**Digitizing Literature and the Question of Originality**

In this study we attempt a comparison between the original, print version of the poem “The Dice Player” by the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, as published in his final collection *I Don’t Want this Poem to End* (2002), and the digital version presented by the Egyptian animator Nissmah Roshdy in 2016.[[1]](#footnote-1)

On the basis of this comparison, we aim to answer two key questions:

1. What does the text gain or lose in its conversion from the print to the digital version?
2. To what extent does this conversion bear upon the question of originality?

In answering the first question, we will highlight points of convergence and divergence between the two poems in terms of content, form, and reading, bearing in mind that Nissmah Roshdy omitted many passages from the original poem. Moreover, whereas the original version depends only upon language, the digital version depends upon—in addition to language—a number of other techniques, including:

“the techniques of rotoscoping, kinetic typography, Arabic calligraphy, the voice of the poet himself, music by Trio Joubran and dance.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

There is no doubt that employing such techniques in the digital version adds new semiotic levels to the poem, meriting a wholly different reading from the printed poem. Roberto Simanowski writes:

“The dual nature of digital literature thereby makes it important to teach a reflective engagement with both languages involved, the natural language that makes the piece at hand a work of *literature* as well as the computational language that makes it a work of *digital* literature.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

The radical changes introduced to the poem consequent to this transition thus prompt us to ask the second question on the issue of originality; and this in turn branches into such sub-questions as: to what extent does this transition affect the originality of the poem itself? Can the poem in its new digital version be considered an original text? And what about the originality of the author in this case?

We will attempt to answer these questions by discussing the understanding of originality as reflected in various literary sources, and linking this to such relevant concepts and technical notions as “intertextuality” and “plagiarism.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

Answering these questions will, ultimately, assist us in forwarding a general conception of the issue of certain critics’ call to digitize literary texts, classical and otherwise.

Finally, it remains for us to point out that the majority of critical studies addressing digital Arabic poetry have dealt with either analyses of digital poems which were, from the start, composed in digital format—i.e., what are known in Western criticism by the technical term: “born digital”—or with analyses of digital poems converted from printed versions without reference to the original.

Therefore, the particular contribution of this research lies in its being the first digital Arabic critique in Comparative Criticism, providing an analytical reading for a digital poem via its comparison to the original poem (the print version), and subsequently linking this to the question of originality.

1. Online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aehlMo644ZU> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Reham Hosny, “E-Lit in Arabic Universities: Status Quo and Challenges,” *Hyperrhiz: New Media Cultures* no. 16 (2017). Online at: <http://hyperrhiz.io/hyperrhiz16/essays/6-hosny-elit-arabic-universities.html> ([doi:10.20415/hyp/016.e06](https://doi.org/10.20415/hyp/016.e06)) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Simanowski apud Hosny, op. cit. The original reference is Roberto Simanowski, Jörgen Schäfer, and Peter Gendolla, eds., *Reading Moving Letters: Digital Literature in Research and Teaching. A Handbook* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2015), 241. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See, for example:

- Edward W. Said, *Al-ʿĀlam, al-Naṣṣ wa’l-Nāqid [= The World, the Text, and the Critic]*, translated by ʿAbd al-Karīm Maḥfūẓ (Damascus: Ittiḥād al-Kitāb al-ʿArab, 2000), 155-217 (= Chapter 6. “*ʿAn al-Aṣāla* [= On Originality]”).

- Shukrī ʿAyyād, “*Mafhūm al-Aṣāla wa’l-Tajdīd fī al-Thaqāfa al-ʿArabiyya*,” *Al-Ādāb*, no. 19 (1971): 1-5.

- Fahad Abū Khaḍra, “*Bayna al-Aṣāla wa’l-Sariqāt al-Adabiyya fi’l- Balāgha al-ʿArabiyya*,” *Dīwān al-ʿArab* (13 March 2007), online at: <http://www.diwanalarab.com/spip.php?article8204> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)