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Praise for Murder?
Two Odes by al-Buḥtūrī Surrounding an Abbasid Patricide

Samer Mahdy Ali (University of Texas at Austin)

The caliph al-Mutawakkil ʿalā llāh reigned for fourteen years (232-47/847-61) as head of the Abbasid state.\(^1\) In the winter of 247/861, he unexpectedly withdrew his approval from the heir apparent, al-Muntasir billāh (d. 248/862), in favor of his youngest son, al-Muʿtazz billāh (r. 252-5/866-9).\(^2\) Shortly thereafter, al-Mutawakkil was murdered in his palace by his personal guards in a plot that implicated al-Muntasir. Al-Mutawakkil’s court poet, Abī ʿUbāda al-Walīd b. ʿUbayd al-Buḥtūrī (d. 284/897), rose to the occasion to voice his outrage and loyalty. In a vehement elegy (riṭḥāʾ), al-Buḥtūrī extolled his late patron, accused his son of patricide, cursed him, and vowed vengeance – according to one version of the historical events.\(^3\) The poet not only stigmatized al-Muntasir, he urged members of the court to support a more worthy candidate for the caliphate (vv. 32-3). The poet’s political guidance was not followed, but the fact remained that the new caliph was stigmatized and damaged.

Abbasid literary sources indicate that al-Buḥtūrī left Samarra for the ḥajj, and two months later, returned to praise none other than al-Muntasir.\(^4\) The poet in his panegyric now salutes al-Muntasir as the hero who thwarted disaster and renewed the majesty of the caliphate.\(^5\) The two poems have elicited admiration from medieval scholars in both literary and historical sources,\(^6\) but the odes stand in puzzling contradiction. In the first

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1 This paper is a revised version of chapter 4 of the author’s dissertation, “Ardor for Memory: Mythicizing the Patricide of al-Mutawakkil in Court Poetry” (Ali 2002). I would like to thank my advisor, Suzanne Stetekyvich, for her constructive criticism and encouragement on earlier drafts. Research was supported by a Fulbright-Hays Training Grant, part of the Doctoral Dissertation Research Program of the U.S. Department of Education. I am indebted to the Fulbright commissions of Egypt, Germany, and Spain for their assistance during 1998-9. An earlier version of this paper was delivered to the Departamento de Estudios Árabes (Instituto de Filología) at the Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, Madrid, Spain, where I benefited from the comments of Heather Ecker, Howard Miller, and Manuela Marin. Sections of this paper were discussed at the Working Group on Modernity and Islam at the Institute for Advanced Studies, Berlin, 2000-1, and I acknowledge my productive exchanges with Angelika Neuwirth, Renate Jacobi, Hilary Kilpatrick, and Friederike Pannewick. I also express my gratitude to the co-editors of this volume, Beatrice Gruenderl and Louise Marlow. Unless stated otherwise, all translations are the author’s.

2 El-Hibri 1999, 192-3; cf. al-Ṭabarī (d. 314/923), Taʿrīkh, 9: 225; al-Maṣʿūdī (d. ca. 345/956), Murūj, 4: 115-22. See also Gordon (2001, 82), who contends, based on numismatic analysis by Michael Bates, that al-Mutawakkil genuinely favored al-Muʿtazz as heir. El-Hibri, however, following al-Ṭabarī’s material, reaches the conclusion that the caliph supported al-Muntasir, but shifted under pressure.

3 al-Buḥtūrī, Dīwān, 2: 1047. For an alternate account, see below p. 20.


5 al-Buḥtūrī, Dīwān, 2: 849-50.

poem, the poet stigmatizes the heir; in the second, he valorizes him. The poet at first clearly withholds his support, but later found it possible to reverse his stance.

Despite the appeal and abundance of panegyric in the medieval era, this genre seems to pose special problems for modern scholars, whether because the praise is offered as a commodity or because of the asymmetry in power between patron and poet. Both conditions seem conducive to a romantic image of heart-felt admiration.\(^7\) Scholars have, thus, turned their attention to social functions. Major endeavors have proposed to reframe the issue of sincerity, to posit practical functions for praise within the context of the court and society. Julie Meisami, for example, has identified how the praise poem can instruct and guide the patron;\(^8\) Beatrice Gruendler has argued that the poet can shape the very terms of patronage;\(^9\) Stefan Sperl has discussed praise as a liturgical expression to the king,\(^10\) and Suzanne Stetkevych has examined panegyric as a kind of rite of passage, entailing a change in social condition ratified by a ritual exchange.\(^11\) These attempts are critical to understanding the panegyric as more than an expression of feelings. And very fortunately, these methods have had their own performative effect in making the polemic over sincerity seem naïve and superficial at best.

Al-Buḥṭurī’s two odes remain a puzzle, however, because they stand in complete contradiction. Putting aside the question of sincerity, if al-Buḥṭurī is effective in the first case, how can he be effective in the second? Recent critics have attempted to address this question with disappointing results, because their analyses disregard the poet’s pair of odes by attributing them to frantic opportunism.\(^12\) According to Shawqī Ḍayf, the poet created a problem for himself by criticizing al-Muntaṣir and needed to excuse himself.\(^13\) Attitudes that dismiss poetry and poets bring scholars to a dead end, for they fail to explain the appeal of these poems as \textit{art} at the time and for generations, because the issue of appeal rests on the emotional and aesthetic effect of these odes. If one presumes that al-Buḥṭurī presented the panegyric to al-Muntaṣir solely to compensate for an “er-

\(^7\) On the problem of sincerity, see Meisami 1987, 41-3, and S. Stetkevych 1996a, 35. On the rejection of the \textit{qaṣida} in the West, see Sells 1987. Sells’s article, though well-documented, paints an overly bleak picture and should be read in the context of J. Stetkevych’s 1979 article, which argues that German Orientalism enthusiastically engaged and assimilated the \textit{qaṣida}, including panegyric, particularly in adaptations and translations, but then in the mid-nineteenth century, enthusiasm was replaced by a stale technical approach, in which philologists sought to compile perfect editions. Stetkevych points out that over the past hundred years, this obsession with banalities has suspended a serious engagement with the ode. For more on the rejection of the traditional ode by modern Arab poets and critics, see Jayyusi 1977, 1994, 1996. One can find a paramount example of a Nasserist-socialist condemnation of the panegyric profession in Ḍayf (1990). Al-Buḥṭurī’s success as a poet is attributed to his “greed” (1990, 278, 279, 281) and his willingness to praise anyone for reward (ibid., 280). We are also told that the poet’s cupidity had no limits (ibid., 282, 283). Cf. Wabb Rümiyya who, critical of rejectionists, posits specific functions for the courtly ode, and deems it reasonable that poets would seek favors, money, and other material benefits from their patrons (1997, 53-67).

\(^8\) Meisami 1987, 43-6.
\(^9\) Gruendler 1996, 106; and 2003, 75.
\(^10\) Sperl 1977, 33.
\(^11\) S. Stetkevych 1996a, 1: 36-40; 1994, 4-5.
\(^12\) Ḍayf 1990, 278; al-Buḥṭurī, \textit{Diwān}, 5: 2792.
\(^13\) Ḍayf 1990, 278.
ror,” even a preliminary reading of the text shows the absence of any formal features of apology or self-redemption.\textsuperscript{14} To the contrary, al-Muntaşir treats the poem as a favor. He reciprocates with an extraordinary prize sum, which was uncharacteristic of him.\textsuperscript{15} Whatever function the praise might have served, it did more than turn a profit or appease an angry patron. However, the most problematic aspect of Ğayf’s approach is his assumption that court poets are, in effect, weaklings. This assumption underestimates the pride with which many medieval scholars and littérates viewed the verbal, and thus political, power of al-Buḥṭuri.

The “poet’s greed” theory also falls short of explaining the appeal of these poems, as evidenced by their impact and reception. Less than a generation after the event, al-Ṣūlī registers the poet’s effect in restoring al-Muntaşir’s battered public image.\textsuperscript{16} Likewise, a tenth-century historian, al-Maṣ‘ūdī, takes note of al-Buḥṭuri’s cleansing of al-Muntaşir’s reputation.\textsuperscript{17} Al-Buḥṭuri’s poems are in fact transmitted for eleven centuries, so that ten of fifteen extant \textit{Dīwān} manuscripts record them. Despite the instabilities of court patronage, the more persistent question is one of poetic function and appeal, which invites a thoroughgoing engagement with these odes. This article will address both the political and mythic effects of his words. It will focus on how al-Buḥṭuri moves and inspires others in a moment of state crisis and for generations thereafter.

I will argue that the two odes function on both the political and mythic level, thus having short- and long-term effects. At the moment of crisis, in the short-term, the dyad serves as a memorable ritual for the “transfer of allegiance” between patrons.\textsuperscript{18} Initially, the poet’s elegy for al-Mutawakkil denies al-Muntaşir endorsement, but his panegyric to al-Muntaşir conveys it, thus emphasizing the prerogative of the poet to unmake and make authority. However, the poet’s choice of Mecca as the goal of his journey, and \textit{ḥajj} as the ritual of atonement, suggests a mythic redemptive effect that resonated far beyond the moment in cultural memory.

