

Zeitschrift: Asiatische Studien : Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen Asiengesellschaft = Études asiatiques : revue de la Société Suisse-Asie

Herausgeber: Schweizerische Asiengesellschaft

Band: 62 (2008)

Heft: 4

Artikel: Ahmad Sulaymn al-Ahmad : the vicissitudes of life, or metamorphoses of creativity

Autor: Rayhanova, Baian

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-147806>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 12.01.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

AḤMAD SULAYMĀN AL-AḤMAD

The Vicissitudes of Life, or Metamorphoses of Creativity*

Baian Rayhanova, Sofia University

Abstract

In this paper I present an artistic profile of Aḥmad Sulaymān al-Aḥmad (1926–93), pioneer and theorist of new poetry in Syria. He published many books on Arabic verse drama and poetry, translated Russian, Bulgarian, French, Romanian and Vietnamese poets and writers, and wrote a number of poetical volumes of his own, which were translated into several languages and included among school textbooks in Syria. In spite of this versatile activity, the works of Aḥmad Sulaymān al-Aḥmad have not been closely studied yet.

The background of al-Aḥmad's life and poetry

The poet was born in a village in the province of Latakia. His father, al-Shaykh Sulaymān al-Aḥmad, was a scholar of the Arabic language and Islamic theology and a member of the Arab Academy in Damascus, who educated him in the classical philological tradition. After his father's death he came into the care of his eldest brother Muḥammad, a popular neo-classical poet of the forties and fifties, known as Badawī al-Jabal (1903–81),¹ and his sister Fāṭimah (pseudonym Fatāt Ghassān), a leading figure in feminist literature in Syria.² On leaving the French school in Ṭarṭūs and graduating from the University of Damascus, Aḥmad Sulaymān al-Aḥmad moved to Argentina, where he worked at the Arabic Institute in Buenos Aires and wrote for such Arabic-language journals as *al-Istiqlāl*, *al-Rafīq* and *al-Fiṭrah* from 1948 till 1954, when he returned to Syria. In the sixties he left Syria for Bulgaria (1961), Algeria (1963) and France (1965). In 1967, after defending his doctoral dissertation on Arabic poetic drama at the

* I would like to thank Katia al-Aḥmad, the wife of the poet, for obtaining for me the materials discussed here.

1 See R. SNIR, "Badawī al-Jabal", in: *Encyclopaedia of Arabic Literature*, ed. J. S. MEISAMY & P. STARKEY, vol. i, London 1998:121.

2 See Aḥmad Sulaymān al-AḥMAD, *Wa-yas'ālūnaka 'an al-shakl al-'asmā*, Damascus 1979:349.

Sorbonne, the poet returned home, where he stayed for about fifteen years: these were the most fruitful period of his life.

For about ten years Aḥmad Sulaymān al-Aḥmad taught Arabic literature at Damascus University, and became head of the poetry section in the Union of Arab Writers (1970–80). In 1973 he obtained his second doctorate, on modern Arabic poetry, in Moscow. Two years later in Damascus he founded the journal *al-Ādāb al-ajnabiyyah*, the only one of its kind at that time.³ As its editor, he introduced many modern poets and prose-writers both from the West and the East to Syrian readers though he was criticised for his partiality for East European literature.⁴ Knowing several languages, Aḥmad Sulaymān al-Aḥmad translated more than 20 collections of poetry. In 1975 he also established an association named *Rābiṭat al-dirāsāt al-ʿulyā* with the intention of transforming it later into the first Academy of Sciences in Syria. This, however, he did not achieve. The political situation in the country forced him to leave home for ever. In 1981 he moved again to Bulgaria, six years later to France, then to Tunis (1991). The last two years of his life he spent in Sofia.

The poetical activity of Aḥmad Sulaymān al-Aḥmad lasted about five decades, and included 10 original collections besides his translations. His writings were closely linked to the development of Arabic poetry of the 20th century and its renewal, at first by adapting the traditional poetical canon to the spirit of the modern age, and subsequently by transforming and reconstructing it. Various new tendencies and previously unknown poetical forms appeared as a result. We can observe three stages in his artistic development, as he passed through *iḥtidhāʾ* (imitation), then *ḥadāthah* (modernism) and finally *al-ʿawdah ilā al-uṣūl* (return to the roots).

