

The System of Gaps and Alerting the Reader in Modern Arabic Literature

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Abstract

This article discusses the system of gaps in modern Arabic literature and how such gaps function to alert readers to specific author intentions and so facilitate the construction of meaning. The system of gaps, this article argues, is fundamental to the process of literary communication between the text and the reader. Literary meanings are produced through a series of gaps that include the title, polyphonic narrative, circularity, ending, fusion between imagination and reality, punctuation, printed form on the page, reading order, linkage, and echoing. This article also studies the contribution of such gaps in making the reader produce the text's meaning using, as examples, several short-stories, novels, and poetic texts from modern Arabic literature.

Keywords: Literary communication theory, reader's gaps, literary meaning, modern Arabic literature

Introduction

The novel, the short story and other modern literary formats play central roles in the formation of interactive links between the author and the reader, which establishes a literary dialogue that is generated through the text and the reading process. As such, the text is only realized through being read, and the role of the reader is only realized through the presence of the text. This concept refers to the theory of literary communication, which has been discussed by numerous critics, particularly First Name Jauss and First Name Iser, who emphasize the importance of the encounter between the reader and the text and how such interactions bring literary works to life (Hasan, 2015, pp. 1–6).

Jauss stresses the cumulative experience of the readership, whose horizon of expectations is shaped by the particular historical period in which they live. Part of Jauss's purpose is to bridge the gap between historical and aesthetic approaches to literature (Jauss, 1982, p. 19).

Communication between the text and the reader is an activity that takes place in the reader's imagination. According to Iser, this creative and dynamic process is controlled by the text, and most specifically, by what the text does not say. It is the gaps created by the unsaid – that which is not in the text – which activate a thought process that can lead to a variety of possible meanings for the text under consideration (Nolte, 2012, p. 6).

As readers are drawn into events, what is missing stimulates them to fill in the blanks with projections. What is said takes on significance only as a reference to what is not said; it is the *implications*, not the statements themselves, that give shape and weight to the meaning (Iser, 1978, p. 168).

Iser's approach centers on the response of the individual reader in his/her confrontation with the literary text. Iser thus places greater emphasis on the internal components of the text without reference to the historical context in which it was written (Suruji, 2011, pp. 12–15). In such a situation, one can speak of neither a subjective interpretation nor an objective interpretation of the text; rather, the interpretation is a dynamic interaction between the text and the reader, which depends on Iser's terms: spaces or gaps. Hence, the reader might change his/her interpretation with every new reading of the text (Suruji, 2011, pp. 45–46). Iser has adopted Roman Ingarden's theory that although the structure of a literary work is unchanging, its realization will nevertheless differ from one recipient to another.

Phenomenology's principle contribution to literary theory has been to rethink the ontology of the literary text, which it views as a kind of latent potential that can be realized through the reading process (Das, 2014, p. 115). In describing the strategy for constructing meaning, Iser relies on a number of concepts, including those of the implied reader, the record of the text, the roaming point of view, the textual strategies, and the gaps (Barakat et al., 2011, p. 138).

Gaps Defined

According to Roland Barthes, it is language, which speaks, not the author (Barthes, 1977, p. 143). In his well-known 1967 essay, "The Death of the Author", Barthes discussed the activation of the reader, whereby language, with its myriad cultural references, is accorded a significant role such that a text cannot be limited to a single or particular reading thereof. To give a text an "author" is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing (Barthes, 1977, p. 147).

Iser takes up Ingarden's concept of "indeterminacy", according to which the artistic literary work is an intentional enterprise, which lacks complete specificity. This deliberate lack of specificity provides the reader with an incentive to produce and realize meaning. Places of indeterminacy are an aesthetic feature that distinguishes modern from classical literature, which is marked by cohesion, harmony and unity.

Such places contain the following elements: ambiguous ideas, obscure symbols, riddles, implicit references, ironies, and contradictions, as well as "blanks" represented by omission, interruption and pauses. According to Ingarden, the correct specification of a work of art—that is, its filling in, its completion, and full embodiment or concretization, and the harmonization of its aesthetic modalities – can only occur through the aesthetic orientation (Ingarden, 1979, pp. 246–254).

