CHAPTER 4

Lament for Lost Youth

Ah! Jeunesse—l’homme ne la possède qu’un temps et le reste du temps la rappelle.

ANDRÉ GIDE—Les Nourritures Terrestres

1 Death of Youth

Old age looks back nostalgically at its bygone days of youth. The binary opposition at work here is between past and present, with the first term being the cherished one. Weeping over lost youth (al-bukāʾ ʿalā l-shabāb) is a male undertaking just as weeping over deserted encampments (al-bukāʾ ʿalā l-āṭlāl). Both themes were already prevalent in pre-Islamic poetry and both involved lost love. The latter, the amatory prelude (nasīb), was replaced by the former in ʿAbbāsid poetry. The appearance of gray hair meant the loss of youthful vitality, beauty, and pleasures. But who started all the weeping we are about to witness? Two main contenders are mentioned in the sources: ʿAmr b. Qamīʿa,1 and ʿAbīd b. al-Abraṣ.2 ʿAmr says:

(1) Alas my soul for Youth that’s gone!
No light thing lost I when he fled.3

ʿAbīd says:

(17) Ah! Gone is Youth, and has sworn that ne’er will he visit me more, and hoariness has taken his place in the locks that fall on each side;

(18) And hoary hairs are a shame to the court where they come to dwell—yea, goodly the full black locks that were mine in days gone by!4

1 al-Marzubānī, Muʿjam al-shuʿarā’, p. 10.
Judging from the context of these verses, it appears that their lamentation has to do more with aging than with youthful pleasures. ‘Abīd laments the beauty of black hair, which is replaced by shameful hoariness. ‘Amr is said to have been a beautiful young man who lived long enough—some ninety years—to see his beauty marred by the ravages of time. The theme continued to be treated, in view of the variety of pleasures that depart with youth, until it pervaded ’Abbāsid poetry.

Al-Aṣmaʿī (d. 213/828) believes that the best poetic genres (anmāṭ) are elegy and weeping over youth.⁵ It is clear that al-Aṣmaʿī considers weeping over youth to be its own genre, like elegy, although it is not included in Ibn Qutayba’s (d. 276/889) description,⁶ or in Qudāma’s (d. ca. 337/948) list of the six aghrāḍ al-shuʿarāʾ.⁷ In referring to the Kitāb al-muʿammarīn (long-lived), Juynboll says, “The poems preserved in this anthology deal with descriptions of the hardships of old age—often heralded by the graying of hair and beard—mixed with outbursts of nostalgia about lost youth and vigor. Verses of this sort constitute a separate genre in Arabic poetry practiced by many poets of all times.”⁸ Al-Mubarrad (d. 286/900) notes that in their poetry the Arabs’ dispraise exceeds their praise of gray hair, yet their poetry about gray hair is considered to be better than any other genre because it springs from broken hearts.⁹ Such poetry should be understood to include youth as well, since the praise or dispraise of hoariness is generally done in contrast to youth. Al-Mubarrad’s statement may be a variant of an account related by his teacher al-Māzinī (d. 249/863), who asked an eloquent Bedouin: why is it that poetry on lamentation in elegies, weeping over youth, and fear of gray hair is considered your best? The Bedouin said: that’s because we compose it with sad, beating hearts and painful, burning livers.¹⁰ It is said that although their poetry lamented bygone youth more than anything else, the Arabs’ treatment of the subject nevertheless fell short of giving it its due.¹¹

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⁸ Juynboll, “Muʾammar,” EI².
⁹ al-Mubarrad, al-Fāḍil, p. 72.