Brought up with pre-Islamic and Islamic poetry, delighted by the Arabic neo-classics and carried away by the aesthetics of European romanticism, al-Aḥmad started to write verse for the local newspapers in Syria when he was thirteen. At the beginning of the forties he published two collections of poetry: *ʿAbqar* (Fairylend, 1942) and *Jabal al-ilhām* (The Mountain of Inspiration, 1943). The first dīwān is based on folklore and inspired to some extent by the poetical experience of Shafīq Maʿlūf (1905–76), a Mahjar poet in Brazil, and his narrative poem of the same title.⁵

3 Ibid.:296.

4 Interview with Katia al-Aḥmad (cf. preliminary note *), Sofia, 14 December 2004.

5 This work is analysed in detail by C. NIJLAND in his paper “A New ‘Andalusian’ Poem”, *Journal of Arabic Literature*, xviii (1987):102–120.

Using folk material al-Aḥmad also composed the poetic dramas *Mam wa-Zīn* (in three parts, 1945) and *Mā'mūniyyah* (in four parts, written in 1947 and published ten years later). In the first play the poet revives a Kurdish legend and tells the love story of Mam and Zīn, who are reminiscent of the Arab heroes Qays and Laylā. The second play returns to the 'Abbāsid period and recounts the story of a beautiful singer and her love for the caliph al-Mā'mūn. Both plays reveal the author's striving for an original poetic language, though he still follows the classical model. According to a suggestion by Suhayl Idrīs (b. 1923), Aḥmad Shawqī's verse drama is an obvious influence, especially on his first play.⁶

Heterogeneity of his poetry

The artistic maturity of al-Aḥmad becomes apparent in original and innovative works both on the level of versification and of themes. Among his collections of poetry are:

- *Aghānin ṣayfiyyah* (Summer Songs, 1967)
- *al-Raḥīl ilā madīnat al-tadhkār* (Journey to the City of Remembrance, 1970)
- *Nawāfidh al-burūj al-mudā'ah* (The Windows of the Lighted Towers, 1971)
- *Bustān al-suḥub* (The Garden of the Clouds, 1975)
- *Lil-kalimāt jihāt taqṣiduhā 'amdan* (Words have directions they take on purpose, 1979)

and others which were included in the Complete Works published in three volumes from 1987 to 1989. Most of his poetry is composed in free verse (*al-shī'r al-ḥurr*), based on a single foot (*tafīlah*) as the metrical unit, and lines of different length, instead of the fixed number of feet per line of traditional verse. Their structural elements, form and rhythm are all tightly connected to the themes through which the author expresses his understanding of the world and of the powers of poetic vocabulary.

6 See A. S. al-AḤMAD, *Wa-yas'ālūnaka 'an al-shakl al-'asmā*, Damascus 1979:278.

The key lyric themes of “life and death”, “man and nature”, “moment and eternity”, “love and fate” come to life in al-Aḥmad’s poetry. He creates them in a poetical-deductive way by a combination of symbols, though at all times they stem from real psychological situations, and he brings together many different concepts and associative sequences to express his key theme through exotic metaphors which often do not appear until the end of the poem. In *Li’l-kalimāt jihāt taqṣiduhā ‘amd^{an}* he writes:

<i>Yahrubu minnī ‘l-laylu,</i>	The night flees from me,
<i>Fa-aḥlumu bi’l-muduni ‘l-mahjūratī ka’l-</i>	Like lovers I dream of abandoned cities.
<i>‘ushshāqi.</i>	
<i>Al-basmatu tastayqizu fī kalimātī</i>	A smile awakens in my words
<i>Ka’l-ashjāri, tuḥarrikuhā al-‘āṣifatū.</i>	Like trees set in motion by the storm.
<i>Al-amsu taḥarraka muttajiḥan ṣauba ‘l-</i>	The past has moved on towards the present,
<i>ḥāḍiri,</i>	
<i>Farra ‘l-ḥāḍiru naḥwa ‘l-amsi,</i>	The present has hastened back to the past,
<i>Wa-ḡalla ‘l-ghadu mahjūran ...</i>	And the future is still abandoned ... ⁷