Thus, while Ingarden lends only marginal importance to points of indeterminacy, Iser lends them prominence as gaps, empty spaces, or blanks which form an important part of the process by which meaning is produced between the text and the reader (Baba, 2015, p. 15). Iser speaks of an "imbalance between text and reader", which both make communication possible and advance it (Iser, 2010, p. 1526). Furthermore, Iser identifies two poles involved in the reader's experience of interpreting the text: the artistic pole, which is the text created by the author, and the aesthetic pole, which is the reader's revelation of meaning (Iser, 2010, p. 1524).

Aesthetic response stimulates the reader's imagination, which gives life to the intended effects (Iser, 2000, p. 311), and it is here that Iser's theory of gaps or blanks emerges. In his book *The Act of Reading*, Iser depicts gaps as the areas in which interaction takes place between the reader and the text (Iser, 1987, p. 33). Such gaps are likewise viewed as the ruptures, which separate the parts of the text, and whose presence within the text points to specific semantic connections, which the reader must fill in between the lines (Sharafi, 2007, p. 225).

Thus, it may be said that a reader adds something of his/her own to the text by filling in the spaces he/she discerns. These empty spaces have been left, whether intentionally or unintentionally, by the writer, which gives recipients/readers the opportunity to fill them in whatever way they deem appropriate in keeping with their beliefs (al-Barbaki, 2006, p. 152).

Ibrahim Taha has proposed the existence of numerous gaps between the text and the reader, which he categorizes into two types: the text gaps and the reader gaps. The text gaps involve displacing or postponing certain types of information from where one would expect to find them somewhere later in the text. The reader gaps consist in questions, which the text leaves unanswered or unexplained by leaving out certain pieces of information so that the reader must exert an effort to answer the questions for him/herself (Taha, 1996, p. 95).

The concept of reader gaps corresponds to what have been termed fixed gaps, while the concept of text gaps corresponds to what have been termed temporary gaps (Rimmon-Kenan, 1984, p. 122). Some have also referred to them as mental gaps (on the part of the reader) and textual gaps (al-Barbaki, 2006, p. 156). All of this is in contrast to the perspective promoted by Iser, who denies the existence of text gaps. For Iser, the text cannot fill in gaps, it produces specific empty spaces, which the reader is required to fill (Taha, 2010, p. 225). The importance of gaps stems from Iser's notion that they provide a variety of textual perspectives, leaving the text to the reader to decipher (Khrais, 2017, p. 28).

The present study introduces types of gaps, which differ from those that have been suggested previously. Supported by concrete examples, these new types of gaps reveal the true nature of the communication between the text and the reader.

The Title

Titles of artworks are often integral parts and essential properties. The title slot for an artwork is never devoid of aesthetic potential, how it is filled, or not filled is always aesthetically relevant (Levinson, 1985, p. 29). Consequently, critics have viewed the title as a kind of threshold to a text, or as a text, which parallels the original one. With every page, the reader watches for the title to appear.

The reader might wonder to him/herself about the connection between the title and what he/she is reading at a given moment, and when he/she will get to the part that reveals the significance of the title, or the wisdom behind the author's choice thereof, and why other titles were not chosen instead. Throughout Ahmad Khalid Mustafa's novel *Antikhrīstūs* (Mustafa, 2015), the book's title represents a merging of a text gap and a reader gap such that the reader strives to inquire into the reason this word has been used as a title. In fact, the reader starts out by wondering what the word even means.

After all, the meaning of the word *antikhrīstūs* will be unknown to the reader and, consequently, the answers to the questions just raised will likewise be unknown. An Arabic speaker, at least, would not necessarily be familiar with the English term Antichrist (*al-masīh al-dajjāl*), and might even wonder whether it is a word at all in the Arabic language. The fact that the title is not explained by the author is, in and of itself, a gap in the reader's experience. The word *antikhrīstūs* does not appear in the novel until page 79, and when it does appear at last, it is presented in a vague manner, without any direct statement indicating what it means. The sentence in which it appears reads: "We gave them light, and we will go on giving them light until they bring it to the bearer of light ... to the *antikhrīstūs*." (Mustafa, 2015, p. 79).

