concept of Literary Genre," *Alam al-Fikr* [World of Thought], Supreme Council for Arts and Letters, Kuwait, vol. 30, no. 2, September 2001, p. 60.

² Abdelfattah Kilito, *Literature and Strangeness: Structuralist Studies in Arabic Literature*, Dar Toubkal Publishing, 12th ed., 2015, p. 23.

³ Tzvetan Todorov, *The Theory of Literary Genres*, p. 22; quoted from: Maurice Blanchot, *The Book to Come*, 1959 (*Le Livre à venir*, 1959).

⁴ Abdelfattah Kilito, *Al-Maqamat*, trans. Abdelkarim Cherkaoui, Dar Toubkal, 2nd ed., 2001, p. 6.

⁵ Abdelfattah Kilito, *Literature and Strangeness*, p. 84.

⁶ Abdelfattah Kilito, *Al-Maqamat*, p. 178.

⁷ Abdelfattah Kilito, "Between the Novel and Classical Narrative," *Al-Karmel* Journal, no. 10, 1 October 1983, p. 317. It appears that this article, from which this citation is taken, became—after minor revisions—a preface to the book *Al-Hikayah wa al-Ta'wil* (*The Story and Interpretation*). It is worth providing an example of the specific alteration made to this phrase: "The barriers we place between genres have their justification [changed: have no real foundation], but they remain relative. Many threads bind the genres together on multiple levels." [Preface to *Al-Hikayah wa al-Ta'wil*].

⁸ Tzvetan Todorov, *The Theory of Literary Genres: Studies in Intertextuality, Writing, and Criticism*, trans. Abd al-Rahman Bouali, Ninawa Publishing for Studies, Publishing and Distribution, 1st ed., 2016, p. 13.

⁹ Tamer Fadel, *The Second Language in the Problematic of Method, Theory, and Terminology in Modern Arabic Critical Discourse*, p. 90.

¹⁰ Abdelfattah Kilito, *Al-Hikayah wa al-Ta'wil: Studies in Arabic Narrative*, Dar Toubkal Publishing, 2nd ed., 1999, p. 7.

¹¹ Jalal Al-Hakamawi, "Abdelfattah Kilito: Why Do We Read Certain Books While We Are Nearly Dying of Fear?" published on the website *Alawan* (alawan.org), quoted from *Asharq Al-Awsat* newspaper. See also: *Masar: Without Prior Planning*, pp. 84–85.

¹² Abd al-Malik Murtad, "Reading between Theoretical Constraints and the Freedom of Reception," *Tajalliyat al-Hadatha* Journal, Algeria, no. 4, June 1996, p. 13.

¹³ Abdelfattah Kilito, *Literature and Strangeness*, p. 6.

¹⁴ Khalid Belkacem, "The Book," *Al-Dawha Cultural Magazine*, Ministry of Culture and Arts, Doha, Qatar, no. 53, 2012, p. 8.

¹⁵ One of the early Sufis held this view in his discussion of understanding and interpreting the text: "Interpretation (*ta'wil*) is for the elite, and explanation of the revelation (*tafsir manzil*) is for the common people." For further reading, see Abd al-Karim ibn Hawazin ibn Abdallah al-Qushayri, *Lata'if al-Isharat*, vol. 3, ed. Ibrahim Basyuni, Egyptian General Book Organisation, Cairo, p. 210.

¹⁶ Lahmidani, *The Structure of the Narrative Text*, p. 16. (Perhaps quoted from: Forster, *The Plot of the Story*, pp. 131–32.)

¹⁷ Umberto Eco, *The Mechanisms of Narrative Writing*, trans. Moreover, ed. Said Benkrad, Dar Al-Hiwar for Publishing and Distribution, Syria, 1st ed., 2009, p. 51.

¹⁸ Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Mundhir Ayashi, Center for Civilisational Development, Aleppo, 1st ed., 1999, p. 8.

¹⁹ Abdelfattah Kilito, *I Speak All Languages, but in Arabic*, p. 110; quoted from: *The Rustle of Language*, p. 33 (in French).

²⁰ Tzvetan Todorov, "Autonomy," trans. Mohammed Ahmed Tajjo, *Al-Adab Al-Alamiyyah* [World Literature Journal], Syria, no. 136, 1 November 2008, p. 28.