Verbal Art and the Power of the Poet

This interpretation may seem far-fetched, for it assumes that the poet possesses a high degree of verbal influence. Indeed this approach is predicated on the critical proposition that artistic communication both creates and expresses the authority of the speaker. Performers of verbal art are both admired and feared for their capacity to stimulate the emotional participation of their audiences and thereby influence the emergence of new relations of power and privilege.\textsuperscript{19} In addition to literary theory, Abbasid sources themselves confirm the power of the poet to move his audience publicly and demonstrate his influence in the face of royal authority. Al-Buḥṭuri, in particular, plays a special role for

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{14} Cf. S. Stetkevych 1994, 1996b, 1997a.
  \item \textsuperscript{15} al-Ṣūlī, \textit{Akhbār al-Buḥṭuri}, 101.
  \item \textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{17} al-Maṣ‘ūdī, \textit{Murūj}, 4: 135.
  \item \textsuperscript{18} Cf. S. Stetkevych 1994, 1996a.
  \item \textsuperscript{19} Bauman 1977, 43-4.
\end{itemize}
the Abbasid dynasty. More than any other contemporary, he uses his personal stature as a poet-hero simultaneously to vent discontent and to uphold the public image of the Abbasids as sacred, legitimate, and generous rulers. In the Samarran era, he endures as caliphs are made and unmade. He serves a total of six rulers: al-Mutawakkil, al-Muntašir (r. 247-8/861-2), al-Mustaʿān (r. 248-52/862-6), al-Muʿazz, al-Muhtadi (r. 255-6/869-70), and al-Muʿtamid (r. 256-79/870-92), in addition to their vassals and subordinates. Even the pious al-Muhtadi, known for his dislike of poets, had to concede al-Buḥturi’s role in promoting the Abbasid line, calling him “the orator of our family and the poet of our dynasty.”20 Moreover, the fact that such an honor is transmitted in Ibn al-ʿImrānī’s historical work, some seven centuries after al-Buḥturi, attests to the readiness of later authors to concur in retrospect with this assessment.

In the autumn of his life, al-Buḥturi has reason to boast of his verbal prowess:

\[\begin{align*}
\text{in abqa aw ahlik fa-qad niltu llati} \\
\text{mala'at ṣudūra aqārībi wa-'udāṭi} \\
\text{wa-ghanītu nadmāna l-khalāḏīfi nābihan} \\
\text{dhikrī wa-nā'imatan bi-him nashawāṭī} \\
\text{wa-shafāṭu fi l-amri l-jalīli ilayhimū} \\
\text{ba’dā l-jalīli fa-anjaḥū ṭalābāṭī} \\
\text{wa-ṣanāṭu fi l-ʿarabi l-ṣanāʾīra ʿindahum} \\
\text{min riḍi ṭallābin wa-fakki ʿunāṭī}^{21}
\end{align*}\]

Whether I live on or die, I have supplied words that have filled the hearts of my relatives and foes.

I remained a companion of caliphs, celebrating my glory, and, because of them, my reveries were sweet!

I interceded in one mighty matter after another, and they met my requests.

I performed for the Arabs good works: gifts for the needy and ransom for the captives.

In part, al-Buḥturi’s pride in his accomplishment rests on his ability to intercede or petition, and thereby obtain concessions. Moreover, supplication in the form of panegyric verse is made memorable, transmittable, and performable, thus immortalizing an encounter between supplicant and benefactor for generations of audiences. In apparent irony, the poet’s need and deprivation are transformed into power when he displays his vulnerability. As S. Stetkevych proposed,22 Kevin Crotty’s observations on the Homeric epic equally apply to supplication scenes at the Abbasid court. Because supplication calls upon parallel situations in group memory, whose characters and roles are familiar, supplication “enables the participants to experience victory, shame, memory, and pity in an especially compelling way and to apprehend and configure them anew.”23

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20 Ibn al-ʿImrānī (d. 950/1543), al-Inbāʾ, 136.
22 S. Stetkevych 1997a.
Crotty notes that in the Homeric epic, supplication scenes gain dramatic force precisely because the supplicant exhibits the capacity to shame the benefactor into showing mercy. By appealing to a verbal ritual and a time-honored code of heroism, the seemingly weak possess and exercise the power to give or deny society’s approval. In short, Crotty’s formulations and al-Buhturi’s phrasing indicate that there is surprising potential for a poet to gain power in the rituals of supplication before an assembly. For al-Buhturi, the proof of influence is that his requests are not denied and that his verbal productions function as symbolic commodities in an exchange of “gifts for the needy and ransom for the captives.” According to al-Buhturi, the stature that the poet gains from the exercise of influence inevitably enhances the artistic reach of his panegyrical as it circulates. In a marvelously self-reflexive line, he explains,

\[ wa-l-madhu\ laysa yajuzu ga\textsuperscript{25} sivata l-mad\hat{a} \]
\[ \hat{h}att\hat{a} yak\textsuperscript{26} na l-majdu majda l-sh\textsuperscript{26} iri \]

And panegyrical cannot spread far and wide
unless the glory is the glory of the poet.

It is important to stress that the poet’s display of power is to some extent competitive. According to Ibn Rashiq, a poet’s plea is most alluring when he inspires his patron to make a concession. This, he argues, makes poets more noble than state secretaries:

Some object that poets perennially serve secretaries, but that we never find state secretaries serving poets. They [the critics] are, however, unaware of certain facts (\textit{anb\hat{a}}). It happens to be this way only because the poet relies on his own devices. With what he wields, he can overpower the secretary and even the king. He [the poet] demands what they possess! And he can take it! As for the secretary, with what instrument (\textit{\text{"a}la}) does he appeal (\textit{yaq\textsuperscript{27} sudi}) to the poet and ask (\textit{\text{"a}rij}) him for what he possesses?

Implicit in these comments is a vision of supplication that views the patron’s sacrifice as a prize or a trophy. The poet’s stature is in essence measured by his ability to extract favors. The favor may entail a direct gift to the poet, but Ibn Rashiq is careful to give several examples of poets who approach their patron on behalf of others. That is, he shows the poet playing a mythic role as an intercessor or redeemer \textit{(shaf\textsuperscript{29} i\text{"})} before a fearsome authority. Based on the way al-Buhturi presents himself to his audiences, his reception, and modern theoretical formulations, this study recognizes the poet’s role as not only politically influential, but mythic by virtue of his capacity to assume convincingly the role of supplicant or redeemer in the face of awesome authority. In doing so,

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24 Ibid., 5, 18-19.
25 Ibid.
27 Ibn Rashiq, \textit{\text{"Umda}}, 1: 12.
28 Ibid., 1: 73-88.
29 One such example is the role that ‘Alqama b. ‘Abada played in redeeming his brother (or nephew) held prisoner by the Ghassanid king al-Hairith. In this case, the praise poem serves as an offering in a ritual gift exchange, namely as a ransom bid, which the king will value more than a languishing prisoner (S. Stetkevych 1994, 3). Alternatively, the case of the fugitive Ka’b b. Zuhayr illustrates that the poet can present a gift of praise in order to redeem himself and essentially buy back his (renewed) life (ibid., 36).
he invokes time-honored beliefs and attitudes about the vulnerability of life, the prospects of renewal, and the need for cosmic order.

Following Crotty’s approach to Homeric supplication, one might find it useful to view caliphal panegyric as a show of verbal prowess in the face of royal authority. While the caliphal patron has an interest in preserving a public image of munificence, the poet safeguards his privilege of verbal effectiveness as measured by favors granted. Within this rapport, the poet can be expected to employ wisely strategies that help achieve his interests, which categorically benefit society at large by providing a model of how subordinates can gain surprising leverage through oratory in the face of authority. Most importantly, poets serve as models of tenacity. One should not presume, however, that resistance inevitably leads to victory or revolution. There are no clear winners or losers, and in an Arab courtly context, neither poets nor their patrons would benefit from dominating the other. Michel Foucault offers a useful theoretical formulation on the exercise of power, which stresses its dialectical and interactional dimensions. He notes that power relations are characterized by “a perpetual battle rather than a contract regulating a transaction or the conquest of territory.”30 If we read panegyric as an Arabo-Islamic discourse on power and patronage, the exchange between poet and patron can be viewed, following Foucault, as an exchange of messages. These messages are not an end in themselves, but a means of defining and adjusting a relationship, and therefore they can be “a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy.”31 In short, the discourse between poets and patrons demonstrates that interaction is possible between these two interested groups, despite the layers of intimidation employed by monarchs.

In tandem with a discursive approach, there is a need to expand our conception of artistic communication to encompass verbal as well as non-verbal art (such as the material culture) in a community, and to realize the dialectical relationships among diverse art forms.32 In the present case, the poet communicates most notably in verse, but his artistic expressions respond to the symbols used by the king, most visibly here in the monumental symbolism of the palace. This approach follows Richard Bauman and Charles Briggs’s contention that artistic expressions act as modes of persuasion, enabling interested parties in a cultural setting to communicate and compete for privilege and recognition.33 The poet’s role herein stands in a dialectical tension with the king’s. Vis-à-vis the poet, the monarch uses architectural symbolism to evoke and claim the mythic role of sacral king. In the face of the caliph’s absolute power, embodied in the palace, the poet has the task – daunting as it may be – of convincing his audience of his own verbal prowess.

32 Bauman and Briggs 1990, 60.
33 Ibid., 61.
Spatial Symbolism and the Power of the King

The caliph al-Mu'tasim (r. 218-27/833-42) is credited with moving the capital from Baghdad to Samarra within a year of his ascension to the throne.\textsuperscript{34} His intention was to end the persistent friction between his Turkish troops and Baghdad’s civilian population.\textsuperscript{35} The city remained the capital until al-Mu'tamid decreed a return to Baghdad in 279/892.\textsuperscript{36}

Literary and architectural remains document that Abbasid caliphs commissioned palaces, which projected their cosmic centrality and, simultaneously, their putative control over the cosmos. Of the scores of palaces that were erected in Samarra, a few have been excavated, and some plans have been drawn and studied at least partially. The common theme of Samarran palaces appears to have been titanic size,\textsuperscript{37} which obliquely but forcefully implied the mythic stature of their owners.\textsuperscript{38} Al-Mutawakkil, for example, built a residence called al-Jawsaq al-Khāqānī (221/836), which covered 432 acres, an area that took researchers twenty years to excavate.\textsuperscript{39} Planners designed the palace complex with enormous courtyards, wide gardens and parks, open air fountains, canals, game preserves, and polo grounds.

There are several reflections in classical literary sources of the belief that al-Mutawakkil intended to evoke a cosmos with his palaces, as if he possessed and controlled a mythic realm. This idea crystallized in anecdotes and the very naming of some of his structures. In reference to al-Jawsaq al-Khāqānī, the Kitāb al-Diyārāt reports that al-Mutawakkil asked Abū l-‘Aynā' – a courtier famous for his quick wit and sharp tongue – “What do you think of my residence here?” He replied, “I see people building homes in the world, but you build the world in your home.”\textsuperscript{40} Thus, in its size and complexity, the creation of al-Mutawakkil “contains” the creation of God.