The title only begins to appear in a focused manner late in the novel (Mustafa, 2015, p. 169), where one of the satanic characters says: "your name, which will mean salvation to this miserable world ... you are the Christ, you are the savior. The name you have taught us to call you by, my great lord, is *antikhrīstūs*" (Mustafa, 2015, p. 285). Therefore, one concludes that what is meant by the title is the figure of the Antichrist, who is only mentioned a few times in the course of the novel.

In a poetic play written by Yaqoub Ahmad and titled *Fatimah* (1995, pp. 3-16), it becomes apparent that the characters are Fatimah, her husband Sabir, and Hanzalah. Whoever reads the title will of course expect Fatimah to be the play's central and most effective character, and for her to play a prominent role in both actions and words. However, one is surprised to find that Fatimah says nothing throughout the entire play! Sabir speaks, Hanzalah looks on, and Fatimah remains silent.

Similarly, in Muhammad Ali Said's story titled *Predation* (1997, pp. 132–132), the reader expects to encounter a beast of prey, the occurrence – or anticipated occurrence – of some type of predation, or some piece of information related to predation. Once having read the story, however, one realizes that the predation referred to in the title is metaphorical in nature. This use of a symbolic title rather than a literal one thus creates a gap for the reader. When we find a lion coming out of the refrigerator to ravage the woman in the story, for example, we are

confronted with the symbolic nature of both the title and the lion. This requires us as readers to engage our minds in an attempt to interpret both symbols (the symbolic title and this symbolic main event) and the connection between them.

Polyphony

Polyphony manifests itself through the variety of narrators within a text. In a polyphonic novel, the author is able, in an objective and artistic way, to visualize and portray personality as another, as someone else's personality, without merging it with his own voice (Bakhtin, 1984, pp. 12–13).

The truth at which the hero must and indeed ultimately arrive through clarifying the event to himself, can essentially be the truth of the hero's own consciousness. It cannot be neutral with respect to his self-consciousness. In the mouth of another person, a word or a definition identical in content would take on another meaning and tone, and would no longer be the truth (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 55).

The novel *Antikhrīstūs* begins with an introductory passage featuring a first-person speaker. This speaker is presented as a participatory narrator, who addresses himself directly to the reader as though he was part of the novel. In fact, the reader is duped into thinking that the narrator is the author, in that we read: “At last I've got you alone, and now I own you ... and I own your eyes ... This will be the last novel of mine you ever read ... since I am on the precipice of death” (Mustafa, 2015, p. 9).

Such statements give the impression that the narrator is the author, since he attributes the novel to himself. However, the reader is then surprised to find the narrator saying “And now, I will tell you nothing but my name ... I'm Bobby Frank. I see you've concluded from my name that I'm an American. And that is correct” (Mustafa, 2015, p. 11). This in and of itself constitutes a gap for the reader who, puzzled now, must begin engaging in his/her own interpretations and continue to read in order to resolve the created confusion.

In his poem titled *God in a word (Allāh fī kalimah)*, Abdelqader al-Janabi writes: “The old woman who lives in the room across from our apartment, and who would often ponder the contours of her flaccid beauty in a cracked mirror ... this old woman ... I think she must have died” (1995, p. 27). The voice here is that of the narrator speaking in the first-person singular. In the same context we read: “But ... why this pessimistic feeling that every absence is a final death?” (1995, p. 27).

The question is the following: Whose voice is this? Is it the voice of the narrator? The building residents as a group? One of the residents? The poem goes on: “This old woman either withdrew from our sight for a creative purpose (didn't she tell us that she would engage in days-long writing orgies in order to be rid of the images that had caused her to go blind?), or she went to some other country to rest” (1995, p. 27). Here there is a shift from the singular first person to the plural first person. So, is this still the voice of the first narrator, or that of the building residents?

This uncertainty highlights the centrality of the reader and the variety of choices at his/her disposal as to how to fill the gap.

Circularity

When the story begins where it ends, or ends where it begins, this means something. That is to say that circularity is not simply a cheap trick or a piece of structural decoration, but a device

in which the structural form itself is loaded with significance (Allen, 1994, p. 54). However, readers need to know the reason for the similarity between the beginning and the end.

