'AMŪD AL-SHĪR: LEGITIMIZATION OF TRADITION

'Amūd al-shīr (the essentials of poetry) was a body of loosely related critical conceptions formulated during the fourth and fifth centuries A.H., primarily as a reaction to the New Style (al-badīʿ), which had appeared in the latter part of the second century A.H. The New Style of such poets as Bashshār ibn Burd (d. 167 A.H./784 A.D.), Abū Nuwās (d. 198 A.H./814 A.D.), Muslim ibn al-Walīd (d. 208 A.H./823 A.D.) and in particular Abū Tammām (d. 231 A.H./845 A.D.) was characterized by “unconventional” imagery, “original” meanings and daring metaphors. Conservative poets and critics, finding the New Style “artificial, contrived and farfetched”, sought to reaffirm the “natural” and “ideal” conventions of the “ancient”, or “beduin”, poetic tradition. 'Amūd al-shīr was thus the systematic formulation of tenets representing the traditional conception of the ideal Arabic poem.

The term 'amūd (literally the pole of a tent, a pillar or a mainstay) could be used metaphorically to represent a set of characteristics or principles underlying a given concept or literary genre. The word could be combined with other terms to create technical expressions, such as 'amūd al-khāṭābah (oratory), 'amūd al-balāghah (eloquence) and 'amūd al-nazm (composition). The term 'amūd al-shīr was first used by the Abbasid poet al-Buhtūrī (d. ca. 284 A.H./897 A.D.) in response to a question concerning a critical comparison between himself and his major Abbasid counterpart Abū Tammām, the most eminent representative of the New Style, and therefore the symbol of deviation from the classical norm. Al-Buhtūrī’s reply was

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3 Thaʿlab, Qawāʿid al-Shīr (ed. Ramādān 'Abd al-Lāwwāb, Cairo, 1966), pp. 88, 89.
that Abū Tammām "delved more deeply for meanings, but I am more observant of 'amūd al-shīr'".5

The first critic who enumerated, albeit in a negative and un-systematic manner, some of the main characteristics of 'amūd al-shīr was al-ʿĀmīdī (d. 370 A.H./980 A.D.) in the course of his illustrious critical comparison (muwäzanah) between Abū Tammām and al-Buḥṭūrī.6 In a significant passage, al-ʿĀmīdī set forth the claims of the two opposing parties of critics in their support of one or the other of the two poets. The transmitter-critics (ruwaḥ) of "modern" poetry, he stated, claimed that the "good poetry of Abū Tammām's contemporaries is inferior to Abū Tammām's good poetry, but Abū Tammām's bad poetry is worthless and can be ignored".7 Al-Buḥṭūrī's supporters, on the other hand, asserted that al-Buḥṭūrī's poetry was "soundly formulated, stylistically superior, never weak or inferior, but of consistently high quality".8 Furthermore, those who preferred al-Buḥṭūrī and assigned to him such qualities as "felicity (of style), smooth transition from theme to theme (husn al-takhallus), appropriate wording, sound expression, lucidity and accessibility of meanings, were the prose writers (al-kuttāb), the beduins (al-aṭrāb), the natural poets (al-shuʿarāʾ al-maṭbūʿūn), and the rhetoricians (ahl al-balāghah)".9 Conversely, those who preferred Abū Tammām and favored his "obscure and convoluted meanings that demand arduous inference and elucidation were the exegetes of (abstruse) meanings (ahl al-maʿānī), the artificial poets (al-shuʿarāʾ ʾaṣḥāb al-ṣanʿāh) and those disposed to intricate and philosophical discourse".10

Although the transmitter-critics made like claims for the excellence, copiousness11 and originality of the poets they championed al-ʿĀmīdī was the first to clarify the differences:12

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6 Ibid., vol. 1, pp. 4-5, 11-27. In these and other references al-ʿĀmīdī cited the major characteristics of al-Buḥṭūrī’s "natural" (maṭbūʿ) poetry which were identical with those of 'amūd al-shīr as al-ʿĀmīdī conceived of it.
7 Al-Muwāzanah, vol. 1, p. 3.
8 Ibid., p. 3.
9 Ibid., p. 4.
10 Loc. cit.
11 Loc. cit. Concerning copiousness (ghazārah) of poetic composition, earlier critics and philologists had different standards: al-ʿĀṣmaʾī (d. 216/831), for instance, set the number of poems that would qualify a poet to enter the rank of master poets (al-fuhūl) at 5 or 6 or 20, Fuhūlat al-Shuʿānī (ed. M. ʿAbd al-Muʿīn Khafajī and Ṭāhā M. al-Zaynī, Cairo, 1953), pp. 21, 22, 28-29 and 44.
12 Al-Muwāzanah, vol. 1, pp. 4-5.