

© 2011 American University of Beirut Press
First Edition

Published by American University of Beirut Press
American University of Beirut
Beirut, Lebanon

All rights reserved.

This publication may not be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the American University of Beirut Press.

The findings, interpretations, and conclusions expressed in this book are entirely those of the authors and should not be attributed in any manner to the American University of Beirut, to its affiliated organizations, or to members of its Board of Trustees.

For permission to reprint excerpts from this publication, submit a request by fax to 961-1-361-091 or email aubpress@aub.edu.lb

Printed in Beirut, Lebanon
ISBN 978-9953-9025-1-7

Designed and produced by the Office of Communications, AUB
Designed by Zéna Khairallah
Printed by Salim Dabbous Printing Company

Table of Contents

Introduction

PART ONE – The Issue in Classical and Premodern Times

From Theory to Application

Saleh Said Agha

Of Verse, Poetry, Great Poetry, and History 1

In Genres/Phenomena

Peter Heath

Some Functions of Poetry in Premodern Historical and
Pseudo-Historical Texts: Comparing *Ayyām al-‘Arab*,
al-Ṭabarī’s *History*, and *Sīrat ‘Antar*..... 39

Geert Jan van Gelder

Poetry in Historiography: The Case of *al-Fakhrī*
by Ibn al-Ṭiḡṭaḡā 61

Ramzi Baalbaki

The Historic Relevance of Poetry in the Arab
Grammatical Tradition..... 95

Werner Diem

The Role of Poetry in Arabic Funerary Inscriptions 121

Beatrice Gruendler

“Farewell to *Ghazal!*” Convention and Danger
of the Abbasid Love Lyric 137

In Defined Eras

Suleiman A. Mourad

Poetry, History, and the Early Arab-Islamic Conquests
of al-Shām (Greater Syria)..... 175

<i>Tahera Outbuddin</i> Fatimid Aspirations of Conquest and Doctrinal Underpinnings in the Poetry of al-Qā'im bi-Amr Allāh, Ibn Hānī' al-Andalusī, Amīr Tamīm b. al-Mu'izz, and al-Mu'ayyad al-Shīrāzī	195
<i>William Granara</i> Ibn Ḥamdīs's <i>al-Dīmās</i> Qaṣīda: Memorial to a Fallen Homeland	247
<i>Fawwaz Ahmad Tuḡan</i> A Search for Monuments and Architectural Relics in some Abbasid Poems	265
PART TWO – The Issue in Modern and Contemporary Times	
In Genres/Phenomena	
<i>Leslie Tramontini</i> Poetry Post-Sayyāb: Designing the Truth in Iraqī War Poetry of the 1980s.....	289
In the Works of an Individual Poet (Maḥmūd Darwīsh)	
<i>Angelika Neuwirth</i> The Hebrew Bible and Arabic Poetry — Poetry Translating the Other's Canon: Maḥmūd Darwīsh's Project of Reading the Hebrew Bible to Reclaim Arab Memory in Palestine.....	315
<i>As'ad E. Khairallah</i> Maḥmūd Darwīsh: Writing Self and History as Poem	335
<i>Maher Jarrar</i> “A Tent for Longing”: Maḥmūd Darwīsh and <i>al-Andalus</i>	361
In Popular Poetry	
<i>Tarif Khalidi</i> 'Umar al-Z'innī and Mandate Lebanon.....	397
<i>Noha Radwan</i> The Land Speaks Arabic: <i>Shi'r al-Āmmiyya</i> and Arab Nationalism.....	413
Index	439

Of Verse, Poetry, Great Poetry, and History

Saleh Said Agha
American University of Beirut

This is more of an open inquiry into the nature of the issue than an attempt to propose conclusive answers. The question this paper poses is: “Can poetry, which retains a universal value, be tapped as an instrument for reconstructing history?” This paper is a tribute to the memory of Khalīl Ḥāwī, who was the first to teach me about Poetry and History.