With the aim of linking the past to the present the poet turned to historical archetypes, mythological symbols and legends, reminding us of the poetic experiments of Khalīl Ḥawī (1922–82), Yūsuf al-Khāl (1917–87), Adūnīs (‘Alī Aḥmad Sa‘īd, b. 1930)⁸ and others, though he does introduce other material besides well known mythological and folk tales. In the poem *Bāndūngh* (1955) the author invokes an Indonesian legend and tells the story of the Princess of Bāsīndān and her heroic death.⁹ Another poem, *al-Rimāl al-dhahabiyyah* (Golden Sands, 1957) is based on a Bulgarian fairy-tale about pirates plundering at sea and on land.¹⁰ In the collection *al-Raḥīl ilā madīnat al-tadhkār* (Journey to the City of Remembrance, 1970) al-Aḥmad creates his artistic images by combining the popular myths of Sisyphus, the Phoenix, the Wooden horse of Troy and al-Burāq, the horse of the Prophet Muḥammad. He even provides short narrative versions of these myths in his epilogue.¹¹

The nationalistic poetry of al-Aḥmad is perceived as a reflection of his social and political ambitions. It is concrete, and composed in a poetic-inductive

7 A. S. al-AḤMAD, *al-A‘māl al-shi‘riyyah al-kāmilah*, vol. iii, Baghdad 1989:366.

8 Adūnīs is a relative of Aḥmad Sulaymān al-Aḥmad on his father’s side.

9 A. S. al-AḤMAD, *al-A‘māl al-shi‘riyyah al-kāmilah*, vol. iii, Baghdad 1989:133–148.

10 Ibid.:197–204.

11 A. S. al-AḤMAD, *al-Raḥīl ilā madīnat al-tadhkār*, Damascus 1970:115–116.

way by detailed elaboration of the images and a blending of the outer and inner worlds. It is also distinguished by the way he localises the lyrical event in space and time and by the structural integrity of the verse. As a result, a particular fact in his poetry becomes a condensed and heightened reality rather than merely an empirical detail accidentally intruding into the lyrical context. The author tries to preserve the primary meaning of his poetical vocabulary while expressing his thought and feelings. In a poem dedicated to his mother he writes:

<i>Wajhukī ...</i>	Your face ...
<i>Wa'l-dumūʿ</i>	And the tears
<i>Tahjubunī ʿankī ...</i>	Hide me from you ...
<i>Wa-ṣayḥatu ʿl- rujūʿ:</i>	And the home-coming cry:
<i>Li-ajli an lā yamahḥiya min ʿumrinā ʿl-rabīʿ</i>	So that spring not be blotted out of our life
<i>Li-ajli an yaḥluma ka ʿl-malāʾiki ʿl-atfāl</i>	That children may dream like the angels
<i>Fa-lā tariʿu laylahum aḡhwāl</i>	And monsters not scare them at night
<i>Li-ajli an lā tustabāḥa makāsibu ʿl-ʿāmil</i>	So that workers and farmers not be stripped of
<i>wa ʿl-fallāḥ</i>	their earnings
<i>Li-ajli an lā naḥṣuda ʿl-tahrīj</i>	That we may not harvest chaos
<i>Li-ajli an nuḥibba, an naḥyā bi-ʿālamīn bahīj</i>	That we may love and live in a world radiant [with joy]
<i>Li-ajli an tamūja fī arḍinā ʿl-sanābilu ʿl-</i>	That rolling yellow corn and roses may cover
<i>ṣafrāʾu wa ʿl-wurūd</i>	our land
<i>Li-ajli an aʿūda ilayki yā ummu, wa-yarjiʿa</i>	That I may return to you, mother, and my
<i>ʿl-rifāq</i>	friends may come back
<i>Āthartu an aqtaḥima ʿl-āfāqa bi-kalimatīn</i>	I have preferred to conquer the horizons with a
<i>khadrāʾa</i>	green, fresh word
<i>Lam tadhbūl lahā awrāq.</i>	Whose leaves never wither. ¹²

Al-Aḥmad believed in the effectiveness of the poetic word. In an anthology of newspaper interviews *Wa-yasʿālūnaka ʿan al-shakl al-ʿasmā* (And they will ask you about the Highest Form, 1979) the poet clearly declares his engagement, meaning by this not only his attitude to social and political problems but also his personal commitment (*al-iltizām al-dhātī*), which he puts in the forefront.¹³