Circularity promotes a feeling of closeness. On a deeper level of analysis, this turns out to be a circularity that does not provide answers to the problems discussed in the body of the text, or the answer is provided, but it is not unambiguous, which requires the reader to open the closeness of this circularity to various interpretations (Taha, 1999, p. 22).

The novel *Antikhrīstūs* begins with a deck of cards that feature pictures of demons. These cards are a kind of code for every story that the narrator tells. The first story is about the origin of sorcery and Iblis's encounter with Nimrod, God's Prophet Abraham, and other figures. In the last story also, there are cards with images of demons on them. The topic of the last story is Iblis and his relationship to the Antichrist, the account of the Prophet Moses and the Samaritan, and other motifs.

Hence, the novel revolves from beginning to end around the forces of evil represented by demons and things related thereto, as well as prophets' confrontations with forces of error of all kinds. Moreover, despite the difference in the names as they appear at the novel's beginning and end, the demons' presence has not changed. The effect of this is to raise questions in the mind of the reader, who seeks to fill the resulting gap by attempting to explain why the beginning and the end are similar in some ways and different in others.

Mahmoud Darwish's poem, "The Violins", begins with the lines:

The violins weep with the gypsies heading for Andalusia.
The violins weep for the Arabs leaving Andalusia (1992, p. 27).

And it ends with the lines:

The violins weep for the Arabs leaving Andalusia.
The violins weep with the gypsies heading for Andalusia (1992, p. 29).

Thus, in the ending we have a reversal of the beginning. Circularity is present, however, it is presented in a different order. So the question arises: Does the ending differ in meaning from the beginning, or is it a repetition of it?

The Ending

An open ending often leaves us with an ambiguous or missing plot resolution. In such a case, the story may not offer any clues to the whereabouts and future of the main characters, thus failing to fulfill the viewer's expectations by not offering a climax or other emotional relief (Preis, 1990, p. 18).

The novel *Antikhrīstūs* concludes with a chapter on the birth of the Antichrist and historical reports about him, such as those that tell us of Tamim al-Dari's encounter with him, and the things the Prophet Muhammad related about him to his Companions. Over the course of approximately two pages, Iblis addresses the Antichrist in the future tense, saying, for example: "The first to follow you will be seventy-thousand Jews", "You will descend to Earth from the East", "Both jinns and humans will see you as their god, and will bow down to you", "You will show them how it is that those who believe in your era will attain to immediate bliss ... not the far-off bliss which is shrouded in doubt and uncertainty" (Mustafa, 2015, pp. 309-310).

The author ends the novel on a metaphysical note, which is consistent with the Islamic creed, as Iblis speaks of things expected to happen in the near future (indicated by the use of the prefix *sīn* before the present tense verb).

According to Ibrahim Taha, the open ending creates what he terms post-ending activity, which is an activity that continues within the reader beyond the end of the text (Taha, 2002, p. 259).

So what kind of an ending is it? Is it open, or closed? Herein lies the gap. Is the author telling us that there is no way to write future history in detail, but that before long it will happen, and we will write about it at that time? Or is he telling us that the story of the Antichrist ends here and that no further detail can be provided?

If the ending is judged to be an open one, this may mean either the absence or impossibility of a solution, or at the very least, that readers will disagree on it. However, despite such difficulties, the author has chosen to avoid taking responsibility for one closed ending or another by concluding his novel in this inconclusive manner.

In Yusuf Idris's story, "Layla, Did You Have to Turn on the Light?" (n.d, pp. 12–31), we have an open ending in which the imam leaves the congregation in the middle of the final prostration of the dawn prayer to go fulfill his desire with Layla, who lives next door to the mosque. Having glimpsed her overpowering charms across from the minaret while delivering the call to prayer, he goes to her on the pretext of teaching her how to pray. When he gets there, he finds to his surprise that she has learned to pray from an English source. However, she turns out the light, and the story ends with the same sentence that has been repeated throughout the story, and which also serves as its title, namely, "Layla, did you have to turn on the light?"