I. OF VERSE AND GREAT POETRY

The clause in the above phraseology of the question, which qualifies poetry as that “which retains a universal value” is of the essence. Omitting or neglecting it would reduce the question to a senseless exercise in begging the question. For poetry, simply understood as a versified form of speech, has always been used as a major source for reconstructing history, especially ancient Arab history. This aspect of the issue I will presently revisit. For now, let us concern ourselves with the strain of poetry so characterized as retaining “a universal value”, in other words, “Great Poetry”.

As a student of both Philosophy and Poetics, our late professor Khalīl Ḥāwī loved to teach (actually proselytize)¹ that the object of History is the “concrete”, the object of Philosophy is the “universal”, and the object of Poetry is the *Concrete universal*. That is, while History is naturally entrapped within the confines of its mundane particularity (i.e., facts) and concreteness, and while Philosophy naturally luxuriates in its abstract universals, Poetry — for it to be great poetry — must, once and at the same instance, bear the burden of concretizing the universal and universalizing the concrete. Thus, emulating Ḥāwī, one may characterize the object of great poetry (poetry which retains a universal value through concrete imagery) as the *Concrete universal*.²

Of course, Ḥāwī laid no claim to initiate a theory, nor am I attributing to his own genius any such claim. He simply captured and taught, as perceptively and cogently as may be wished, the relevant theoretical

continuum stretching from Plato, Aristotle, neoclassicism, through the German and English Romantic upheaval, to the influential theories of his own times.³ Being a poet-critic, Ḥāwī was not an impartial disseminator of literary theory. He actually proselytized a specific organic variety of a literary theory of which, he believed, his own poetry was an embodiment. His was a cohesive organic view of Soul, Existence, and of epistemology — of the human condition (soul and existence), the human endeavor (history), and the human understanding thereof (epistemology). He was, at once, an Aristotelian rationalist, a Romantic visionary who believed in Coleridge's vital Imagination as a recreator (or a perpetual dissipater-creator!), and a nihilist.⁴ Swinging between his poetic moods, Ḥāwī never abandoned his theoretical convictions. Even as a theoretician, but also responding to the summons of poetry, he always saw profound unity at the roots of ostensible diversity. This is probably why he was able to fuse, in his oral expositions, Aristotle's concept of "metaphor", as the natural mark of genius which cannot be taught,⁵ with Coleridge's "secondary Imagination",⁶ both being for him one and the same faculty responsible for poetic creativity. Aristotle and Coleridge proceeded from two different perspectives, yet Ḥāwī saw that they were essentially speaking of the same thing — of the well from which poetry gushes, naturally, and of the human faculty which streamlines it in poetic images. He extended this continuum to include Jean-Paul Richter, as the initiator of, and Carl Gustav Jung, as the thinker who brought to maturity the theory of a "collective unconscious" as the source of creativity, and of "archetypes" as the concrete images subsisting in the "collective unconscious" and embodying man's primeval reactions to his surroundings.⁷

Ḥāwī was profoundly a proponent of an organic theory which enlisted three major elements: (1) Aristotle's "metaphor", (2) Coleridge's "Imagination", and (3) Jung's "archetypes". Accordingly, he stratified poetic imagery (i.e., imagery of epistemological value) into three levels: (1) mythological (archetypal); (2) symbolic (where the individual poet co-opts elements from the collective unconscious to interact with elements from his individual experience); and (3) new, independent, and individual imagery, which does not necessarily partake in the collective pool, but which is vital enough so as to establish a new tradition not alien to the old. At the heart of each of these three elements, or strata, lurks a concrete image and a human universal "truth" — be it archetypal, symbolic, or a newly created symbol of the type that takes root. All concretes in poetry must embody and exude universals. All universals in poetry must be embodied in concrete images. Thus, the concept of the *Concrete universal* was inevitable.⁸ It summoned into its vortex all the violent winds of experience and theory.