12 Ibid.:247–248.

13 A. S. al-AḤMAD, *Wa-yasʿālūnaka ʿan al-shakl al-ʿasmā*, Damascus 1979:294.

Al-Aḥmad reveals an unusual understanding of the word *iltizām*, a multi-layered term whose significance can only be grasped in the context of the complex processes occurring among Arab intellectuals. In his opinion, there is no such thing as a non-hack artist: there is only the commitment of a poet who sells his talent to book-market speculators and ideological manipulators on the one hand and on the other hand the kind of commitment of a person who has respect for himself and his people and offers his poetic gift for the public good.¹⁴

From modernity to traditionalism

Following in the footsteps of his brother Badawī al-Jabal, who was given the title *shā'ir al-urūbah* (The Poet of Arabism),¹⁵ al-Aḥmad poeticised the unity of the Arabs and the beauty and purity of the Arabic language, and he turned to poetry based on the classical poetical norms. In this style he composed long poems devoted to heroes and events from the past and present. Written at different times, they were collected in the *dīwān* *ʿAshar muʿallaqāt* (Ten Odes), published in 1980. Like those poets who are known mainly for their preference for free verse but, at the same time, use the neo-classical model on solemn occasions, he started composing traditional verse for recitation at conferences, festivals and other public gatherings in the seventies, though his first poem of this type was presented at the festival in honour of the Iraqi poet Maʿrūf al-Ruṣāfī (1875–1945) in Baghdad in 1959.¹⁶

Among al-Aḥmad's poems are *al-Tūnisiyyah* (1973), *al-Jazāʾiriyyah* (1975), *al-Baghdādiyyah* (1979–1986) and many others which were printed in the collection *ʿAshar muʿallaqāt* as well as in the third volume of his Complete Works (1987). Besides panegyrics, al-Aḥmad composed elegies in memory of his relatives and prominent people. He dedicated *al-Qaṣīdah al-ḥazīnah* (The Sad Ode, 1971) to his nephew Muḥammad ʿAlī al-Aḥmad, who passed away just after qualifying as a doctor, and he commemorated in verse the leader of the first movement for Syrian independence, Shaykh Ṣāliḥ al-ʿAlī, in *ʿĪd al-jalāʾ* [...] *yastaʿīd ghadahu* (Evacuation Day [...] Recalls the Subsequent Day, 1976), and recalls a famous ʿAbbāsid poet in *Maʿa al-Mutanabbī ʿalā mashārif al-qarn al-*

14 Ibid.:278–279, 294–295.

15 See *ʿĪlām al-adab al-ʿarabī al-muʿāṣir: siyar wa-siyar dhātīyya*, ed. by R. CAMPBELL, Beirut: Orient-Institut/Stuttgart: Steiner, 1996:297.

16 A. S. al-AḤMAD, *Hādhā al-shiʿr al-ḥadīth*, Damascus: [n.d.]:212.

ḥādī wa'l-ʿishrīn (With al-Mutanabbī on the Threshold of the 21st Century, 1976).

Using the conventional poetical forms al-Aḥmad tries to show that they are still topical and capable of reflecting the spirit of the modern age. At the end of his poem *al-Tūnisiyyah*, which consists of seventy lines composed in *al-kāmil* metre and rhyming in *hamzah* (ā'a), he emphasises:

<p><i>Ḥammaltu awzānī 'l-qadīmata aʿṣuran</i> <i>Ḥaliya 'l-jadīdu bi-hā wa-jarra ridā'an.</i></p>	<p>I loaded my ancient metres on to passing ages So the modern became beautiful and flaunted its garb¹⁷</p>
--	--

His views on poetry and language

The theoretical basis of al-Aḥmad's artistic development, both in the context of *al-shi'r al-ḥurr* (free verse) which he composed from the fifties to the seventies, and *al-shi'r al-ʿamūdī* (poetry in traditional metres) which dominated the last two decades of his life, is revealed in various ways in his studies of Arabic poetry. These are represented by *al-Mujtamaʿ fī al-masrah al-ʿarabī al-shi'rī* (Society in Arabic Poetic Drama, written in 1972 and published in 1982), *al-Shi'r wa'l-qadiyyah al-filasṭīniyyah* (Poetry and the Palestinian Problem, 1973) and *Hādhā al-shi'r al-ḥadīth* (This New Poetry, 1974), which all arouse our interest because of his original interpretations and evaluations of facts, names and problems.