Other anecdotes reveal a perception that the caliph projected his own centrality in architecture. When Ja'far al-Mutawakkil completed a new palace city just north of Samarra, he identified the city explicitly with himself: he named it al-Ja'fariyya, called its chief palace al-Ja'fārī (245-7/859-61), and requested that upon his death the edifice be his sepulcher.\textsuperscript{41} According to the Abbasid historian Ya'qūbī (d. 284/897), he held audience and said, “Now I know that I am indeed a king, for I have built myself a city and live in it.”\textsuperscript{42} In a double overlay of meaning, the palace was an extension of the caliph’s person and a thumbprint of the cosmos.

\textsuperscript{34} Gordon 2001, 50; Northedge 1995.
\textsuperscript{35} Northedge 1995.
\textsuperscript{36} Gordon 2001, 141.
\textsuperscript{38} Hillenbrand 1994, 339.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid. and Northedge 1993.
\textsuperscript{40} al-Shābūshī (d. 399/1008 or earlier), Kitāb al-Diyārāt, 9.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibn ‘Abdrabbih (d. 328/940), 'Iqd, 5: 344 and Northedge 1991, 78.
\textsuperscript{42} Creswell 1989, 367.
The king’s centrality was further embodied in the throne room of his palaces. In all of Balkuwārā (235-45/849-59), Iṣṭābūlāt (ca. 232-5/847-50), and al-Jawsaq al-Khāqānī, this room was accentuated by a dome, which was a novel architectural feature in the ninth century. The first two also elaborated on the symbolism by extending the throne chamber into four pavilions (sing. īwān) in a cruciform shape. The pavilions intersected exactly above the throne. In the Near East, the cruciform, along with the circle and the ark, evoked associations of salvation. Qaṣr al-Jiṣṣ (ca. 264-8/877-82), the latest known Samarran palace, exploited those connotations further by expanding the cruciform over the entire structure and dividing the palace space into four quadrants that intersected at the center, above the throne chamber. In short, the palace architecture intimated an ideology of cosmic centrality and control, which was consistent with the king’s long-established mythic role in the Near East.

To gain access to this central figure, a visitor to the Samarran palaces (usually a member of the nobility) had to traverse interminably long corridors of procession. To endure adversity implied deference to the king, and was thus inscribed in bodily practices. In Balkuwārā, the corridor measured some 575 meters, that of Iṣṭābūlāt 1,000 meters, while the earliest and longest was al-Jawsaq al-Khāqānī with a procession of 1,400 meters, or nearly one mile. In addition, the axes of procession were often designed with built-in stages that suggested a drama of self-transformation resembling cultic initiation rites. Samarran architects contrasted vast open courtyards (sensory overload) with tightly-knit warrens (sensory deprivation), which enabled them sufficiently to awe visitors by physically and psychologically shocking them with the extreme contrasts of space usage, lighting, and, in the summer, temperature. Since in every palace the main axis was also processional, one might associate the protracted discomfort of traversing the sun-baked courtyard (fīnā) with the rite of passage reflected in many ceremonial poems. The rite of passage in the ode has been well documented as a formula of composition and as an artistic transformation. The parataxis of triumphant arches and vast courtyards offered the visitor a walk, sure to remind him of his smallness as he pondered the majesty of his host and to produce the proper frame of mind – fear of the caliph’s wrath and hope for his beneficence.

Caliphs were not only convinced of their own power and centrality but were also jealous of competing localities that might be recognized as empowering and central to others. Of the palaces that have been excavated and studied, three at Samarra were oriented in opposition to the holiest site in Islam, the Kaaba, which indicated the direction (qibla)

45 Hillenbrand 1994, 575.
46 Ibid.
48 Lane 1984, s.v. “f-n-y.” Note the paronomasia (fīnās) between fīnā (courtyard) and fānā (death).
49 S. Stetkevych 1994, 3; 1996a, 44; 1993, 7. Balkuwārā embodied the symbolism through elevation. The axis of procession traversed three planes (Hillenbrand 1994, 398-406), so that a visitor proceeded upward through the symbolic rite of passage.
of daily prayer, proper burial, and pilgrimage. At least three Samarran palaces, Qaṣr al-Jiṣṣ, Iṣṭabulāt, and Qaṣr al-ʿĀšíq (ca. 264-8/877-82), are oriented with the processional axis pointing north-east. The use of the anti-qibla-axis enabled the caliph to face the Kaaba as God’s sole vicar on earth. At the same time, this plan must have created a problem for visitors of the Muslim nobility.

If a visitor were to turn his back to the caliph, this would constitute a vulgar gesture to the court.\(^{50}\) When the visitor departed, propriety demanded that he exit the throne room by walking backwards.\(^{51}\) In the case of three known palaces, the anti-qibla processional axis forced the visitor to honor the caliph ceremonially with his front and desecrate the qibla with his back as he moved, bowed, and prostrated in fulfillment of court protocol. As the qibla is, for pious Muslims, the most symbolic of bodily orientations, the medieval subject had figuratively to offend either God or the caliph, creating a hierarchical conflict between God and his first executive.

In Baghdad, orientation and architecture were used even more explicitly to entrap subjects. The city’s palace abutted on the mosque so that, in the palace, subordinates had to turn their backs on the Holy Shrine – the pious center – and in the mosque, they did the same to the throne chamber – the caliph’s center.\(^{52}\) Marshall Hodgson notes that the ruler’s appetite for conspicuous displays of submission provoked the anger of pious men of religion and true believers in general.\(^{53}\) From their perspective, the caliph did not have the right to create any ceremony that resembled divine worship. In what was surely an affront to pious sensibilities, palace architecture was designed to draw the subordinate into a space beyond his control and force him to recognize royal authority as a goal of bodily ceremony, at the expense of Mecca. This is not to suggest that the subject was barred from the mosque space; instead the tension was meant to be tacit and covert. By sanctioning this pitting in opposition, caliphs fostered a conflict of loyalties in order subtly to deflate potentially legitimate pious rivals and critics among the ‘Alids, Qarmatians, Khārijites, and men of religion. In the Abbasid realm, Mecca thus represented an opposite center of power, the symbols of which caliphs sought to manipulate and mitigate. It is poetically significant that al-Buḥṭūrī had to venture to the palace’s counter-center to acquire the power of redemption.

The Poet-Hero as Redeemer

Owing to the imposed centrality of the king figure, his demise posed a catastrophe, which was potentially cathartic in both Semitic and Iranian culture. In ancient Persia the king was the personification of law that guided and protected subjects. Calvin McEwan explains that when the king died law ceased for five days.\(^{54}\) He further notes, “The king

\(^{50}\) Note how bodily orientation and choreography express the claims of authority on the performer (Conerton 1994, 71).
\(^{51}\) Pseudo-Jāḥiz, Kitāb al-Tāj, 8.
\(^{52}\) Hillenbrand 1994, 395, 574.
\(^{53}\) Hodgson 1974, 283.
\(^{54}\) McEwan 1934, 18.
was the state and its animate constitution.”

But the death of the king, to be sure, was not simply a tragedy for the court; it was a catastrophe that affected the commonwealth. Sperl observes that “when the king, as secular and religious pivot of society, is killed or harmed the whole world order may collapse; diseases and destruction may afflict the land.”

In lower ancient Mesopotamia, the death of the king was also deemed a woeful omen for the fertility of the land, causing drought and low crop yields. In the same vein, though employing pastoral imagery, al-Nābigha al-Dhubyānī (sixth century) warns in one poem,

\[
\text{fa-in yahlīk Abū Qābūsa yahlīk}
\]
\[
\text{rabi'ū l-nāsi wa-l-shahru l-ḥarāmu}^{58}
\]

If King Abū Qābūs perishes, the vernal camps of all people and their sacred month perish with him.

In Bedouin life, “vernal camps” denoted the mildest season at a place where water and pasturage were sufficient to sustain a gathering of kin, which was a festive event among Bedouins. As a topos, however, it connoted an idyllic habitation, one that was cosmologically “primal.” The loss of vernal camps, and the accompanying sacred months (for pilgrimage, slaughter, and feasting), represented a collapse of tribal joys and customs.

The death of al-Mutawakkil posed graver problems still because the king did not quietly pass away; he was assassinated in his own dwelling. As a patricide, this death threw the court into a moral and political conflict due to a clash of imperatives. Courtiers who felt loyalty to the Abbašid caliphate – presumably all but a small faction – found themselves in a double bind. On the one hand, they had the duty to avenge or at least grieve the dead king, and on the other, they had to greet the successor. Under the circumstances, the one deserving welcome also deserved wrath. Fulfilling both duties was impossible, and failing to do so dishonorable. A general feeling of shame thus prevailed at the court for not being able – out of fear – to act honorably. The court needed a redeemer.

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55 Ibid.
56 Sperl 1977, 23.
57 al-Nu‘aymī 1995, 92.
58 Ibid.
60 Cole 1975, 47.
61 J. Stetkevych 1994, 66. The psychological and semiotic richness of rabī‘ can perhaps be captured in a scene of both subjective space and time. It is therefore useful to link it with M. M. Bakhtin’s idea of chronotope: “Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time” (Bakhtin 1981, 84). Similarly, Theodor Gaster expresses a space-time image with his term topocosm. With it, he indicates anxiety and joy as the earth dies and comes back to life with the seasonal waning and waxing of daylight (1961, 24). See also J. Stetkevych 1994, particularly the section on rab (Vernal Encampment).
62 Four months were considered non-combat periods, the first three being consecutive: Dhū l-Qa‘da, Dhū l-Hijja, al-Muḥarram, and Rajab (Ibn Manẓūr (d. 711/1311), Lisān, s.v. “ḥ-r-m”).
A literary parallel can be found in the tragedy of Orestes’ vengeance. Abbasid sources provide only fragments of poetry and narrative that structure the pathos of the court, but these coincide with Ancient Greek literary patterns of trauma, blood sacrifice, and redemption. The Orestes tragedy illustrates this emotional double bind, for it presents a clash between a son’s duties to his unavenged father and those to his guilty mother. His father, Agamemnon, is away at war as the tragedy opens. His mother, Clytaemnestra, plots the murder of her husband upon his homecoming, in order to conceal her affair with Aegisthus.\(^63\) Once Agamemnon is killed, the adulterers celebrate their new reign over the House of Atreus and their rule over Argos. The boy Orestes is sent away, and no hero remains to right the wrongs.

