AL-BUHTURĪ'S POETICS OF PERSIAN ABODES

It has been said that medieval Arabs had no genre of writing that we would recognize as "literary criticism," meaning, I suppose, that MLA conventioneers never swung down from their howdahs to deconstruct Bedouin abodes in imperial Baghdad, while would-be job marketeers wearing borrowed finery offered praise and enthusiasm in return for rejection letters finely worded. The following discussion of al-Buhturī's poem, "I have preserved my soul from what pollutes my soul (*suntu nafsī 'ammā yudannisu nafsī*)," intends to demonstrate how acutely aware Abbasid poets were of the strengths and limitations of their poetic heritage. There is no need for a separate genre of "literary criticism," for the criticism is in the poetry itself.

Perhaps this essay would rather reconstitute itself in verse, but living within the limitations of my own culture and literary practice, I must offer some theoretical justification for the comments which follow, rather than rhyming and scheming my own version of abandoned encampments. Escape from one's language and poetic tradition—whether a tradition imposed on one or into which one is born—is no simple proposition. The greatest of poets, among which we should include al-Buhturī, call into question the underlying assumptions of their traditions. Yet in poetry, because a realm so tightly centered on tradition, because a craft so dependent on materials—words—left to the poet by predecessors, it is difficult to find a place outside of one's own tradition at which to stand in criticism of it. It is to al-Buhturī's credit that he recognizes the possibility of resolution of his own culture's difficulties in an alien, alternative tradition, even if this other tradition lies in such ruins that a great deal of imaginative reconstruction is necessary.

This essay insists on context, although the contextualizing moves might not always place the poet's work within sight of the hermeneutic horizons usually assigned to them. Al-Buhturī (821-897) was the star pupil of Abū Tammām (804-845), and one of the Abbasid age's greatest and most controversial poets, according to Arab critics, although the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* holds a different opinion:

> Contrary to all expectation he does not seem to have grieved at the death of Abū Tammām. . . . this was the first instance of the ingratitude and opportunism of which he gave ample proof later. . . . Western critics have taken little interest in al-Buhturī. . . . For their part, Eastern critics consider him, with Abū Tammām and al-Mutanabbī, as one of the most important poets of the Abbasid era. . . . Al-Buhturī has this in common with most of his fellows,

that he begged ceaselessly and rejected no means of getting money; this greed for gain destroyed his moral fibre and led him to dissimulate in order to follow slavishly the fluctuations of the religious policy of the caliph who was his patron (Pellat, 1289-1290).

This bizarre pseudo-sociological context is not one into which I will cast the poet. Instead, I want to examine the context in which his poetry places him.

Language of the Abandoned Encampments

Like most Arab poets of the several hundred years which preceded him, al-Buhturī wrote primarily qaṣīdas. Like other Abbasid poets, al-Buhturī imitated and adapted tropes dating to the Jāhiliyya, especially the aṭlāl or "abandoned encampment," perhaps the most important element of the qa-ṣīda. In the poem "I have preserved my soul from what pollutes my soul (ṣuntu nafsī 'ammā yudannisu nafsī)," al-Buhturī transforms this trope of the abandoned encampment into a vehicle for harsh criticism of the Arab culture of his own day. The traces of an abandoned Bedouin camp become a reconstructed imperial Persian city which both precedes and nearly precludes the abandoned encampment as a source for an Abbasid poetics. Of course, it would not have been possible for al-Buhturī to reconstruct an imperial Persian city unless the Persian Empire had been conquered by the Arabs and the city in question reduced to ruins. Nonetheless, al-Buhturī's appropriation of an imagined Persian alternative to the Arab abandoned encampment permits him to question the source—and value—of imperial Arab culture.

Al-Buhturī himself provides the immediate context of the poem in its opening line. He has been poorly treated by his patron, his "cousin" (1-10). To distract himself from his troubles, al-Buhturī makes a trip to al-Madā'in, the site of Sasanian Persian imperial ruins about twenty miles southeast of Baghdad (11). Memories of his own troubles give way to reflection on the ruins before him (12-21). He then describes his response to a wall-painting depicting the Sasanian siege of Byzantine Antioch three centuries earlier (22-28). Suddenly the poem shifts to al-Buhturī imagining his son serving as his cupbearer, an evocation of the wine and, in another sudden shift, al-Buhturī imagines the cupbearer to be the son of Anūshirwān, the Sasanian emperor who laid siege to Antioch (29-33). He returns to reflections on the ruins, contrasting their destruction with the glory obvious even in its remnants (34-44). Al-Buhturī then turns the power of his imagination to evoking the ruins in their heyday (45-47). He ends the poem by summarizing his relationship to the ruins and the Sasanians (48-56).

Since al-Buhturī's poem is a qaṣīda, we need to remind ourselves of the primary characteristics of its Jāhilī predecessors. The typical qaṣīda of the Jāhiliyya begins with the nasīb, an evocation of the abandoned encampments