The reader does not know what happened to the people, who were prostrating in the mosque. Some of them laughed, while some of them wondered where the imam had gone. However, the rest is unknown. Similarly, the reader does not know what happened between Layla and the imam. On the one hand, she tells him she has learned to pray. Yet on the other hand, she turns out the light. With its open ending, the story forces readers to pose questions about its final events, and to answer these questions for them.

Merging Fantasy with Reality

As a literary genre, the novel is dominated by the imaginary, whose depths are plumbed in the mind of the author in such a way that he/she can translate fantasy onto words on a page. However, we might ask: What are the limits of the use of fantasy in the case of a historical novel, which is concerned with narrating what happened in the past, particularly in view of the fact that when reading something historical, the majority of readers will attempt to ascertain fact from fiction? Will the use of fantasy impugn the validity of the historical reports involved?

The reader may wonder about the following: What type of information am I reading now – historical fact, or fiction? In such a situation, the reader is required to double his/her efforts to verify the information from its original sources. This is particularly the case when he/she encounters notifications to the effect that not all of the events recorded in the novel are real.

In the beginning of *Antikhrīstūs*, for example, readers are told that "all of the characters mentioned in this novel are real—humans, jinns and demons alike, and most of the events related herein are based on established fact" (Mustafa, 2015, p. 7).

Reading straight historical information might be said to be boring, as a result of which the author takes special care to word it in an engaging manner, clothing it in literary garb adorned with imaginary, descriptive, and romantic elements that contribute to creating an enjoyable ambience for the reader. Further, the novelist may view the historical material available as incomplete, or introduce fictional elements as means of connecting historical material to his/her own political and economic circumstances.

The author may even decide to make use of material, which is unanimously agreed upon to be historically unreliable, or to draw on Jewish folklore alongside Islamic materials. In all such cases, questions and hypotheses may swarm through the reader's head, opening a gap, which he/she must work diligently to close.

Punctuation

When the author of a literary work breaks with convention in his/her use of punctuation marks, this raises questions in the mind of the reader, thus creating a gap. One of many examples that might be cited is found in the following quote from Mustafa's *Antikhrīstūs*: "You may ask me what we can do in the face of all these frightening Masonic and Zionist names ... this would be the most important question you had posed to me since our sessions began ..." (2015, p. 271).

"I am informing you about myself, the Christ ... and that I am about to be granted permission to go out to the Earth ... whereupon I will go out into it, and there will be no village but that I remain there for forty nights ..." (2015, p. 308). In the first passage quoted here, the author has posed a question without using a question mark. In addition, he has used ellipses in a place where there is no need for them, unless we assume that a word or words has/have been omitted from the text (Hasanayn & Shahatah, 1998, p. 90). In addition, the author quotes statements without placing them between quotation marks; the second passage, for example, is known to be a prophetic hadith.

There is a pervasive use of ellipses throughout *Antikhrīstūs*. Does this mean that the novel is based upon omission, which would generate a lack of cohesion and, as a consequence, the absence of a part of the meaning? Is the writer attempting to give the reader the opportunity to guess what has been left out, thereby intensifying the process of communication with the text? Or is its use arbitrary and pointless? Whichever the case, readers are given room to intervene with their own tastes, filling in the gaps created by the presence of the ellipses and anything else that is not in its place, as it encourages them to visualize, or even add to, the scenes as they are in the novel (Bubakri, 2015, pp. 141-166).

Another example of questions raised by the use, or omission, of punctuation marks appears in Gamal al-Ghitani's short story, "Why Did the Sparrow Fly Away" (1992). Even though the story's title is worded as a question, the author has chosen not to end it with a question mark. Is this mere coincidence? It most certainly is not, since al-Ghitani ends his story with the same question, only here he does include the question mark. What we have, then, is a kind of circularity between the title of the story and its ending. So the question is: Why is a question mark used following the question when it appears at the end of the story, but not when it appears in the story's title? This apparent inconsistency creates a gap for the reader, a gap, which the reader can work to fill. The story consists of seven passages. In the final passage we read: "The sparrow alit on the floor of the balcony. It hopped to the right. It hopped to the left. Muhammad gave a shrill cry. 'Coo-coo, coo-coo!' He reached out his arms toward the sparrow. 'I love Coo-

cool!’ Then the sparrow flew away. He was bewildered. He wanted to take the sparrow in his arms, to kiss it. Why did the sparrow fly away?’ (1992, p. 147).

