'THE MOST NATURAL POEM OF THE ARABS':
AN ADDITION TO THE DĪWÂN OF AL-KUMAYT IBN ZAYD

In their al-Ashbāh wa-l-nazā'ir, a work devoted to the comparison of early and muḥdath poetry, the two brothers Abū Bakr Muḥammad (d. 380/990) and Abū Ṭūthmān Saʿīd (d. c. 390/1000), known as al-Khālidiyyān, give the following story:¹

(ii, 144) Abū Bakr Aḥmad Ibn Mansūr, known as Ibn al-Khayyāt the grammarian²—God rest his soul—told us: Saʿūdā³ told me: We were sitting with Abū ʿIkrima al-Ḍabbī⁴ (a man who knew more than anyone else about the poems of the Arabs, and knew them by heart). Although he had a rather unsociable character we noticed that he looked cheerful, so we said to him, We do not think the Arabs have made a poem describing war like the poem of Qays Ibn al-Khāṭīm that begins A-tacrifu rasman (...).⁵ Abū ʿIkrima said to us, "And He creates what you do not know!"⁶ So we realized there was something that he wanted to teach us, and we asked him, What is it then, master? He replied: There are two poems by the Arabs describing war that have no equal. [Two poems, by al-Rabīʿ Ibn Ziyāḍ al-ʿAbsī and Ibn Aḥmar al-Ṣaʿdī, are quoted].

(ii, 147) Saʿūdā continued: Now when we saw that he was [still] cheerful we asked him about the most natural poem of the Arabs, the finest in splendour and with most brilliancy (a.tba'i qasfdatin lil-:arabi wa-ahsanihd rawnaqan wa-aktharihi miJān). He answered: You have asked me much and kept me a long time. But I will recite for you a poem such as you ask for.

⁴ ʿAmīr Ibn ʿImrān Ibn Ziyāḍ (or Dhiyād), from Samarra, d. 250/864, grammarian, lexicographer and akhbārī, whose unsociable character (sharāsh is mentioned in several sources. He played a part in the transmission of the text of the Muḥaddīṣīyyāt; his al-Amīḥāl was edited by Ramādān ʿAbd al-Tawwāb (Damascus, 1974). See Yaqqūt, Muṣjam al-udabāʾ, xii, 39; Ibn Khallikān, al-Wafayat, Beirut, 1968-72, vi, 395, al-Ṣafādī, al-Wafī, xvi, 592 f.; C. Brockelmann, Geschichte der arabischen Litteratur, Suppl., I, 180; F. Sezgin, Geschichte des arabischen Schrifttums, ii, 53, viii, 136, etc.
⁵ The well-known bāʿyā used, included in al-Qurashi's Jamharat ashār al-ʿarab.
⁶ Sūra vi, 8.
Only, I make a vow unto God that I shall not inform you of its author. We said, We agree. Then he recited for us... [A poem of 42 lines follows; see the Appendix for the text and a translation].

(ii, 149) Ṣaʿūdā continued: By God, we did our utmost to make him tell us who made this poem, but he did not do so. When he was on his deathbed, writing his testament (waṣiyya), I said to him, I shall not really find that poem beautiful until I know its author. Now won’t you tell me who made it?—He laughed and replied, I used to imagine that you could be entrusted with a testament. But now I think you are not sensible. Throw that letter with the testament over to me! Do you think I have in any situation ever had a worse temper than right now, while I perceive Death in my movements? By God, you will never hear the author’s name from me. Hand me that testament, will you, and go away!—Then he took it from me and I left. He died later that day.

The story is remarkable in more than one way. First of all, Abū ʿIkrima’s behaviour is eccentric: I do not know any other examples of philologists brazenly withholding information about authorship in this manner. Did he not know the name of the poet and was he loath to appear ignorant? Did he like the poem but not the poet? Or was he perhaps himself the maker?

Secondly, it is curious to see that all those involved in the transmission, from Ṣaʿūdā in the ninth century to the editor of al-ʿAshbāḥ wa-ʿl-nazāʾir in our time, have, apparently, been unable to solve the mystery, and were, moreover, not afraid to show this, in spite of a general reluctance, in traditional scholarly practice, to admit one’s ignorance. 8

Related to this attitude, perhaps, is Ṣaʿūdā’s interesting assertion that he is unable to appreciate the poem fully as long as he does not know its author. Of course he said this with a purpose, a mild form of blackmailing, but at the same time it may well be a recognition of the incontrovertible fact that a great name, when attached to any production, however slight, enhances its perceived value. It is a tendency that is responsible for many false attributions in the history of Arabic poetry, and we ought to be thankful for it, since no doubt it contributed to the preservation and transmission of what might have been lost otherwise.

Finally, it is somewhat exceptional for an Arabic critic to ask for the most natural poem. More usually the ‘most something’ line is demanded or given. ‘Naturalness’, unlike more specific qualities (ahjā bayt, ahsan ma qila fī..., etc.), is best illustrated in longer passages and poems, or, indeed,

7 The edition has an ʿarrafaṭukum; according to a note another MS has an lā ʿarrafaṭukum, ‘which is what is intended at any rate’, as the editor remarks. The correct reading is of course in ʿarrafaṭukum.