TOWARD A REDEFINITION OF "BADĪ’" POETRY

You are not you, the abodes are not abodes
Passion has waned, desires have changed.¹

لا أَنتِ عَلَى الْبيْنِ وَالْوَرْدِ فَهِيْ هِيْ بِحُرْرِ

The vicinity of the ruins and of their people
That long ago was sweet to drink at, now tastes of salt.

كَانَتْ بِجاوْرَةِ الطَّلْوَلِ وَأَهْلَهَا زَمَّةً عَذَابَ الْوَرْدِ فَهِيْ بِحُرْرِ

The 'Abbasid poet of the "new" style realized that the Golden Age of the Jāhiliyah was no more—it was the ruined abode, irreparably changed, the repository of old and archetypal yearnings; nothing remained but the vague traces of a tribal heritage, long since abandoned for the glories of Empire and Islam. Time has changed the poet too; in psyche and in sensibility he is no longer the bedouin warrior and lover, pouring forth his heart "in profuse strains of unpremeditated art," but the consciously cultivated littérateur of the Caliphal court. And yet the 'Abassid "badī’" poet returned for inspiration to the traces of the primordial dwelling whose once sweet waters now have the tearful taste of melancholy. Thus the "new" poetry was still nourished from the traditional tribal well-spring of Arabic literature, but it was changed by the passage of time, the relentless march of history, to consciously and self-consciously reflect the urban Islamic culture of the 'Abassid empire. The so-called "badī’" poetry that emerged in late second and early third century Basra and Baghdad was the recognition and expression in literature of this irrevocable change. As such it was welcomed by those who revelled in the headlong rush into a new era, but it came as a threat to those who cherished the illusion of continuity with Jāhiliyah times and preferred to remain under the protective wing of the Golden Age.

Ibn al-Mu‘tazz is credited with the first critical formulation of a definition of the new poetry in his Kitāb al-Badī’ (274 H.). His definition of the literary phenomenon in terms of already existing rhetorical devices became the basis for all later criticism of badī’

poetry. His theory has been expounded and expanded, analyzed and psycho-analyzed but never challenged, superceded or discarded.

I would like to demonstrate that the concept of "bâdî'" as propounded by Ibn al-Mu'tazz is fundamentally inadequate, and that to arrive at an adequate and coherent formulation of the nature of the new poetry, we must first return to the fertile second century Basran soil from which it sprang.

The term "bâdî'" appeared in the third century hijra to describe the innovative style of certain ʿAbbasid poets, the beginning of which was generally attributed to Bashshâr ibn Burd (d. 167/8 H.) or Muslim ibn al-Walîd (d. 208 H.). The term was not at first defined, but apparently indicated the novel, innovative quality of the poetry.2 The word itself is related to the verb abda' a IV to originate, invent, bring into existence for the first time that which did not exist before. Hence, bâdî' (in the meaning of fâ'il I or mufrûl IV) is one of the epithets of God, meaning "the Originator of the creation." And bâdî' (in the meaning of mufrûl I) as an adjective thus means "Originated; invented; made, done, produced ... newly, for the first time ... new, wonderful, unknown before."3 Of note here also is bid'ah, innovation in the realm of religion and theology, which is to say, heresy.

In the Kitâb al-Aghâni, Abû al-Faraj al-İsfahâni credits Muslim ibn al-Walîd with the introduction of the term:

Muslim ibn al-Walîd ... was an early ʿAbbasid poet, born and raised in Kufa. He is, so they claim, the first one to have composed what is known as "bâdî'" poetry, and he termed this type [of poetry] novel (bâdî') and refined. He had a group of followers, and the most famous of them was Abû Tammâm al-Ṭâʾi, for he composed all of his poetry in that manner.4

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2 This discussion follows in part the chapter on "bâdî'" in: Ahmad Maṭlûb, Mustalâhah Balâghiyyah (Baghdad: al-Majmâʿ al-ʿIlmi li-ʾIrāqī, 1972), pp. 80-95.

3 Edward William Lane, An Arabic-English Lexicon 8 vols. (Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1968) Vol. 1, pp. 166-167. We might also note the common etymology of "bâdî'" and "bid'ah"—"an innovation, a novelty ... an addition or an improvement, in religion ... generally a heretical innovation"—which may in part explain the negative and "heretical" connotation which the literary term later began to assume.