In *Hādhā al-shi'r al-ḥadīth*, which could be regarded as an up-dated version of his Moscow Ph.D. thesis, al-Aḥmad starts his investigation of modern Arabic poetry with certain linguistic problems, and states that "the language of Arabic poetry has not changed from the fifth century AD until our own day: it submits to standardised morphological and syntactical rules and represents the common phonological basis of modern poetry, which confines itself to those fabulous vessels called poetic metres or poetic seas."¹⁸

At the same time the author closely observes the dynamic development of language and in doing so he reveals two opposing tendencies which are connected, in his opinion, on the one hand, with the canonisation of the Arabic

17 A. S. al-AḤMAD, *al-A'māl al-shi'riyyah al-kāmilah*, vol. i, Baghdad 1987:84.

18 A. S. al-AḤMAD, *Hādhā al-shi'r al-ḥadīth*:10.

language, leading to its stagnation, and, on the other, with the desire for freedom from linguistic rules.¹⁹

The poet refers to articles and poems published in magazines, newspapers and books which are saturated with words and phrases forced to conform to the traditional grammatical rules. On the basis of his observations of different kinds of texts he proposes that pronunciation and spelling should be standardised to avoid inconsistency and anarchy, especially in poetry.

His concrete suggestions cover several topics, among them the vowels of verbs. He proposes that these should be standardised, so that the vowel of the middle radical of the perfect tense in the basic triliteral verb should be always “a” and the vowel of the middle radical of the imperfect always “u”, for example, the verb “to despise” should be *ghamaṭa* in the perfect and *yaghmuṭu* in the imperfect instead of having two variants in each (perfect *ghamaṭa* and *ghamiṭa* and imperfect *yaghmitu* and *yaghmaṭu*). As for the basic doubled verbs, the vowel of the first radical should be only “u” in the imperfect, for example *yafurru* (from *farra*, “to run away”) instead of its three variants *yafarru*, *yafirru* and *yafurru*.²⁰

Al-Aḥmad brings to light another tendency in modern poetry, namely the attempt to increase the number of plural patterns in order to fit into the metre and rhyme, and he proposes the standardisation of the singular and broken plural nouns and the verbal nouns.²¹ He also draws attention to mistakes in school textbooks and books published by the Academy of the Arabic Language in Damascus. He appeals for accuracy in writing and pronouncing foreign words and the use of a single method of reproducing them in Arabic.

As for printed poetry, al-Aḥmad stresses the need to vocalise the text, because an author should always be concerned not only to write without grammatical errors but also to be understood properly by the reader. In his opinion, words written with the vowels even look better; they are like decorative patterns which can have an aesthetic effect on people’s feelings.²² Al-Aḥmad himself never forgets to insert vowels in all his poetical works.

As a supporter of the idea of Arab unity, he rejects calls to use the Roman alphabet and different local dialects instead of modern standard Arabic, and appeals for it to be preserved. The genius of the language, its magnificence and

19 Ibid.:20.

20 Ibid.:42.

21 Ibid.:40–41.

22 Ibid.:52–53.

semantic richness are revealed lucidly in poetry, he believes. Indeed poetry can only be created by means of correct and expressive language. Inaccurate pronunciation and mistakes in inflection simply corrupt poetry.²³ Summing up his observations of the problems of poetic language, he suggests that Arabic poems should never be considered in isolation from their musicality, because it is exactly this musicality which enables a verse to be turned into a resonant song and properly recited.²⁴

In the cause of poetic renewal

In order to discover the essence of poetic modernity and determine its main features, al-Aḥmad returns to the beginnings of Arabic verse and the metrical theory of al-Khalīl ibn Aḥmad (c.100–75/718–91). Although he does not deal specifically with the well-known circles of the metres (*buhūr*) or the various kinds of verses (*abyāt*), he does mention the deviations from the normal patterns (*ziḥāf* and *ʿillah*),²⁵ as seen in the works of poets of different periods, from the pre-Islamic to our own time.