A poet in his own right, Ḥāwī equated Poeticity and its medium

with Prophecy and its medium as the ultimate epistemological tool and medium. Poetry is the ultimate tool to the extent that the faculty which produces it is intuition which, according to Schelling, is the faculty that transcends and complements Philosophy, the faculty that unites Reason and Imagination, and empowers the inspired creator (of poetry) to transpire the phenomenological world reaching the “absolute truth”. Inasmuch as poetic creation is a tangible expression of the organic fusion of the particular and the universal, poetry is the ultimate medium, and it is “an embodiment of heaven, hell, and death in concrete images which bring forth into the tangible world the hidden transcendental [truths].”⁹

Thus, and in the footsteps of Sir Philip Sidney (d. 1586), Ḥāwī was bound to pronounce Poetry superior to both History and Philosophy. Except for the vital fact that Sidney was more morally and Ḥāwī more epistemologically oriented, for the purposes of this paper they both reach the same platform: Poetry must be firmly anchored in the *concrete* and, without losing touch with its concrete base, it must transpire it to a plateau where it touches *universal truths*.¹⁰

According to Ḥāwī’s decisive “taste”, not all verse is necessarily poetry. Modes of expression which display correct adherence to the formalities of meter and rhyme are not poetry unless they reflect the *Concrete universal*. Accordingly, versified speech — normally and indiscriminately called poetry — may be classified in three categories or types relevant to the epistemological dimension of the issue — that is, the relation between the historical “fact” and the universal or poetic “truth” as expressed in poetic *imagery* (of which the Aristotelian concept of “metaphor”¹¹ and Coleridge’s definition of “Imagination” are of the essence).

The first type is where verse purports to express or capture a *universal* (truth) through an *abstract* (medium). Lacking the *concrete* image, this type is inferior to true poetry; and lacking Reason, it is inferior to philosophy. It is cold and scrawny (بارد غث). To illustrate this type of verse, Ḥāwī’s example of choice was Sa‘īd ‘Aql’s:

لَوْفَعُكَ فَوْقَ السَّرِيرِ مَهِيْبٌ كَوْفَعِ الْهُنَيْهَةِ فِي الْمَطْلَقِ¹²

Your impact on the bed is awesome
Like the impact of the instant in the absolute,

The woman’s impact on the bed is *concrete* and truly awesome; but the image soon deteriorates, where neither the “instant” nor the “absolute”, nor the impact of the one on the other can be concretely perceived.

The second type of verse is where the *concrete* is just that — i.e., the particular (subjective, tactile, concrete, locally or historically colored

component of an image), so barrenly entrapped in its particularity to the extent that it cannot transpire it into a plateau of universality. The worst, according to Ḥāwī, is something like Nizār Qabbānī's transmuting a modern Andalusian female beauty into a medieval Muslim roughneck:

عَانَقْتُ فِيهَا عِنْدَمَا وَدَّعْتُهَا رَجُلًا يُسَمَّى طَارِقَ بْنِ زِيَادٍ¹³

When I bade her farewell, in her I embraced
A man whose name is Ṭāriq ibn Ziyād

Here the poet deliberately tries to preserve and upgrade his “particular” to the level of a symbol, but miserably fails.

Between this miserable “imagery” and the straightforward, non-pretentious, almost prosaic versification of historical accounts,¹⁴ lies a vast landscape of verse which may be dotted with sporadic glimpses and splashes of truly great poetry. This vast landscape has always been a gold mine for historians; and it will presently be revisited.