Lesser members of the House of Atreus live in fear, but cannot forget the unavenged blood of Agamemnon. Orestes’ sisters, Electra and Chrysothemis, are powerless to avenge their father’s blood themselves, but they decry their culpable mother and her lover by castigating them in public and frequenting their father’s grave.\(^64\) In *The Libation Bearers*, Electra visits the grave of “godlike Agamemnon” and unleashes her grievances:

> I ... call upon my father: Pity me;  
Pity your own Orestes. How shall we be lords  
in our house? We have been sold, and go as wanderers  
because our mother bought herself, for us, a man,  
Aegisthus, he who helped her hand to cut you down.  
Now I am what a slave is, and Orestes lives  
outcast from his great properties, while they go proud  
in the high style and luxury of what you worked  
to win. By some good fortune let Orestes come  
back home. Such is my prayer, my father. Hear me; hear.\(^65\)

The supplication not only reveals Electra’s anguish after the regicide, or patricide, but her vision of a hero to rid the House of Atreus of wrongdoing and infamy, namely, Orestes.

While away, Orestes is haunted by spirits to avenge Agamemnon’s blood and warned by Apollo and Zeus that, if he fails, he will suffer the fate of an outcast, debarred from temple and sacrifice and afflicted with leprosy.\(^66\) To fulfill this imperative, however, Orestes risks angering the furies, for avenging his father means matricide. The boy who once drew milk from his mother’s bosom must, as a man, now draw blood.\(^67\) Aegisthus, in the meantime, lives in fear of Clytaemnestra’s son, but when drunk becomes contemptuous. On one occasion, he dances on Agamemnon’s grave and pelts the headstone with rocks, singing, “Come Orestes, come and defend your own!”\(^68\) The villain is tempting fate, and the hero is burning to oblige him.

\(^{63}\) Graves 1955, 415.  
\(^{64}\) Ibid., 420.  
\(^{65}\) Aeschylus (d. 455 BC), *The Libation Bearers*, II. 129-39.  
\(^{66}\) Graves 1955, 420.  
\(^{67}\) Ibid.  
\(^{68}\) Ibid., 419.
Though different in detail, the situation at the Abbasid court is roughly analogous, for the narrative of the regicide is highly stylized to suit literary convention. Regicide narratives, such as in Oedipus, Julius Caesar, Hamlet, Macbeth, and the slaying of Ḫujr the father of Imrū’ al-Qays, share the motif of treachery at the hands of kin or allies, whence they derive their “primordial horror.”69 Along with the horror, treachery evokes shame in those who are helpless to thwart or redress it. For example, Electra complains that she and her brother “have been sold, and go as wanderers because our mother bought herself, for us, a man.” The mother’s woeful “sale” brings about a new, vulnerable condition for her children. Electra says, “Now I am what a slave is, and Orestes lives outcast from his great properties.”70 From pride and status, she and her brother are cast out because of their lack of power to prevent or remedy the situation.

A similar sense of shame can be found at the Abbasid court. We read in the Kitāb al-Aghānī about a poetess named Faḍl (d. ca. 257/871), who composed an elegy for al-Mutawakkl which virtually echoes Electra and the chorus. Conflicting imperatives immobilize her; she is conscious of the demands upon her, but tragically torn. Faḍl is asked on the morning after the murder, “What befell you yesterday?” and she sings through tears:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{inna l-zamāna bi-dhaḥlīn kāna yaṭṭubunā} \\
\text{mā kāna aghfalanā ʿanhū wa-ashānā} \\
\text{mā lī wa-lil-dahri qad aṣbaḥtu himmatahū} \\
\text{mā lī wa-lil-dahri mā lil-dahri lā kānā?}
\end{align*}
\]

Time has demanded revenge from us
But how unmindful we were, how heedless!
What does Fate want from me, that I have become its aim?
What does Fate want from me? Would that Fate existed not.

The poet Diʿbil al-Khuzaʿī (d. 246/860) also sensed that courtiers could not fully grieve the father, nor salute the accession of the son. They were trapped:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{khalīfatun māta lam yaʿāf laḥū aḥadūn} \\
\text{wa-qāma ākharu lam yafrāḥ biḥī aḥadū}
\end{align*}
\]

A caliph died for whom no one grieves,
and another rose for whom no one rejoices.

ʿAlī b. al-Jahm (d. 249/863), furthermore, exacerbated the collective shame by voicing his disbelief:

\[
\begin{align*}
a-yuqṭalū fi dārī l-khilāṣati Jāfarun \\
ʿalā furgatin ṣabran wa-antum shuḥūdūhā \\
fa-lā ṭalībun lil-thaʿrī min baʿdī mawtiḥū \\
wa-lā dāfʿun ʿan nafṣīhī man yurūdūhā
\end{align*}
\]

69 S. Stetkevych 1993, 244.
71 al-Iṣfahānī (d. 356/967), al-Aghānī, 19: 310.
72 al-Maqqdisī (fl. 355/966), al-Badʾ, 6: 123.
73 ʿAlī b. al-Jahm, Diwān, 116, vv. 30-1.
Praise for Murder?

Was Ja'far killed treacherously in the caliphate’s residence, while away from allies, and you all stood by?

And is there no one to avenge him, upon his death, nor anyone to defend his life from those who want it?

Al-Mas'ūdī’s narrative stresses the cowardice of those present when the crime occurred. Except for al-Fath b. Khāqān, the caliph’s familiar and vizier, all attendees failed to stand and fight. Al-Mas'ūdī reports that the Turkish guards stormed the chamber; then “when the slave-boys and those present among the familiars (julasā) and boon companions (nudamā) saw them, they ran away helter-skelter (‘alā wujūhihim).”74 The caliph’s courtiers are still ridiculed seven centuries after the murder: the sixteenth-century historian Ibn al-'Imrānī reports that the lion-hearted al-Fath threw himself before the caliph to shield him and cried, “There is no life without you, O Commander of the Faithful.” In contrast, an effete courtier ran for the door, screaming, “A thousand lives without you, O Commander of the Faithful.”75

Narratives close to the event, however, convey no humor. Honor required the son to slay the murderers, but they were his co-conspirators. Who then could rise up against him and remedy such a loathsome situation? Marwān b. Abī I-Janūb (the Younger) (d. after 247/861) in particular invoked the pulpit as an emblem of caliphal authority, proclaiming that if the son does not avenge his father, the pulpit “will never cease to weep for him [the father].”76 In effect, Ibn Abī Ḥafṣa issued a reminder to the heir that the pulpit will testify against him. In the wake of the son’s inaction, another person was to redress the crisis.

Mandate for Sacrifice

The pre-Islamic elegy (rithā') calling for vengeance (tha'r) follows a ritual pattern, namely that of the rite of sacrifice.77 In poems and anecdotes, blood vengeance functions as a sacrifice for the deceased and evinces a particular tripartite structure.78 In this respect, al-Buḥṭūrī’s elegy evokes a pre-Islamic tradition of poetic vengeance and proposes a renewal by shifting from “the profane to the sacred and from the sacred back to the profane.”79 It has also been observed that this structure brings about a new status for the poet in that the tripartite form of the rite of sacrifice coincides with Arnold van Gennep’s rite of passage. In this regard, blood vengeance is a religious act that modifies the moral and social condition of the avenger when he offers up a victim and shoulders the burden of avenging his slain kinsman.80 In the case of al-Buḥṭūrī’s blood vengeance, the dynamics hark back to ancient Arab tribal precedents. However, the poet’s

74 al-Mas'ūdī, Murūj, 4: 120; for ‘alā wujūhihim, see Hava 1970, s.v. “w-j-h,” and Lane 1984, s.v. “w-j-h.”
75 Ibn al-'Imrānī, al-Inbā‘, 120.
76 Ibn Kathīr (d. ca. 774/1373), al-Bidāya, 10: 804.
77 S. Stetkevych 1993, 55.
78 Ibid., 57.
79 Ibid., 56, 75.
80 Ibid.
ambit of influence, as a redeemer, will be expanded to reflect the changes he effects for 
an imperial, not a tribal, community. It is also the aim of this discussion to emphasize 
that, although the poet relies on precedent and tradition, these verbal procedures are 
neither hackneyed nor invariably convincing. From a performance perspective, it will be 
necessary to illustrate how the poet sustains the emotional involvement of his audience. 
If he can do so, the poet ascends to new heights in his profession.

The historian al-Ṭabarî suggests that pressure mounted on the court to take swift action 
to fend off a state crisis. He reports that some 20,000 horsemen offered to avenge al-
Mutawakkil, among them even vagabonds and gangsters.81 The narrative implies that 
even lowly men know the duty to avenge a slain leader. The poet’s solution was neither 
only to deny the tragedy nor to take up the sword himself, but to attempt to galvanize court 
opinion to avenge al-Mutawakkil and to install a suitable heir.

Al-Buḥturi first uses his elegy to move from the profane to the sacred, consistent with 
the rites of blood vengeance.82 In the elegy, the poet affirms the anguish of the court, 
shoulders the brunt of that burden and vows to draw blood. The opening of an elegy 
does not usually include a nāṣib with its bittersweet themes of lost love, people, and 
places. Rather, Ibn Rashīq explains that the poet in a state of shock and mourning pre-
occupies himself with the heavy business of conveying sad news.83 He further elabor-
ates that an excellent elegy “evinces distress and conveys sorrow, mingling grief, sad-
ness, and the magnitude [of the moment].”84 In other words, the specific losses of the 
day are framed in an elegiac idiom used to express distress and sorrow universally. In 
the opening of al-Buḥturi’s elegy, the specifics of the moment are lifted to the level of 
the universal. The ode then escalates in intensity as the poet faults those present and 
absent, then, dramatically, himself. At this point (v. 25), he forswears wine until blood 
vengeance is achieved: 85

1 A halting place on the Qāṭūl, its fading [traces] have worn away; 
like an army, the calamities of fate attacked it repeatedly,
As if the east wind is fulfilling its pledges, when it unfurls, 
lagging gusts blow evening and morning.
Many a gentle era, over here; the selvages of those years 
were delicate and their foliage was budding.
The beauty of the Ja’fari palace turned and so its pleasant company;
The Ja’fari collapsed both within and without.

