A FOURTH CENTURY CONTRIBUTION TO LITERARY THEORY: IBN FĀRIS’S TREATISE ON POETIC LICENSES

Introduction

Preference for poetical works has been adduced as one of the principal impulses for the promotion of Arabic poetics in the 4th A.H./10th A.D. century.1 To this may also be added the ever-growing literary corpus, which derived from the emergence of new themes and styles. However, there were two significant issues which dominated the intellectual debate and discussion among the literati during this period. The first relates to the problem of evidential examples, shawḥīd. The debate concerned which period of Arabic literary experience should be regarded as the terminus a quo, the poetical works emerging after which might not be cited as authoritative usages. The second issue was whether the employment of exceptional usages, darūrāt, with no few illustrations from the classical poetry, should be allowed to contemporary poets. In its most extreme form, the argument over the latter challenged the legitimacy of that dispensation which poets of no matter which historical classification had often utilized sometimes to the point of the absurd.

With regard to the first issue, there was a curious lack of consensus, a startling fickleness, and indeed self-contradiction among the avant-garde of Arabic literary theory. Abū 'Amr b. al-ʿAlāʾ (d. 154/770) and al-ʿAṣmaʿī (d. 123/828) were classic representatives of this contradiction and confusion.2 We must, however, hasten to say that some other early theorists advocated the evaluation of poetry without parti pris, arguing that any poetical work, regardless of the period in which it was composed, should be assessed to contemporary poets. In its most extreme form, the argument over the latter challenged the legitimacy of that dispensation which poets of no matter which historical classification had often utilized sometimes to the point of the absurd.

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Concerning the issue of exceptional usage however, the intellectual symbiosis that found its sustenance in the mutual dependence between the poet and the philologist, in which the latter was a senior confrère who could determine the fortune or misfortune of the poet, had started to weaken, if not already to pale into insignificance by the end of the third/ninth century.4 The poet was now assuming the role of the regulator of public opinion, regarding which usage was to be accepted by the philologist for codification within the context of routine and formal usages. The emerging, insufferable pretensions of the poet found expression in such statements as “It is for us to say and for you to interpret”, an assumption that was patently demonstrated in many of the encounters between the poets and the philologists at literary forums.5 This particular development provoked the reaction of some philologists who felt that the poet was going too far in taking advantage of exceptional usage which, in the first place, derived from consideration for practical convenience in verse making. Of such scholars was Aḥmad Ibn Fāris (d. 395/1004) whose thesis on the issue is the subject of this study.

It must be stated, however, that some scholars before Ibn Fāris, for example, al-Khalīl b. Aḥmad (d. 175/791) had already argued, in a less than discriminating manner, in support of the poet employing uncommon usages when so constrained,6 while some others like Abū ʿAlī al-Fārisī (d. 377/979) allowed such usages whatever the condition.7 Neither disposition seems to have found favour with Ibn Fāris, and his thesis on the subject should therefore be interpreted as an explicit reaction to the existing tradition.

Ibn Fāris had the singular honour of being the first to challenge the ludicrous concession reflected in the unqualified endorsement of exceptional idioms, having observed that the dispensation was being stretched too far, almost to the point of disregard for basic grammatical rules. Hence his Dḥamm al-khaṭa'ī fī al-shīr (Reproving Mistakes in Poetry) the nucleus of this essay, derives its uniqueness from this perspective, no less from the fact that it is the only surviving work by him that is essentially devoted to a certain aspect of Arabic literary theory.8

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4 For instance, see Abū ʿl-Faraj al-İṣṭahānī, Kitāb al-Ağhānī, (Cairo, 1927-74), xviii, 184.
8 See Ḥāji Khalīfa, Kashf al-zunūn, (Istanbul, 1941-3), i, 827.