ABŪ TAMMĀM’S ‘SPRING’ QAṢĪDA: 
RAQQAT ḤAWĀṢĪ ‘L-DAHRI’

No critic can provide us with a blueprint for interpretation; the most we can expect is that he will suggest ways of looking at things that might not otherwise have occurred to us. ĀAbbasid criticism may have more to yield in this respect than is often conceded. To the fourth-/tenth-century critic al-Āmidī, one of Abū Tammām’s most annoying mannerisms is his failure to tie up ends. His descriptions and images peter out: they cannot be resolved into fully concrete, finished or consistent pictures.2 To al-Āmidī, this indeterminacy makes Abū Tammām’s poetry essentially closed and personal, something with no fixed meaning, at best to be semi-apprehended by a clique. As often, al-Āmidī’s analysis is pertinent even when his conclusion is debatable. In Abū Tammām’s ‘spring’ qaṣīda (raqqat ḥawāṣī ‘l-dahri) indeterminacy is well to the fore, and indeed to my mind is the poem’s chief organising principle, whether as pictorial or lexical indeterminacy, or as an obliqueness of exposition and linkage. But this very indeterminacy is designed to make the poem—perhaps a Noruz offering?—not just a public tribute to the caliph, but a performance demanding the sequential response of an audience. Whatever meaning we discover in the poem is largely dependant on this performative aspect, as we see if we look at the two strands of argument of which it is composed. One strand is logical, the other digressive and not altogether consistent with the first. It is only by an illusion—made possible by indeterminacy—that the two strands appear to merge.3

The illusion is achieved largely by making the apparently affective passages of the poem the parts that bear its intellectual message, while the aphorisms that punctuate these passages and appear to point the conclusions to be drawn from them, are in fact not nearly as logical and cohesive as they seem. Thus line 1 shows the arrival of spring, lines 4-7 the winter rains that have prepared the soil for spring herbage, and which

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3 Gregor Schoeler’s discussion of the poem (of which he translates only ll. 1-24, Arabische Naturdichtung, Beirut 1974, pp. 95-7) is more or less confined to its pictorial aspects.
merge imperceptibly (there is no marker, lexical or temporal, to show exactly where) into spring showers. These pictures of moisture and potential fertility (l. 1, tamarmaru, quivering (like shapely female flesh), yatakassaru, fragile (with sappy growth? or with dew?), al-tharā, (moist) earth; ll. 2-6, wabl, muth‘anjir etc.; and l. 7, nadan, dew/generosity) lead to the recognition of the true spring and true dispenser of plenty, the caliph (l. 8). This establishes the first proposition of the poem’s argument: the spring is lavish and life-giving; the spring is like the caliph; but the caliph is the only true spring. The second proposition is established in lines 11-20: the spring is so delightful that we forget that the earth’s function is to sustain us, and wish only to contemplate it (l. 13); the overwhelming nature of this beauty (and the disinterestedness of our contemplation—an anticipation of the plea for remuneration in line 32?) is demonstrated in a long passage of description. Lines 21-24 set the parallel between spring and the caliph in a solemn context: the caliph, like the spring, is part of God’s plan for man’s welfare; the memory of his virtues will not wane like that of earthbound delights. Lines 28-30 show the specific results of the caliph’s rule (justice and generosity already having been enumerated in l. 23): peace; harmony; order and (again) justice; civilisation. First conclusion (appearing as an illustrative digression between two statements of the final conclusion): the caliph’s virtues have established an ideal civil order in his realm. Final conclusion (ll. 28, 32): the caliph’s reign has suspended the arbitrariness of the human lot.

The poem’s three main descriptive sequences—line 1; lines 4-7 describing winter and spring rains; lines 11-20 describing spring flowers—are a most oblique parallel with the mamdūh, and it is impossible to apply the pictures they draw point for point to the caliph. Abū Tammām therefore provides them with a rationalising gloss: lines 2-3: spring is good, but so is winter, for without winter there can be no spring; lines 9-10: if only spring were eternal! but change, not changelessness, is what makes the earth beautiful; line 21: spring is the forerunner of summer’s harvests. The purely logical implication of these aphorisms—that all parts of the cycle of change are equally necessary and inevitable, hence, perhaps, that the caliph himself must fulfil his fixed span and pass away—would tend to undercut, rather than strengthen, the conclusion towards which the physical parallels between spring and the caliph are directed; and, on one level, the function of the gloss is not, in fact, to clarify the parallel directly, but to set what initially appear to be free descriptions in a familiar moral frame: the gloss, in other words, merely sets the tone.

The aphoristic glosses do, however, emphasise the fitness of things,