In his view, several metres, such as *muqṭaḍab*, *mujtathth*, *mutadārik* and *mutaqārib*²⁶ were totally absent in the poetry of the Jāhiliyyah (Time of Ignorance), while the poets of the modern era prefer just eight of the sixteen available metres: *mutadārik*, *kāmil*, *mutaqārib*, *ramal*, *rajaz*, *hazaj*, *sarī* and *wāfir*. As for their attempts to create new metres, he notes that they have failed, and are of no interest either to Arab critics or to readers of poetry.²⁷

The author shares the opinion of most scholars about the stagnation of literary development in the pre-modern period, which lasted for seven centuries from the thirteenth century, when the poet turned into a mere drummer or juggler “playing with words and phrases tragicomically, without any moderation”.²⁸ He attributes the revival of Arabic poetry not to the verse of Maḥmūd Sāmī al-Bārūdī (1839–1904), the founder of neo-classicism, but

23 Ibid.:57.

24 Ibid.:58.

25 Ibid.:37–38.

26 Ibid.:62–63.

27 Ibid.:63–65.

28 Ibid.:84.

mainly to the works of his successor and disciple, Aḥmad Shawqī (1868–1932), who introduced an original style and new themes.

Al-Aḥmad discusses the activity of the *Diwān* poets and their attacks, especially those of ‘Abbās Maḥmūd al-‘Aqqād (1889–1964), on Shawqī as a mere “artisan” who, according to al-‘Aqqād, lacked poetical imagination, and their criticism of modern poetry because of its left-wing orientation. The author also deals with Nizār Qabbānī (1923–98) and his views on Arabic poetry, which are limited by his narrow perception of its problems and the way he interprets them in terms of the conflict between the left and the right.²⁹

The tendency towards the reconstruction of traditional poetical themes, form and prosody is revealed vividly in the works of the *Apollo* and *Mahjar* groups, though in al-Aḥmad’s opinion they did not entirely succeed in realising their ideals. The first group had no poet with enough talent to serve as an example for others to follow,³⁰ while those in the second group were both isolated from their homeland and living in a new environment whose language and culture remained alien to them.³¹ This observation is based on the works of Rashīd Salīm al-Khūrī (known as al-Qarawī, 1887–1984), Ilyās Farḥāt (1893–1976), Fawzī al-Ma‘lūf (1899–1930) and his brother Shafīq (1905–76), Zakī Qunṣul (1916–94), who immigrated to Brazil and Argentina, and Īliyyā Abū Mādī (1889–1957) and Nasīb ‘Arīdah (1887–1946), who settled in the United States.

In spite of his ambiguous attitude towards the artistic activity of the *Mahjar* group, al-Aḥmad acknowledges their importance in the development of Arabic poetry and describes them as the first to experiment with the rhythm and form of traditional verse, trying to bring the meaning and the structure of poetry into a harmonious balance and to release it from the figurativeness and descriptiveness of the traditional vocabulary by intensifying the subjectivity of the poet’s expression.

In al-Aḥmad’s view changes in the content of literary works generally occur more quickly than changes in form. The dynamic process of artistic renewal both in the form and the content of Arabic poetry in the first half of the last century makes the appearance of free verse inevitable. It becomes a natural stage in the development of poetry and not merely a manifestation of the individual tastes and weaknesses of the poets.

29 Ibid.:91–93.

30 Ibid.:98.

31 Ibid.:99–100.

Al-Aḥmad sets the end of the fifties as the chronological boundary for the beginning of free verse, but at the same time he notes that “it does not matter who was the pioneer of the new poetry – Khalīl Shaybūb with his poem published in the magazine *Apollo*, [...] or Abū Shādī. We could look even further back and award the victor’s laurels to al-Band, [...] or we could crown Nāzik al-Malā’ikah, Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb or ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Bayyātī. This does not change the nature of free verse.”³²

As al-Aḥmad notices, at the end of the forties and the first half of the fifties free verse was perceived as alien and strange by common readers used to classical and neo-classical verse, but later the situation changed radically. The new poetry gradually acquired the features of maturity in the works of many talented authors, and was enriched by the creative assimilation of the experience of the Western poets, who represented different tendencies and schools, as well as the various artistic media of the theatre, cinema and others.

The positive and negative aspects of free verse

In contrast to many traditionalists al-Aḥmad does not criticise his colleagues for their refusal to comply with the poetical canon in general, but he lets fall several remarks on its material significance, based on free verse published from the late fifties to the beginning of the seventies.