5 Those who dwelt there left abruptly; its abodes 
and graves became alike.
When we visit it, our grief is renewed, while before 
this day, the visitor would delight.

81 al-Ṭabarî, Ṭūrīkh, 9: 229.
82 S. Stetkeych 1993, 57.
83 Ibn Rashīq, al-ʿUmda, 2: 839.
84 Ibid., 2: 831.
85 I have relied on the text of al-Ṣayrafi’s edition (1977, 2: 1045). The ode is composed in the fawīl 
 meter with the rhyme -ruh. The complete Arabic text is included in the appendix.
Praise for Murder?

I cannot forget the gloom of the palace when its herds were frightened, and its fawns and calves were terrified, and when departure was announced, and covers and curtains were hastily torn down, nor its desolation, as if no kind soul ever lived there and no scene ever delighted the eye.

10 As if the caliphate never slumbered there with its carefree mien nor did kingship ever rise with a bright complexion.

[And as if] the world had not gathered there its splendor and radiance, nor were [the twigs of] life, when broken, sappy and tender within.

Where are the forbidding curtain, the doors and chambers that were impregnable?

And where is the pillar of the people when disaster strikes? Where is the man among them who forbids and commands fate?

His assassins lay in wait for him covertly — it would have been more worthy for his assassin to come openly!

15 His guards did not fight back death, nor did his wealth and stores defend him.

The one hoped for failed to help the “Mighty” (al-Mu‘tazz); the truly mighty among his tribe is he whose helper is mighty.86

Death appeared to his Fatḥ (Help), and his Tāhir (Pure) was away in Khurasan.87

If the dead one had lived or the distant one been near, the cycles of fortune would have turned away from disaster.

If ‘Ubaydallāh b. Yahyā b. Khāqān had had support against them, coming [out] would have been difficult for those going [in] to the affair.88

20 Passion misled reason; an age came to an end; death was urged on by the fates.

The clan of the victim violated by murder was not to be feared; no shame protects its pegs and ropes.

He is a slain man from whom swords sought the last breath of life, which he bestowed generously while death’s talons turned red.

I was trying to defend him with my two hands, but one man cannot deter the many enemies at night without arms and armor.

If my sword had been in my hand at the time of fighting, the swift murderer would have learned how I attack.

25 Forbidden to me is wine after [your murder], until I see blood for [your] blood streaming on the ground.

86 Al-Mu‘tazz b. al-Mutawakkil would have been the rightful heir to the throne; see Bosworth 1993.
87 Al-Fatḥ b. Khāqān, the caliph’s confidant, died shielding him with his own body; see Pinto 1965. Tāhir b. ‘Abdallāh was the Abbasid governor of Khurasan in 230-48/844-62; see Bosworth 2000.
Shall I hope that an avenger will seek blood vengeance ever, while [your] avenger is the slayer himself?

Did the heir apparent harbor betrayal? Then how strange that his betrayer was appointed heir!

May the survivor never enjoy the legacy of him who died; may his mosque pulpits not bear benedictions for him.

May the suspect never find refuge; may he who drew the sword in treason not escape from the sword, nor he who pointed it.

How excellent is the blood you shed on Ja‘far’s night, during a part of the night as black as pitch.

[You act] as if you do not know, under the whetted blades, who is his heir, his mourner, and avenger.

I surely hope that the rule over you reverts to a scion of his character who does not betray him.

To one who ponders ideas, whose equanimity is dreaded, when the hasty fool is dreaded for his whims.

The qaṣīda can be divided into four sections: opening lament (vv. 1-11), accusation of the court (vv. 12-25) and the successor (vv. 26-9), and denial of allegiance (vv. 30-3). The first line, however subtly, conveys the announcement of death (na‘y). As it circulates, it artfully sends a warning and serves as a message within the elegy. Al-Buḥtūrī announces the death only by insinuating it. The caliph is neither named nor mentioned. His official dwelling is alluded to as “a halting place” (maḥall) located on the Qāṭūl channel (v. 1). The poet plies a partial pun (jināṣ) between the name of the waterway (Qāṭūl) and “murderer” (qatūl), thereby piquing the listener’s curiosity and prefiguring the news to come. A suggestion of betrayal is contained in his reference to calamities attacking the traces “like an army,” since Turkish troops were a hallmark of the palace. The lack of literalism places greater emphasis on the symbolic, archetypal significance of losing a leader.

Al-Buḥtūrī not only conveys news in the first line, he uses the lyrical idiom of the nasīb to transfigure a temporal, localized crisis into a cataclysm of mythic proportions. Though he comments on actual events outside the artistic frame of the ode, they are expressed through the symbolic, evocative, and universal world of the nasīb. The opening of the ode employs lexically charged words typical of the nasīb: the place is dāthir (v. 1), wearing or fading away like traces of human habitation in the sand; fate (dahr) shows itself as an enemy of organized social life (v. 1); the gentle east wind (al-ṣabā) ends abruptly (v. 2). There is a pervasive elegiac mood as the poet expresses the omi-

89 S. Stetkevych 1993, 82. ‘Alī b. al-Jahm indicates the importance of the oral circulation of poetry as a means of broadcasting the news of al-Mutawakkil’s death, when he says, atanā l-qawāfī ṣārīkhātin li-faqdihi
musuallamatan arjāzuhā wa-qaṣiduhā (Diwān, 117, v. 39).
Verses came to us screaming his loss;
their folk and courtly meters were self-mutilated [out of grief].
nous deprivation felt in the present, in contrast to the glorious past cultivated by al-Mutawakqil (vv. 3-11). The lament concludes with acutely lyrical phrasing in the inventive (badī') style, which characterized much of the Abbasid period with its “intentional, conscious encoding of abstract meaning into metaphor.”

In line 3, the mood is constructed with a borrowing from Abū Tammām, “the selvages (ḥawāshī) of those years.” Here, sweet memories are metaphorically depicted as a garment, whose selvages are soft and delicate. Al-Buḥtūrī also heightens the loss of life (and innocence) using the metaphor of broken twigs (makāsir) that are filled with sap (v. 11). This metaphor, likewise taken from Abū Tammām, paints al-Mutawakqil’s reign in ideal terms as fresh, pliant, moist, and thus by extension young and full of life. The use of makāsir metaphorically suggests a life cut down in its prime. By way of reception, one can note that centuries after al-Buḥtūrī this elegy impressed the poet-warrior Usāma b. Mūnqidh (d. 584/1188) who recalled it as a touchstone for the loss of idyllic places.

In the second section of the ode (vv. 12-25), the poet hints at al-Fāṭḥ’s heroism, but denounces all other members of the court for their criminal actions or omissions as he works toward his own assumption of responsibility. After nine lines that lament the end of a golden era, the weight of al-Buḥtūrī’s censure falls heavily on those who actively or passively contributed to the late caliph’s demise. The list is extensive and includes chamberlains (v. 12), army personnel (v. 13), the assassins themselves (v. 14), personal guards (v. 15), the caliph’s “good” son al-Muʿtazz (v. 16), the Khurasanian vicegerent Tāhir b. ‘Abdallāh (v. 17), and the vizier ‘Ubaydallāh b. Yahyā (v. 19). The poet then widens the stigma of inaction to the whole court, when he states what is obvious yet unspeakable:

The clan of the victim violated by murder was not to be feared;
no shame protects its pegs and ropes (v. 21).

A group that is unable to fight off aggression has little hope of security. The murder lays open the bitter reality that the dynasty has waned in might and grandeur. The poet admits that the Abbasids and their entourage have suffered a decline followed by a new, more vulnerable status. Al-Buḥtūrī’s sentiment echoes Electa’s admission at Agamemnon’s grave.

As the list of recriminations grows, the poet claims the ultimate burden as one of the men closest to the deceased caliph both in terms of proximity and rapport. The assumption of responsibility, it would seem, is critical to the persuasive effectiveness of his atonement procedure. Robertson Smith notes that a pre-condition of sin-offering in Semitic culture is that the “priest” represents the sinner “or bears his sin.” In lines 23 and 24, the poet’s admission of fault enables him to shoulder the court’s burdens, in-

91 S. Stetcovych 1991, 8.
92 Ibid., 69.
95 Aeschylus, The Libation Bearers, ll. 129-39.
96 Smith 1894, 344, 349.
cluding those of the heir, to perform the ritual sacrifice. He marks his resolve with a graphic vow:

Forbidden to me is wine after [your murder], until I see blood for [your] blood streaming on the ground (v. 25).

In the arena of politics, al-Buḫturi’s hope in this elegy was to delegitimize al-Muntaṣir so that courtiers would then support the official heir, al-Muʿtazz. His oath and call to vengeance thus underscore the crime’s horror and the heir’s guilt. In this vein, the remainder of the poem, particularly the rebuke (vv. 27-9), serves the public function of denying allegiance to a false caliph.

Generations later, however, the political exigencies of the crisis became secondary to the ritual pattern formed by the juxtaposition of the two odes with the intervening ḥaḍj journey. At the mythic level, the end of the elegy would be recognized as a preparatory phase for a communal ritual of atonement. The convention of forswearing women, meat, ointment, wine, and the joys of communal life until blood has been spilt “amounts to excommunication or anathema and entry into the liminal or sacrificial phase.”⁹⁷ Almost paradoxically, the poet must exit the community to redress its traumas. The sacred or taboo phase of his rite ends only when he slaughters the sacrificial victim, i.e., fulfills the obligation to take blood vengeance.⁹⁸

In the third component of the elegy (vv. 26-9), the poet directs accusations particularly to the ousted heir apparent and inflicts a series of shocking curses (vv. 28-9). These are probably the biting verses that prompted al-Marzubānī to label this poem as invective (ḥiǧāʾ).⁹⁹ However, within the poetics of this elegy, the poet by his vow assumes a sacred and highly symbolic state. Moreover, he is ritually at this point a representative of the group. His first words are consistent with his liminal condition:

Shall I hope that an avenger will seek blood vengeance ever, while [your] avenger is the slayer himself?