²¹ Roland Barthes, *The Structuralist Analysis of Narrative*, trans. Antoine Abu Zaid, Oweidat Publications, Beirut–Paris, 1st ed., 1988, p. 83.

²² Abdelfattah Kilito states:

"... If I were to claim that these images have a sexual meaning, my interpretation might appear crude and repugnant to some. However, for those who possess a degree of intellectual curiosity, the matter will be different. Such a reader may express sympathy, but will remain reserved until I provide a satisfactory demonstration of the hypothesis I am proposing." [*Al-Hikayah wa al-Ta'wil*]

²³ Abdelfattah Kilito, *Al-Hikayah wa al-Ta'wil*, p. 13.

²⁴ Abdelfattah Kilito, *Al-Hikayah wa al-Ta'wil*, p. 12.

²⁵ Naomi Sutherland, "The Novel as Interpretation and Interpretation as a Novel," trans. Mahmoud Falahah, *Al-Adab Al-Ajnabiyyah* [Foreign Literature Journal], Syria, no. 70, 1 January 1992, p. 34.

²⁶ Mohammed al-Daghmoumi, *Critique of Criticism and the Theory of Contemporary Arab Criticism*, p. 269.

²⁷ Abdelfattah Kilito, *Al-Hikayah wa al-Ta'wil*, p. 9.

²⁸ Hamid Lahmidani, *Towards a Socio-Structural Analysis of the Novel*, University Publications / Literary Series 03, February 1984, p. 12.

²⁹ Abdelfattah Kilito, *Al-Hikayah wa al-Ta'wil*, p. 13.

³⁰ Al-Jurjani, *Dalā'il al-I'jāz* [The Proofs of Inimitability], p. 7.

³¹ Mohammed Azzam, *The Absent Text: Manifestations of Intertextuality in Arabic Poetry (A Study)*, Publications of the Arab Writers Union, Damascus, 2001, p. 17. [Electronic version]

³² Hamid Lahmidani, *Towards a Socio-Structural Analysis of the Novel*, University Publications 03, February 1984. [This is Barthes's statement in the book's introduction.]

³³ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Fouad Safa and Al-Hussein Subhan, Dar Toubkal Publishing, 1st ed., 1988, p. 6.

³⁴ Al-Jurjani, *Dalā'il al-I'jāz* [The Proofs of Inimitability], pp. 22-23.

³⁵ Tzvetan Todorov, *Introduction to the Literature of the Fantastic*, trans. Al-Sadiq Boualem, ed. Mohammed Berrada, Dar Al-Kalam, Rabat, 1st ed., 1993, p. 67.

³⁶ Abd al-Hayy al-'Abbas, *The Construction of Terminology (The Marvellous, the Strange, the Supernatural, and the Fantastic) between Lexicographical Constraints and Usage Anxiety*, 1st ed., Al-Matba'a wa al-Waraq al-Wataniyya, Morocco, 2007, p. 64.

³⁷ Abdelfattah Kilito, *The Past as Present, Collected Works*, vol. 2, p. 113.

³⁸ Khalid Belkacem, "The Book," *Al-Dawha Cultural Magazine*, Ministry of Culture and Arts, Doha, Qatar, no. 53, 2012, p. 84.

³⁹ Ibid

⁴⁰ Haitham Sarhan, *The Strategy of Semantic Interpretation among the Mu'tazilites*, Emirates Heritage Club, Abu Dhabi, 1st ed., 2012, p. 53; quoted from: Abdelkader al-Fassi al-Fihri, *Linguistics and the Arabic Language*, vol. 2, p. 21.

⁴¹ There are various types of readers: the actual reader (van Dijk, Jauss), the superior reader (Rivard), the tested reader (Fish), the ideal reader (Koller), the model reader (Eco), the implied reader (Booth, Iser, Chatman, Perry), and the encoded reader (Brock, Rose); each possesses functions and strategies through which meaning is produced.

⁴² Haitham Sarhan, *The Strategy of Semantic Interpretation among the Mu'tazilites*, Emirates Heritage Club, Abu Dhabi, 1st ed., 2012, p. 55; quoted from: Ali Harb, *Interpretation and Truth*, p. 135.

⁴³ Majid bin Hamad Al-Alawi, *Strategies of Reading beyond the Literal among the Modernists*, Al-Ghubaira Library, Sultanate of Oman, 1st ed., 2014, pp. 44-46.