The question as it appears in the title does not require an answer so much as it alludes to a situation. As such, it may be thought of as a rhetorical question and, as such, needs no question mark. The use or nonuse of punctuation marks is thus not limited to their function of helping a reader understand the text better. It reflects a modernist vision that calls for the abolition of logical and customary restrictions and connections, and for a writing style that is revolutionary and unconventional (Daghir, 1988, p. 26).

The Order in which a Text is Read

In his poem, “Footnotes on an Ancient Ode: ‘O Night of Passion’”. Fahd Abu Khudrah places numbers beside some verses of the poem as though to indicate footnotes. The footnotes themselves have been written in poetic language, so that the poem becomes two texts that are separate in appearance: the main body and annotations, both of which are poetry.

The important question for the reader is the following: How is he/she to read the poem? There are three possible orders that might be adhered to. In the first, one reads the body of the text all the way through, ignoring all marginal comments, and then goes back and reads the footnotes. In the second, one reads the title, then goes down from Note 1 to the corresponding footnote and reads the lower text continuously to the end, after which one goes back up and reads the main text to the end, beginning from the title. In the third, one goes back and forth from the beginning to the end between the main text and the footnotes such that whenever one gets to a footnote number in the main text, one reads the associated footnote, and then continues with the main text, and so on and so forth.

The poem reads, as follows:

“Footnotes on an Ancient Ode:
‘O Night of Passion’” (1)

If a vein pulsed with fire,
If you touched the wings of the bat,
The glimmer of foundering light (2),
I would carry the sun on my shoulder
And plant warmth with my sinews (3)
On the day when
The sands began
To drink up bodies and water
And dissolve into moans and tears (Abū Khadrah, 1994, pp. 27–28).

It may be assumed that each order of reading the poem will yield a different understanding, which is, a different construal of its meaning, however slight. After all, the order in which the verses have been placed serves a purpose and performs a function in the formation of the words’ significance. This being the case, three ways of ordering a poem’s contents will yield three different poems. The relocation of any element in the text serves not only a rhetorical purpose, but a semantic one as well.

Typographical Appearance and Format

Typographical appearance plays a role in creating gaps for the reader, for example a sentence, which appears in boldface type or capital letters will have a special purpose. Similarly, writing the text in a particular form or shape will give the reader a variety of suggestions and areas for posing inquiries about the use of these forms in the text. In the poem titled “On the Trunk of an Olive Tree” by Tawfiq Zayyad, the verb “dig” is repeated nine times, in three of which it is followed by text in boldface type:

And I dig: **Kafr Qasem I will never forget**
 And I dig: **Deir Yassin takes root in her memory**
 And I dig: **We’ve reached the peak of the tragedy**
It’s chewed us up, and we’ve chewed it up
Nevertheless ... have reached it! (Zayyad, 1994 [B], pp. 50-51).

The reader will wonder what special meaning is being conveyed by the phrases in boldface type, and will soon discover that the poet is highlighting massacres committed against the Palestinian people.

They say this is our father’s wing which has returned after the struggle
 With a flower,
 With a rain drop,
 Until morning appears (1997, p. 645).

All the lines in the poem have a horizontal orientation with the exception of the one quoted above. As for the questions, this may raise in the mind of the reader that the most satisfying answer to them may be that the typographical appearance produced by the text’s vertical orientation best conveys the image of a drop of water as it falls. In such a case, the typographical appearance of the text is inseparable from its content.

Writers are thus well aware of the tremendous possibilities made available to them by modern techniques, which make it possible for them to intensify the texts they write and, as a consequence, to make readers work harder in the process of searching, interpreting and observing.

Linkage

When a set of words is grouped in a particular context, the reader may wonder whether they have been placed together out of sheer coincidence, or whether they have been linked deliberately in order to give them a significance, which they would not convey if they had appeared separately. In the following passage, taken from a poem by Jamal Qa’wār, it will be seen that the placement of four colors together in the text has occurred by design:

Because the longing in the eyes is green
 Because the roses in the cheeks are red
 Because the face is a lamp illumined
 By a cascade of intense pitch black,
 I loved with a passion, and for that passion I have made no apology,
 But I apologize for four colors (1994, p. 112).