Did the heir apparent harbor betrayal? Then how strange that his betrayer was appointed heir (vv. 26-7). ¹⁰⁰*

Lines 26 and 27 each express a pair of antitheses (tibāq), the lines between which have been blurred producing an abomination. In the first instance, the poet concedes that the distinction between murderer (wāṭir) and avenger (mawtūrūn bi-l-dāmi) has faded. In the second instance, the distinction is lost between trust and betrayal, since the heir apparent (waliyyu l-ʿahdī: lit. entrusted with the covenant [of succession]) concealed betrayal (ghadra). The moral structure of the community relies on clear categories of membership and exclusion as reflected in these dyads. When these distinctions break down, so too does the social order.

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⁹⁷ S. Svetkevych 1993, 72.
⁹⁸ Ibid.
⁹⁹ al-Marzubānī (d. ca. 384/994), al-Mawashshah, 418.
¹⁰⁰* For a discussion of the textual history of vv. 27, 28, and 30 (marked with asterisk) see p. 20 below.
The panegyrical ode conventionally ends with a benediction for the patron. These well-wishes often invoke God or other concepts that are sacred and serve the function of endorsing the social order. Al-Buḥṭurī accomplishes the opposite with his curses. In particular he profanes the successor al-Muntaṣir, denying him even the slightest legitimacy:

May the survivor never enjoy the legacy of him who died;
may his mosque pulpits not bear benedictions for him.

May the suspect never find refuge; may he who drew the sword in treason not escape from the sword, nor he who pointed it (vv. 28-9).*

Whereas panegyrical typically expresses or confirms allegiance and corroborates the caliph’s claims to authority, invective (ḥiṣā) amounts to “the substitution of an act of sedition for an act of ... submission.” The Abbasid poet draws on well-established cultural precedents in pre-Islamic Arabia, in a manner that might be termed shamanistic, using curses and invective as a form of magic. The poet’s curses are made all the more frightening by these links to the world of jinn and satans. Not only does al-Buḥṭurī publicly refuse to pledge his allegiance, but he also invites others to rebel against the man now labeled a traitor. In the last four lines, he recaps the principal message and calls for a revolt:

How excellent is the blood you shed on Jaʿfar’s night,
during a part of the night as black as pitch.*

[You act] as if you do not know, under the whetted blades,
who is his heir, his mourner, and avenger.

I surely hope that the rule over you reverts to
a scion of his character who does not betray him.

To one who ponders ideas, whose equanimity is dreaded,
when the hasty fool is dreaded for his whims (vv. 30-3).

In these lines, al-Buḥṭurī, who has so far been speaking in the first person, addresses the second person plural, thereby directing his message collectively to those who aided the false heir. This audience is accused of failing to recognize which scion could genuinely serve as heir, mourner, and avenger to al-Mutawakkil. Moreover, he admonishes them (and the umma as a whole) not to let the community be ruled by a renegade (vv. 32-3). Naturally, for al-Buḥṭurī, the only advisable alternative is the ascension of another heir, namely al-Muṭazz. But al-Muntaṣir persists as caliph. Nevertheless, the ritual value of these verses also persists. His political troubles exacerbate his battered image and enhance the verbal prowess of the poet.

A poet in performance is faced with the demands of attracting and holding the attention of an unstable audience. Simultaneously, he bears the responsibility of ensuring the

102 S. Stetkevych 1996a, 43.
103 Ibid., 59.
long-term artistic appeal of his creations, which may call for further textual changes in order to protect the continuity of his endeavor.\textsuperscript{107} One anecdote in particular indicates that some littérature (\textit{udabā‘}) held that the elegy had a dynamic compositional history. To wit, the anecdote suggests that the socio-political pressures of the court put the short- and long-term appeal of the ode into mutual conflict. The compromise, it is believed, was a succession of textual adjustments in different performance settings. Al-Ṣālí reports that lines 27, 28, and 30 – three of the eight lines of rebuke – were added later by the poet during the reign of al-Mu’tazz in order to curry favor with him. Al-Ṣālí says, “I asked ‘Abdallāh b. al-Mu’tazz, ‘Did al-Buḥturī [really] dare to say, when al-Mutawakkil was killed on the day of al-Muntaṣir, ‘How excellent is the blood ... May his mosque pulpits not bear benedictions for him’ [al-Ṣayyaf’s vv. 30, 27, 28 (in this order)].’\textsuperscript{108} Ibn al-Mu’tazz replied, “He composed the lines only during the reign of al-Mu’tazz to ingratiate himself to him thereby (\textit{yataqarrabu bihā ilayhi}).” According to the anecdote, al-Buḥturī responded to the diverging expectations of two audiences. At the time of the murder, he issued a slightly milder rebuke of al-Muntaṣir, because the outcome of the succession struggle was still uncertain. For al-Muntaṣir’s sibling and successor, al-Mu’tazz, the poet later amplified the onus upon al-Muntaṣir, giving subsequent generations further dramatic tension in the atonement rite. This anecdote not only suggests the poet’s capacity and willingness to adjust the texts in response to changing conditions, but the readiness of audiences to rate an ode not by historical veracity, but by artistic impact and, ultimately, persuasiveness.

Al-Buḥturī’s intensified rebuke of al-Muntaṣir won circulation in several historical and literary sources. Al-Mas’ūdī, in narrating the story of the murder, recalled lines 27 and 28, both full of condemnation.\textsuperscript{109} Similarly, al-Ḥuṣrī (d. 413/1022) in his Zahr al-ādāb cited eleven lines of the poem, including lines 26 and 28.\textsuperscript{110} He quotes Abū 1-‘Abbās Tha’lab as commenting, “No better Hāshimite [ode] was ever said. [Al-Buḥturī] spoke in it the truth like someone whom misfortune has distracted from fearing the consequences.” These indications suggest that the elegy’s textual adjustments sustained audiences’ attention over nearly two centuries and maintained its appeal as an ode confirming the burden of those involved. One might also speculate that the adjustments were not the invention of the poet, but that of later generations of performers who sought to sharpen the poem for maximum rhetorical effect. In either case, al-Buḥturī or his performers shouldered the responsibility of communication to an audience.

\textsuperscript{107} Blachère 1952, 1: 89-92; Nagy 1996, 34, 36.
\textsuperscript{108} al-Ṣālí, \textit{Akhbār al-Buḥturī}, 102.
\textsuperscript{109} al-Mas’ūdī, \textit{Mūrūj}, 4: 122.
\textsuperscript{110} al-Ḥuṣrī, \textit{Zahr al-ādāb}, 1: 215-16. The verses 4-5, 7-8, 6, 13-14, 22, 25-6, and 28 are cited in this order and with several textual variations.
The Court’s Redeemer

After composing the shocking elegy, al-Buḥtūrī is said to have performed the ḥajj. The Syrian poet and writer Abū l-ʿAlāʾ al-Maʿarrī (d. 449/1058) sensed al-Buḥtūrī’s artifice when he characterized his pilgrimage as the proverbial ḥajj for reasons other than religious piety:

\[
\text{ḥajja min ghayri tuqan ṣāḥibunā}
\]
\[
\text{ka-akhi Buḥtūra ʿāma l-Muntasīr}^{112}
\]

Our friend performed pilgrimage without piety
as did my brother from Buḥtūr the year of al-Muntasīr.

Al-Ṣūlī gives the impression that a mood of anticipation prevailed until al-Buḥtūrī’s return. Al-Muntasīr initiated a series of pro-ʿAlid policies, but no poet dared celebrate this development. Al-Buḥtūrī had created a ritual tension and he was to be the sole bearer of dispensation, which would come in the form of a praise qaṣīda, dedicated to al-Muntasīr upon the poet’s return. This panegyric follows the pattern of nasīb-raḥīl-maḍīḥ, elegiac prelude (vv. 1-10), journey transition (vv. 12-13), and triumphant praise (vv. 14-36). The tripartite form mimics the real experience of the rite of passage. Like the ritual of passage, the ode brings about new social conditions. The ode and the rite of passage both begin with themes of detachment from the community, followed by a transitional liminal state outside the community, and they conclude with reaggregation into the community. The rite of passage effectively “modifies the condition of the moral person who accomplishes it.” The poet, as group representative, brings about an atonement, but he undergoes a passage as poet as well. If successful, the panegyric enables him to prove his verbal prowess in playing the role of redeemer.

His bid is most prominently insinuated in the ḥajj-raḥīl section, which stands as a rejoinder to the spatial strategies of the Abbasid caliphs. One can recall at this point that courtiers were essentially forced to desecrate the Kaaba as they turned their backs on the Holy Shrine in order to face and bow toward the throne. Bodily orientation was consciously prescribed and circumscribed within these grandiose palaces. No doubt, these hubristic designs were sanctioned by caliphs in their bid for control over their subjects. Al-Buḥtūrī was able to tap covertly resentment toward the caliph by not only journeying beyond the court, but to its “opposing” center, as it were. This proves to be more than a ritual creation of a new order for the court. The poet successfully challenges authority by giving voice to the audience’s sentiments.

According to the poem’s literary lore, al-Muntasīr wanted al-Buḥtūrī to broadcast his new policies. He began his reign with goodwill gestures toward the ʿAlids, whom his father had persecuted. In contrast, al-Muntasīr appointed ʿAlids to important and

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113 al-Ṣūlī, Akhbār al-Buḥtūrī, 100.
114 S. Steckevych 1993, 7.
115 Hubert and Mauss 1981, 13.
116 al-Ṣūlī, Akhbār al-Buḥtūrī, 100.
ceremonial positions and initiated a policy of distributing charity to them, which confirmed their bonds of kinship to the Abbasids and their status as protected subjects. He wanted to publicize his new policy toward the ‘Alids and implicitly contrast the cruelty of his predecessor with his more compassionate stance. Al-Buhturí, upon his return from the hajj, as the story goes, sensed the caliph’s hopes and seized the opportunity. Using an eerie nasīb opening, al-Buhturí stepped into the caliph’s audience hall and said: 117

1 She smiles with white, filed [teeth]
and gazes with dark languid eyes.

She sways like the bough of an Arak-tree
swept from the side by gusts of cool wind.