The third type of verse is that which “retains a universal value” while being firmly anchored in its own particularity. This is where verse is poetry — true or great poetry. This is where the *universal* cannot be captured except through a *concrete*, and where the *concrete* cannot acquire a value (a symbolic value) beyond itself, while retaining its own autonomy, unless it naturally and spontaneously (= poetically) oozes or exudes the *universal*. This is speech which transcends normal speech (whether in prose or in verse) by virtue of arresting the *universal* in its own particular *concrete*, and of releasing the *universal* themes “naturally” packed in that *concrete*.¹⁵

Since, according to Coleridge, Ḥāwī's “idol”, a long poem “neither can be, nor ought to be, all poetry,”¹⁶ the glowing gems of imagery in a poem are the principle of its organic unity. The “harmonious whole”, which is the poem, “is produced by keeping the non-poetic parts in the same general style and tone as” the poetic parts, which are the product of “the imagination” — “that unifying and harmonizing activity which is the essence of the poetic process in the larger sense.”¹⁷ Leaving aside for now the structure of a poem in favor of the nature of poetry, Ḥāwī's concentration on hunting down specific (and rather partial) instances of great poetic imagery was in step, at least, with his instructional purposes as a professor of poetics. Of the many examples of great poetic imagery he was fond of reciting, I still remember a few which I wish to share. Some of these are not necessarily related to widely known historical contexts; others are plucked from poems which are grounded in specific historical circumstances which are a matter of public record. Here are five of Ḥāwī's favorites:

(1) Recalling his own personal predicament within the environment of his *miṣr* (Baṣra), the minor Umayyad poet, Sa'd b. Nāshib, was consumed by his own burning will to avenge himself. Ḥāwī, deliberately oblivious to the poetically irrelevant historical context, chose the following verse (actually its first hemistich) as an example of a great poetic image:

إِذَا هَمَّ أَلْقَى بَيْنَ عَيْنَيْهِ عَزْمَهُ وَنَكَّبَ عَنِ ذِكْرِ الْعَوَاقِبِ جَانِبًا¹⁸

Once bent [on an intent], he hurls between his eyes his resolve,
And he deflects all thought about the consequences

Ḥāwī's "catch" is the poet's *concretizing* of his *abstract* resolve, as if it were a load, some cargo. Then, hurling this *concrete* into another ostensible *concrete* (the space between his two eyes) which, in turn, is nothing less than a physiological station of specific import, the poet concretizes his own psychological state of intense intent, which is nothing less than a feature of the universal human condition. This complex dynamic interplay between the *concrete* and the *universal* is what makes of this image an instance of great poetry. The remaining four examples partake in this essential poetic characteristic (the dynamic interplay between the *concrete* and the *universal*).

(2) In a historically irrelevant context — in the *nasīb* of a short poem — Abū Tammām eases himself into an archetype of generosity:

لَا تُنْكِرِي عَطْلَ الْكَرِيمِ مِنَ الْغِنَى فَالْسَيْلُ حَرْبٌ لِلْمَكَانِ الْعَالِيِ¹⁹

Deem not strange the alienation of the generous from riches;
The torrent is an enemy of high places

Ḥāwī's "catch" is where the concrete, physical erosion, perpetually inflicted by torrents on geographic high places, is the embodiment of the perpetual erosion generosity wreaks on the riches of the noble and magnanimous.

(3) From al-Mutanabbī's elegy of Sayf al-Dawla's mother, Ḥāwī (without prejudice to the whole poem) chose the two verses:

وَحَالَاتِ الزَّمَانِ عَلَيْكَ شَتَّى وَحَالَكَ وَاحِدٌ فِي كُلِّ حَالٍ

The circumstances of Time confronting you are [changing and] diverse,
You [, however,] stay the same in all cases

فَإِنَّ تَفَقُّقَ الْأَنَامِ وَأَنْتَ مِنْهُمْ فَإِنَّ الْمَسْكَ بَعْضُ دَمِ الْغَزَالِ²⁰

If [— as is the case —] you transcend the human race while one of
 their number,
 Musk is [likewise] a part of the gazelle's blood

Ḥāwī's "catch": Time (the universal) is the variable, Sayf al-Dawla (the concrete) is the constant — some sort of a deity. While of human stuff, yet he surpasses the human race. If the "essence" of humanity is an abstract universal concept, the "essence" of the gazelle's blood is a concrete chemical substance. Sayf al-Dawla's greatness transcending the entire human race is as natural as the concretely attested superiority of musk over the stuff of which it is a part. It is the concreteness of the *concrete* which salvages the ostensible "absurdity" of the *universal*.