He re-examines the vocabulary of the modern poets and calls upon them to stop repeating words taken mainly from Western poetry or the classical Arabic models, and he points out such frequently recurring words as *riḥm* (womb) in the poetry of Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb (1926–64), Ṣalāḥ ‘Abd al-Ṣabūr (1931–81) and Nizār Qabbānī; *fikhdhān/afkhādh* (thighs) in the works of Muḥammad ‘Afifī Maṭar (b. 1935) and Adūnīs; *mirḥād/marāḥīd* (toilet/s) in the poetry of Fāḍil al-‘Azzāwī and Samīḥ al-Qāsim (b. 1939). He also mentions the words *bawl* (urine), *dam* (blood), *dhubāb* (flies), *dūd* (worm), *jū‘* (hunger), *ṣamt* (silence), *mawt* (death), *khawf* (fear), and others which have become increasingly popular in modern Arabic poetry.³³

Al-Aḥmad draws attention to the increasing use of omission marks instead of the whole phrase in poetical texts, which gives free rein to the readers in their interpretation, and he is critical of the enthusiasm of poets for chopping off the

32 Ibid.:136–137.

33 Ibid.:152–154.

ends of words, which they explain rather superficially as due to the demands of the times and modern art. As an example the author quotes Nizār Qabbānī's verse:

Sayfu Isrā'īla fī raqabatinā
Sayfu Isrā
Sayfu Is ...

The sword of Israel is on our neck
 The sword of Isra
 The sword of Is ...³⁴

He also mentions the pointlessness of using interjections and onomatopoeic expressions borrowed from foreign languages and now widespread in modern Arabic poetry, as in this line by 'Alawī al-Hāshimī from Baḥrayn:

Tik...tak...tik...tak
Min ayna yajī'u 'l-ḥuznu wa-anti ma'ī.

Tick...tock...tick...tock
 Where does the sorrow come from when you
 are with me?³⁵

Al-Aḥmad is not against the enrichment of the Arabic vocabulary by foreign words, though he ironically remarks that one day ultra-modern authors will use Japanese, Chinese or Indonesian characters in their poetry, because they have already introduced Latin words unchanged from their original language and without translation or transliteration in Arabic.³⁶

His criticism is also levelled against the typographical layout of some modern poetry. Fāḍil al-ʿAzzāwī's experiment with the repetition of the word *li-mādhā* ("why?") sixteen times one after another seems to him meaningless and its geometrical configuration reprehensible, even though they might have been genuinely inspired by the poet's emotional state:

Li-mādhā?
 Li-mādhā? Li-mādhā?
 Li-mādhā? Li-mādhā? Li-mādhā?
 Li-mādhā? Li-mādhā? Li-mādhā? Li-mādhā?
 Li-mādhā? Li-mādhā? Li-mādhā?
 Li-mādhā? Li-mādhā?
 Li-mādhā?³⁷

34 Ibid.:158–159.

35 Ibid.:157.

36 Ibid.:192.

37 Ibid.:185.

Another concern of al-Aḥmad is the choice of titles for modern poems. For him, *bukā'iyah* (weeping), *ḥarakāt* (movements), *luqaṭāt* (discoveries), *tanwī'āt* (modifications) and *mawwāl* (a poem or song in colloquial language) are merely ornamental titles (*al-ʿanāwīn al-muzarkashah*),³⁸ though *mawwāl* at least is a generally accepted term. The length of titles seems him strange and excessive, sometimes even longer than the poems themselves.³⁹

He reviews examples of free verse which have sunk to the level of vulgarity and become “the captive of crude prose”. They are unable to rise to the heights of genuine artistic prose, and are failures, in contrast to traditional poetry with its solid metres and well-turned rhyme that can come to the rescue if the poem shows signs of deviating towards prose. Al-Aḥmad comments that only a talented poet can turn a prosaic style into the *sahl mumtaniʿ* (“fluency almost impossible to achieve”), as it was named by their predecessors.⁴⁰

Discussing metrical faults al-Aḥmad shares the opinion of Nāzik al-Malāʾikah (1923–2007), that the poets who hold fast to al-Khalīl’s metres cannot be wrong, but others who compose free verse very often fail to achieve melodious lines. Free verse, he says, demands musically absolute pitch from its creators, especially when they mix different metres in their poems.