(Among the scenes that stir the heart of a staid man
are a graceful figure and a languid gaze.)

Whatever I forget, I will not forget the years
of youth and ‘Alwa when old age rebuked me.

5 Stars of gray adhered to [the black locks of] youth
and diminished its beauty that once was plentiful.

And I have found – do not deny it –
the black of passion in locks of gray.

One must renounce, no doubt, one of two things:
youth or long life.

Have you ever seen how lightning unfurls?
And how the phantom of an ungenerous beloved flashes by?

Her apparition drew near us from Siwā, while we were
praying by night at Baṭn Marr.

10 What does she want with pilgrims (al-muhrimūn),
dragging at midnight their too wide garbs?

They hastened by night to run at al-Šafā,
stone the Herm [at Minā], and touch the Stone.

We performed the hajj to the House out of gratitude to
God for what He gave us in al-Muntaṣīr:
Forbearance when forbearance waned,
and resolve when resolution crumbled.

He bestows justice when he judges.
He lavishes pardon when he decrees.

15 He remains constant in character:
sufficient unto himself, of majestic rank.

He does not endeavor to rule as a man
who begins with good but follows it with evil. 118

117 See al-Šayrāfī’s edition (1977, 2: 838). The ode is composed in the mutaqārib meter with the rhyme -r, which features together echo the meter and rhyme of the elegy to al-Mutawakkil. The complete Arabic text is included in the appendix.

118 I have preferred the alternate reading by Ḥannā’ al-Fākhūrī (1995; 2: 420, v. 16): wa-thanna bi-shar. Here al-Šayrāfī’s edition has a corrupt meter and is inconsistent with the idea of one moral character elaborated in vv. 15-18.
Nor is he fickle, conferring benefits in the evening
and doing harm in the morning.
Rather, he is as pure as the waters of storm clouds;
their first drops are as sweet as the last.
He restored his subjects from a civil strife
whose black night cast them into gloom.

20 And when its darkness reached its blackest,
he shone in it and became the moon.
With a resolve that lifts darkness and blindness,
and with a purpose that sets straight pouting and
smirking [faces].
By right, you twisted on that day the rope
of the caliphate until it was firm.
By might, you established yourself atop
the shoulders of the realm until it was steady.
Had it been another man, he would not have risen to this task –
nor would he have been able.

25 You redressed injustices and your hands
restored the rights of the oppressed:
The family of Abū Ṭālib [the ‘Alids] – after their herd
was seized and scattered,
And the closest of kin received treatment so cruel
that the sky well-nigh cracked open because of it! –
You joined the bonds of their kinship,
when the rope was nearly severed.
For you put their share, once far, within reach,
and made their drinking water, once murky, pure.

30 How lofty are you [Abbasids] compared to them ['Alids]?
Though their rank is neither distant nor remote.
[They are] your kin, no, rather full brothers and clansmen,
to the exclusion of all humankind.
Though, who are they, when yours are the two hands of victory,
two edges of a sword, gleaming of old.
Your precedence is chanted in the Book
and your virtues are recited in sūras.
No doubt, ‘Alī is more worthy and free of sin
in your eyes than ʿUmar.

35 Every [steed] has its merits, when vying in excellence,
while anklets are beneath blazes on foreheads.
May you live on, Imām of guidance, for guidance’s sake
to renew its path that has faded away.
The *nasīḥ*, in general, serves the critical purpose of gaining the sympathetic attention of audiences as would an exordium. This *nasīḥ* in particular (vv. 1-10) constitutes the poet’s first words to al-Muntaṣir since the murder and their estrangement, and thus carries the added burden of attaining the sympathy of the desired patron. He achieves this aim with three motifs, the first of which is the shapely, delicate beloved likened to a doe. Following *nasīḥ* conventions, the beloved exhibits teeth filed to perfection, a gentle gaze (v. 1), a swaying bough-like stature (v. 2), images traditionally deployed to stir passion and yearning for ideal love. These emotions are confirmed, when al-Buḥṭurī conveys the perspective of an otherwise collected man whose heart is moved (v. 3).

The second motif is *al-shakwā min al-shayb*, the lament of gray hair (vv. 4-7), which offers the poet the opportunity to draw attention to himself as a victim of fate’s afflictions. Having gained his audience’s attention with the opening motif, he can now solicit empathy, particularly from the patron he courts. The lament of gray hair motif touches a sensitive chord, for it expresses fears of mortality and the finality of life. In verse 4, rebukes are now directed against him as old age forces him to part with youth and a former beloved, ‘Alwa. He now suffers the stigma of graying locks that are slowly diminishing his handsome appearance (v. 5). In verse 6, however, the poet admits his reluctance to forgo youth and passion completely. However, the only means of holding on to youth is to forsake a full and long life (v. 7).

The third and last motif of the *nasīḥ* depicts the phantom of the beloved who appears unexpectedly (v. 8) and, in formal terms, very late in the *nasīḥ* section. Here it would seem that the phantom represents a former attachment, which suggests it might be an allusion to his former patron, al-Mutawakkil. In al-Mutanabbi’s first ode to Kāfūr, the poet abrogates his allegiance to Sayf al-Dawla by poetically substituting him with a former beloved in the *nasīḥ*. In detaching himself from the beloved and reattaching himself to the patron, the poet simultaneously declares his commitment to this new patron. Al-Buḥṭurī similarly seizes the opportunity to dispel any lingering doubts about where his new loyalties reside. When the beloved’s phantom approaches him, he does not reciprocate:

> Her apparition drew near us from Siwā, while we were praying by night at Baṭn Marr.  
> What does she want with pilgrims (*al-muhrimūn*),  
> dragging at midnight their too wide garbs (vv. 9-10).

The poet is preoccupied with a ritual: holy acts performed in special garb at appointed times in sacred places. At this point in the ode, it is not clear whether he fulfills these obligations in the name of the new patron, but certainly he does not do so out of longing for a bygone era. In short, he makes it clear that he does not welcome this particular bond, but new ties are yet undetermined. Al-Buḥṭurī’s hesitation is not merely a matter of political exigency. In this *nasīḥ*, the most subjective section of the ode, he acknowledges the erstwhile value of past allegiances, yet signals his readiness to move forward.

120 S. Stetkevych, 1996a, 46.
The phantom’s visit to the pilgrims makes the transition to the raḥīl. In the following couplet, the poet now reinterprets the rites of ḥajj as a service performed specifically for the new caliph. His activities at pilgrimage will gradually increase the pressure on the patron to show gratitude for this service.

Rites and Restoration after Crisis

The raḥīl conventionally involves physical movement on a vehicle such as a camel, mare, horse, or ship, but here al-Buḥṭurī adapts the paradigm to the social and mythopoetic context that surrounds the poem (vv. 12-13). The journey is the physical and psychological transition of the ḥajj. Motion is philologically indicated by the verb sarā/yasrī (v. 11), meaning to journey or travel by night.\(^1\) Al-Buḥṭurī alludes to three common ḥajj rites as the point of transition from a former allegiance (to al-Mutawakkil) to a new one (to al-Muntaṣir). Verse 11 constitutes the pivot for the panegyric, as an expression of allegiance, and, on the mythic level, for the rite of atonement. The mythic and political drama revolves around three verbal nouns and their direct objects (mafūl bihi): li-saʿiya l-Ṣafā, ramyi l-jimārī, wa-mašhi l-ḥajar, “to run at al-Ṣafā, stone the Herms [at Minā], and touch the Stone.”

In the first rite, al-Buḥṭurī refers topographically to the Ṣafā hill in the vicinity of the Kaaba. Traditionally, pilgrims run along the masʿā (course) between the two hills al-Ṣafā and al-Marwa.\(^2\) In addition to running, the verb saʿā/yasʿā also conveys the idea of striving, or applying oneself assiduously,\(^3\) which of course hints at the poet’s troubles for his new patron. The second rite demands of pilgrims that they collect seven pebbles for Stoning (rajm) each of the three herms (jimār or jamarāt) that represent devils.\(^4\) Finally, the poet relies on the rite of touching the Black Stone, built on the northeast corner of the Kaaba.\(^5\) According to legend the Stone was completely white in ancient times and over the generations became black because pilgrims would wipe it with their hands to remove the blood of their sin-offering.\(^6\) One can also note that the verb masaḥa/yamsaḥu is used idiomatically to convey atonement as in masaḥa llāhu ʿanka mā bika (may God wipe away your sins).\(^7\) Al-Buḥṭurī thus integrates three rites, evocative of atonement and renewal in Muslim communal life.

The need for legitimacy was most urgent for al-Muntaṣir. He was haunted by the burden of complicity in al-Mutawakkil’s murder. In conversations, the twenty-four-year-old caliph would become vexed at any mention of the regicide.\(^8\) He was also tormented by anxiety dreams, guilt, and the taunts of hecklers.\(^9\) In verse 12, the poet redresses

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\(^1\) Lane 1984, s.v. “s-r-y.”
\(^2\) von Grunebaum 1951, 30.
\(^3\) Lane 1984, s.v. “s-ʿ-y.”
\(^4\) von Grunebaum 1951, 33.
\(^5\) Ibid., 23, 29.
\(^6\) Ibid., 19; Ibn ʿAbdrabbīh, Ḥaqd, 7: 249.
\(^7\) Lane 1984, s.v. “m-s-ḥ.”
\(^9\) al-Ṭabarī, Taʿrīkh, 9: 252-5.
the traumas of the caliph and the community. The object of his new allegiance and the purpose of his *hajj-rahil* become evident. He says:

We performed the *hajj* to the House out of gratitude to
God for what He gave us in al-Muntaṣir:

Forbearance when forbearance waned
and resolve when resolution crumbled (vv. 12-13).