(4) From al-Mutanabbī's semi-epic poem on the battle of "al-Ḥadath", Ḥāwī (without prejudice to the whole poem) chose the two verses depicting Sayf al-Dawla's heroic and triumphant steadfastness in the battle:

وقفتَ وما في الموت شكٌّ لواقفٍ كأنك في جفن الردى وهو نائم
 تمرّ بك الأبطال كلى هزيمة ووجهك وضاحٍ وتغرك باسم²¹

[Fast] You stood, when death was [the] doubtless [lot of] the steadfast,
 As if you were in the eyelid of death [embedded], while death slept.
 Champions of war, wounded and fleeing in defeat, passed by you
 [While] your face was bright and luminous, and your [front]
 teeth gleamed in a [non-wavering] smile

Ḥāwī's "catch": Death has an eyelid; Death sleeps; Death yields to the will of the untouchable hero, and — unawares — makes room between its eyelid and eyeball for him who invades it. There, Sayf al-Dawla, serenely stands reviewing his fleeing victims. The entire image revolves around death being transformed into an eye, and then being negotiated for what it is — a dynamic entity which must be accepted for what it can be: a universal fact, and a concrete *motif* in the poetic milieu.

(5) Abū Tammām's:

فَأَثَبْتَ فِي مُسْتَقْعِ الْمَوْتِ رَجْلَهُ وَقَالَ لَهَا مِنْ تَحْتِ أَحْمُصِكَ الْحَشْرُ²²

He fixed his foot in the swamp of death
 And spoke to it: ‘From underneath the hollow of your sole
 Resurrection [emanates]’

This is probably the greatest poetic image in this repertoire of Ḥāwī’s. The lamented protagonist in this heroic poem is a rather modest character in the history of the period. Muḥammad b. Ḥumayd al-Ṭūsī is hardly the archetypal heroic character who comes across in Abū Tammām’s verse.²³ Yet, Abū Tammām’s imagery establishes him as the ultimate martyr who defies death, not only by plunging into it, but by transforming it into a swamp, stomping his foot into it, and controlling Resurrection and redirecting it along its only possible path — from underneath the hollow of the sole of his foot. Death becomes a swamp; Human defiance becomes a cosmic foot invasively planted in it; Resurrection is trivialized, but only comparatively — it is still majestic, but no matter how majestic, it still must be cleared and allowed to pass from underneath the hollow of the sole of that majestic cosmic foot.

Where the *concrete* component of the *Concrete universal* is borrowed from history, or itself is a presumed “historical fact” (event, situation, phenomenon, context, etc.), is where the two approaches employed here (theoretical poetics and historiographical methodology) intersect. The central question is related to the historical *concrete* within the poetic ecology of the *Concrete universal*, i.e., the third type of versified speech, i.e., great poetry. Once again the question will be deferred, this time in the interest of further distinctions and exploratory criteria.

II. ON VERSIFIED SPEECH AS A SOURCE FOR RECONSTRUCTING HISTORY

Without distinction on grounds of artistic merit²⁴ (or even authenticity), Arabic versified speech has always been used as a historiographical tool. Of old, the early *akhbāriyyūn*,²⁵ the great annalists and historians,²⁶ and others, especially authors of *kutub al-adab*,²⁷ used poetry as a source of historical knowledge, or as a tool to document (verify or refute) what they claimed to transmit of the history of the Arabs — political, tribal, military, religious, social, cultural, or otherwise. Setting poetics aside, Arabic versified speech and the history of the Arabs are, in the Arabic sources, almost inseparable;²⁸ so much so that one may even conjure up an outline (or a *silhouette*) of at least the major contours of early Arab history by solely tapping Arabic verse.