Green, red (referred to in the poem with the word *azhar*), white (to which an allusion is made by likening a face to a bright lamp), and pitch-black are the colors of the Palestinian flag. By placing them in succession here, the poet encourages the reader to form a mental image of the flag. In this case, then, the colors have been grouped together for a purpose, while the reader, given his/her awareness and vigilance or lack thereof, may either succeed or fail in the task of uncovering the secret underlying this subtle string of hues. In a poem titled “Our palm grows again” by the late Tawfiq Zayyad, we can read:

On a morrow when ice catches fire
 On a morrow when black smokestacks set out
 With factories
 And red hammers and sickles advance (1994 [A], p. 69).

The reader will have no difficulty discerning the logic underlying the pairing of red hammers and sickles in distinction from other work tools given the fact that the poet, who was known for his Communist leanings, is attempting to elicit a mental image of the Soviet flag, represented here by the red hammer and sickle.

Echoing

The mechanisms of literary modernism are many and varied. Hence, readers are required in every encounter with a text to be familiar with many of the secrets of creative writing. If, for example, someone were to read the following line of poetry, what would the numbers next to it mean to him/her?

Were they burned ... No ... /4, the last four letters repeat themselves,
 and seem dead ... dead ...” (1978, p. 5).

What is to be done by a reader, who is unfamiliar with the meaning of these numbers, having never heard of this modernist literary technique? Will his/her understanding of the texts comprising this phenomenon be lacking or incomplete? Does the echo (in the repetition of “dead ... dead”) contribute semantic additions to the poem? Is it a part of it to begin with? What Ayman Abu al-Sha`r has done in his poem is to reveal this technique to readers, and in so doing, he has helped guide them to a visually-oriented reading, which will bring them closer to what the poet is saying. The following are examples of this phenomenon, which point to a specific semantic field:

“When he took off over the largest pyramid
 ... those who are above rose
 still higher, like smoke (*kal-dukhān*) ... 3.”

“But we ... wouldn’t have imagined or expected (*aw natawaqqa^c*) .../3”

“She was betrayed by the mistress of the river and the husband of treachery,
 so my crown has been disgraced (*fa tājī hāna*) .../5”

“Who makes us forget the soil (*fa man lil-turbati yunsīnā*) .../4”
 (1978, pp. 45–48).

The echo words in the four examples cited above are: *khāna* (betrayed), which appears twice, *waqqa^a* (signed), which is echoed (alluded to) in the phrase *aw natawaqqa^c*, Jihan (suggested by the phrase *fa tājī hāna*), and *sīnā* (Sinai), which appears within the phrase, “makes us forget” – *yunsīnā*).

It will be clear to the reader that the semantic field is political in nature, that the reference is to the 1979 peace treaty signed by Israel and Egypt, and that the author is accusing President Sadat and his wife Jihan of treason.

Conclusions

Relying on passages excerpted from contemporary Arabic novels, stories and poetry, this study examines the impact of textual gaps on the reader’s formation of a productive understanding of a text. The author has suggested a number of new types of gaps with applied examples, which show that a reader can look at the literary text with a vision of his/her own and from an influential space, which he/she stakes out for him/herself, as it were.

The types of gaps discussed here are related to the titles, the polyphony, the circularity, the endings, the merging of fantasy with fact, the punctuation marks, the typographical appearance, the order in which a piece is read, the linkage, and the echoing. The conclusion drawn is that the gaps created in association with the aforementioned elements grant readers the opportunity to activate mental pathways to achieve what Iser terms the aesthetic pole, or the realization of the meaning of the text (i.e., the artistic pole).

The best texts are productive ones, namely, those that have the capacity to activate the reader. Therefore, authors should make a point of writing their texts in keeping with systems of what might be termed “gap-creation”, thereby ensuring the dialogical nature of reading and literary communication in both directions: from the text to the reader, and from the reader to the text.

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