THE 'ABBASID POET INTERPRETS HISTORY:
THREE QAṢĪDAHS BY ABŪ TAMMĀM *

'Abbasid poetry inherited from the Jāhiliyah age a complex social and political role which Ibn Rashiq describes as follows:

The Arabs needed to sing about their nobility of character, the purity of their blood and to recall their good battle-days and far-away abodes, their brave horsemen and compliant steeds, in order to incite themselves to nobility and direct their sons to good character ... to perpetuate memorable deeds, strengthen their honor, guard the tribe and to inspire the awe of other tribes since others would not advance against them out of fear of their poet.1

We can discern in this and in such remarks as al-Jumahi's that “Poetry was the knowledge of a tribe than which there was no truer knowledge” 2 that the poetry of the Arabs was the canon of their cultural values. With the coming of Islam, and the transition from a predominantly tribal nomadic society to an urban Islamic state, the role of poetry, and hence of the poet, became much more complex. The court poet was no longer dealing with personal and tribal events, but with the political events of a vast empire. The major problem facing the 'Abbasid poet was how to reconcile the two traditions to which he was heir. First, the tribal tradition of the Jāhiliyah age in which his cultural and ethical foundations were based and second, the Islamic historical tradition which formed the basis of the Islamic religion and the 'Abbasid state.

Let us briefly examine these two traditions: As seen in 'Abbasid times, the Jāhiliyah period was an idyllic heroic age, a golden age which embodied manly virtues and noble deeds and from which the present age had fallen. Preserved in literature—in the form of the qaṣīda and the “occasional” poetry of the ayyām al-`Arab—the events of the heroic age were seen as ideals, exemplars of nobility

* The research for this paper was made possible by a grant from the American Research Center in Egypt, 1976-77.
and virtue, rather than as steps in a chronological development. Thus the Jahiliyah age was regarded as a romantic, chivalric age in which time was equated with fate, rather than as a strictly historical period. Moreover, it was a lost age. The modern generations had been cut off from it by the rise of Islam and the establishment of an urban state. Tribes dispersed, ancient loyalties were abrogated, the nobility of character produced by the hardships of desert life was vitiated by the effeminacy of city life. The Moderns felt that much of their literary tradition had been lost, chains of transmission broken, and just as they could no longer attain the moral stature of the Jahiliyah Bedouin, neither could they equal his poetry. Al-Jumahi describes the situation thus:

Then came Islam, and the Arabs were distracted from it (poetry) and devoted themselves to Jihād and to raiding Persia and Byzantium, and they turned their attention from poetry and its transmission. And when Islam had spread and the conquests came, and the Arabs settled in the conquered provinces, they returned to transmitting poetry.... And they found that many Arabs had perished in battle or died. So they preserved the least of it, and most of it was lost.³

The conservative position held by the philologists such as Abū 'Amr ibn al-'Ald' and Ibn al-A'rabi was succinctly expressed by their colleague who, when asked about the modern poets, answered, “Whatever is beautiful (in poetry) was done before them, and whatever is ugly is theirs.”⁴ At the other extreme Ibn Qutaybah claimed to believe that:

God did not limit poetry, knowledge and eloquence to one age to the exclusion of another, nor did He single out one people over another, but rather, God shared and divided (these things) among His servants in every age, and made every ancient a modern in his own time.⁵

Nevertheless, it was the poetry of the Ancients that was held up, even by Ibn Qutaybah, as the model and measure for the succeeding generations. The Ancients created, the Moderns imitated.

The poetry of the Jahiliyah which became the basis of the literary tradition of the Islamic period was carried on in two forms: 1) the anthologies of ancient poetry, of which we can discern three types—a)