He considers *kāmil* as one of the most expressive poetic metres of all, and precisely in this metre the authors make a serious error when they break it simply for the sake of a rhyme. As a result, the poets turn from *kāmil* to *rajaz* or to *ramal*. Al-Aḥmad confirms this observation by quoting the poems of Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb, Aḥmad ʿAbd al-Muʿṭī Ḥijāzī (b. 1935), Maḥmūd Darwīsh (b. 1941) and others.⁴¹

According to al-Aḥmad, the *khābab* meter is identical to the *mutadārik* and not derived from it, as Salma Khadra Jayyusi supposes.⁴² It is the easiest metre, which could be used even in everyday conversation, but all poets without exception make mistakes in it. This assertion of the author is based on his reading of Buland al-Ḥaydarī (b. 1926), Mishāl Sulaymān, Ṣalāḥ ʿAbd al-Ṣabūr and Nizār Qabbānī, who writes:

38 Ibid.:156.

39 Ibid.:181.

40 Ibid.:180.

41 Ibid.:166–167.

42 See S. Kh. JAYYUSI, “Modernist poetry in Arabic”, in: *Modern Arabic Literature*, Cambridge 1992:150.

Min adabi bilādī, min adabī From the literature of my country, from my literature.⁴³

In this example al-Aḥmad notes that Qabbānī uses the *mutadārik* metre incorrectly. Instead of four open syllables he includes five open syllables before a closed syllable, although five open syllables are uncommon even in prose.⁴⁴

To some extent artistic prose, in al-Aḥmad's view, can be more poetic than some specimens of modern poetry, especially that of authors who blindly imitate the Western experience and forget the nature and special qualities of the Arabic metres. They write a long sentence consisting of three to six lines followed by another one or two lines and call this whole construct a *qaṣīdah*.⁴⁵

Al-Aḥmad does not show himself to be a fierce opponent of experiment, but he does believe that real poetry must possess both an external and an internal melody. The internal melody of the poem is achieved through the harmony of the words and images with the realistic description of the poet's emotions and feelings. The external melody, he says, arises from the harmony of the words with the metre, which confirms "the classical definition of poetry as a mode of expression based on metres and rhyme."⁴⁶

According to al-Aḥmad, modern Arabic poetry can only gain experience by overcoming its weaknesses and defects. It is not enough simply to reject the technical limitations of the classical system (monorhyme, the separateness of the *bayt* and so on) and to invent ways of expressing new meanings in new structures.

In his view, the most remarkable achievement of free verse is to be enriched by historical archetypes and myths under the influence of Western poetry, as is revealed in the works of many poets whose verses include mythological symbols drawn initially from foreign models which are then compounded with images from Islamic mythology.⁴⁷ He shares Jayyusi's opinion that "they were not myths rooted in the memory of the people, but had to be learned from books"⁴⁸ and when repeated many times they become familiar. Among these popular mythological symbols are *Ūlīs* (Ulysses or Odysseus), whose image, according to al-Aḥmad, personifies the life of Arabs in exile, *Karbalā'* (the holy city of the Shiites in central Iraq), which symbolises the spirit of our time and

43 al-AḤMAD, *Hādhā al-shi'r al-ḥadīth*:169.

44 Ibid.:169.

45 Ibid.:203.

46 Ibid.:203.

47 Ibid.:221.

48 S. Kh. JAYYUSI, "Modernist poetry in Arabic", op. cit.:155.

the struggle for human rights and justice, *Ahl al-kahf* (People of the Cave) who embody the stagnation and historical inactivity of the Arabs, and many others drawn mainly from Islamic history and the Qur'ān.⁴⁹

Conclusion

The poetic renewal of the second half of the twentieth century was more rapid and energetic than any event in the long history of Arabic poetry. The experiments with verse forms and rhythms profoundly affected all poetry, and, in addition, stirred up lively theoretical speculations about the interpretation of its changing features. Therefore it is not accidental that al-Aḥmad was actively concerned with both of these areas.

Observing the dynamic development of free verse and the pros and cons of the poetical innovations on the thematic, linguistic and metrical levels, al-Aḥmad called for a distinction between the formal novelty of free verse and the real innovation and believed in its effectiveness. At the same time he himself showed the same tendency as some former modernists to return to the traditional type of poetry, which had still not exhausted its potential. The artistic explorations of al-Aḥmad eventually brought him back into the fold of the neo-traditionalist authors in the last decades of his life, when he was exhausted by his activities as a translator and theorist. But his many-sided creativity lasted for almost half a century, and once again confirms the important role of poetry as the pivot of Arabic culture.

49 al-AḤMAD, *Hādhā al-shi'r al-ḥadīth*:222.