In this brief phrasing, the poet celebrates a restoration of order after *fitna*, a moment of crisis for the community, surely to be associated with the internecine wars of early Islamic history. On a personal level, though, *fitna* denotes a trial of faith or loyalty, a temptation to defect. James Garrison observes that one of the principal functions of panegyric in pre-modern societies is to herald a national reconciliation after a period of instability. In particular, the seventeenth-century panegyric of John Dryden addresses the needs of two audiences: it reminds the ruler of his duty to respect societal values, and it exhorts the subjects to offer the ruler obedience and loyalty. The poet thus effects a restoration of order.

In line 12, the poet’s gratitude gives credence to a theme of collective renewal. He casts his performance of the *hajj* as an act of thanksgiving for a state of well-being. Indirectly, one learns that God now sanctions al-Muntaṣir, though implicit in this sanction is a balance of obligations. The community can expect their leader to be firm and forbearing; the leader can expect the community to accept his virtues as a divine “gift” that implies thereafter the duty to repay God’s gift with submission to His deputy. On the mythic level, the poet who had stigmatized the “false” heir now returns from the *hajj* with deliverance. The poet’s invocation of gift exchange rituals heralds the return of life’s normal rhythms.

The brief *hajj-rahil* syntactically connects to the following *madih*. In verse 14, the poet draws on the invocative dimensions of panegyric to coax his patron to virtuous behavior. The speaker protects himself by the broadcast potential of his text. He valorizes pardon and justice as two tokens of al-Muntaṣir’s powers, committing him to clemency as a means to glory:

He bestows justice when he judges.
He lavishes pardon when he decrees (v. 14).

Moreover, al-Buḥturi solicits his own security by addressing in verse 15 the theme of moral consistency. Using his new patron’s thirst for power, the poet lures him into an unwavering course of action:

He remains constant in character:
sufficient unto himself, of majestic rank (v. 15).

Praise can sometimes prove to be surprisingly critical to shaping human conduct. Steven Caton in his study of Yemeni tribal poetry argues that praise poetry at weddings in

130 Gardet 1965.
131 Garrison 1975, 7-8.
132 Ibid., 141-2.
133 S. Stetkevych 1996a, 43.
honor of the groom commits the young tribesman to an image of himself desirable to the community. Using George Mead’s model of the self, Caton notes that the self emerges in society reflexively, through communication and interaction with others. The self responds to affirmations of speech and gesture. Formal praise in honor of the groom, then, reminds the young man of “who he must become.” The mirror of manhood is held up to the young tribesman precisely before marriage obligations. For the Abbasid panegyric, Julie Meisami makes a similar observation: “The poet does not merely record the noble deeds of his patron, but creates the motivation for them.” Moreover, in addition to the ideal patron, the poet can portray ideal patronage. In her study of Ibn al-Rümî, Beatrice Gruendler argues that the poet is able to shape the conduct of ‘Ubaydallâh b. ‘Abdallâh b. Țâhir as a patron by depicting an ideal vision. The poet “spells out how it [his panegyric] should be received, accepted, rewarded, and remembered – leaving nothing to chance (or to the patron’s imagination). In sum, the poet advocates a whole model of patronage down to every detail.”

In al-Muntaṣir’s case, al-Buḥtûrî sees the opportunity publicly to commit the caliph to an image of himself that includes consistency. He holds to the caliph a mirror of manhood that society can sanction:

He does not endeavor to rule as a man
who begins with good but follows it with evil.

Nor is he fickle, conferring benefits in the evening
and doing harm in the morning.

Rather, he is as pure as the waters of storm clouds;
their first drops are as sweet as the last (vv. 16-18).

The adjective musaffan produces a few semantic associations. The verb șaffâ can mean “to clear, settle” (of debts), or “to clarify, filter” (of water: sediment). Moreover, the adjective musaffan can serve as the passive participle (ism al-mafûl), place noun (ism al-makân), and time period noun (ism al-zamân). Thus, referring to al-Muntaṣir, the verse can read, “He is [a debt] cleared” or “He is pure,” and in reference to the court or the era, “Its [debts] are cleared” or “It is pure.”

One might object to the “[debt] cleared” reading on the grounds that it does not seem to suit the rest of verse 18. However, the heaviest debt is the duty to avenge the blood of fallen kin, and the rain imagery is consistent with themes of blood vengeance. The motifs of bloodshed and rainfall are both rejuvenating and common in elegies (rithâ’). One might consider also that the particle “ka-” in Arabic can govern a noun or a manner of action, meaning “as” or “like.” Then, one might read the line, referring to al-Muntaṣir: “He has cleared [debts] like the waters of storm clouds [i.e., he has avenged

134 Caton 1990, 95.
135 Meisami 1987, 46.
136 Gruendler 2003, 75.
137 Hava 1970, s.v. “s-f-w.”
139 S. Stetkevych 1993, 180.
spilt blood]. Their first drops are as sweet as the last.” Symbolically, upon returning from the *hajj*, the poet pronounces the ritual to be effective.

The next six verses, 19-24, valorize al-Muntaṣir as the victor who restores order and saves the community from factionalism. The crisis is depicted as a full-fledged *fitna* that plunged the *umma* into darkness and fear (v. 19). The poet celebrates the caliph’s power to dispel the gloom (vv. 20-1), restore calm (v. 20), and discipline his critics (v. 21). There is an acknowledgement of the extreme measures that the caliph took to accomplish his purpose (vv. 22-3), but the poet also emphasizes the caliph’s individual agency by turning to the second person singular. Caliphal panegyric commonly reflects the Islamic tenet that God appoints only one caliph over the *umma*, and divine sanction is proven with executive power. The poet, thus, attests that no other would have the sanction or the power to act.140

Verses 25-35 commemorate al-Muntaṣir’s new policy of showing mercy toward the ‘Alids.141 This policy, in contrast to al-Mutawakkil’s earlier harshness, was meant to demonstrate the new caliph’s legitimacy.142 It betrays the caliph’s need to defuse the criticism of his challengers. Al-Buḫṭurī memorialized this policy in the midst of his panegyric. In a manner that is consistent with his theme of reconciliation, the poet recognizes the wrongs that the ‘Alids have suffered under the former caliph:

> You redressed injustices and your hands
> restored the rights of the oppressed:
>
> The family of Abū Ṭālib [the ‘Alids] — after their herd
> was seized and scattered,
>
> And the closest of kin received treatment so cruel
> that the sky well-nigh cracked open because of it! —
>
> You joined the bonds of their kinship,
> when the rope was nearly severed (vv. 25-8).

The cracking open of the sky, as found in the Qurʾān, is a sign of the final *fitna* in Islamic eschatology, the apocalypse, and connotes its sense of upheaval.143 The Qurʾānic text describes a cataclysmic rupture:

> When skies are cracked open
> When stars are scattered
> When seas are vented
> When graves are disgorged
> Every soul will realize what it has done and not done.144

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143 Gardet 1965.
144 Qurʾān 82: 1-5.
The caliph as champion of his people prevents cataclysm. His kind policies toward the 'Alids enact one of his mythic duties, namely to preserve order and stay fate's destructiveness.145

The 'Alids, however, are assigned a delicate position in the new hierarchy. The poet makes rank an issue with his apostrophe concerning the loftiness of the Abbasids in relation to the 'Alids, though he is sure to mention that the latter do not lag far behind (vv. 30-1). The two Hashmite lines, once competitors, now complement one another like two sword blades and two hands for the sake of victory (v. 32). Verses 33-5 clarify, however, the Abbasids' precedence in the new order. Al-Buhturi concludes his panegyric with a benediction that asks for divine wisdom and guidance at the hands of the new caliph:

May you live on, Imam of guidance, for guidance's sake

to renew its path that has faded away (v. 36).

Sperl notes that "imam of guidance" (imam al-hudâ) is one of the epithets of divine grace and power.146 Yet, al-Buhturi adds a degree: "May you live on, Imam of guidance, for guidance's sake." The young caliph must now take up the honor of being imam as well as the protector of guidance. In Garrison's terms, the poet here intervenes between the king and society.147 Al-Buhturi's use of the title reminds the caliph of his duties and exhorts the umma to obey his lead. The caliph is further advised, after a period of crisis, actively to "renew the path" of guidance. The use of the verb dathara resonates with the first line of al-Buhturi's elegy of al-Mutawakkil. There, he had employed the word dathiruh, "its fading [traces]," referring to the era's bygone glory. Al-Buhturi's present closure thus salutes al-Muntasir as one who renews a legacy. The parallel between the first line of one poem and the last line of the second also links them to one whole cycle: the first stigmatizes the court, the second redeems it. The poet demonstrates his capacity to restore the community after trauma.

At the end of the ceremony, al-Suli signals the weight of al-Buhturi's service to the caliphate. To be sure, he figuratively indicates that the poem was received not as an apology, or a peace offering as Dayf contends,148 but as a favor. The text lacks the typical indications of an apology as established in odes such as those by al-Nabigha al-Dhubyan and Ka'b b. Zuhayr, which require the poet to note the charges, deny their veracity, then redirect blame to foes and calumniators (a'dâ, wushâh).149 The praise then serves as a peace offering to assuage residual anger. Though al-Buhturi hints at caliphal justice and mercy, his panegyric offers no self-defense, because no defense is warranted. In the eyes of society, the poet acted within his traditional role. The patron, by contrast, is a patricide in the public eye, and no poet yet dared lift the stigma cast upon him by al-Buhturi. All things considered, al-Muntasir was fortunate to receive al-Buhturi's defense.

146 Ibid., 23.
147 Garrison 1975, 141.
148 Dayf 1990, 278.
149 See S. Stetkevych 2001, 1-79.
Al-Ṣūlī says of the caliph, “He gave him [the poet] a lavish reward, though he usually rewarded poets poorly [ṣa-ṣalahu wa-ajzala, wa-lam yakun yaṣīlu l-shu‘arā‘a illā qalilani].” The extraordinary award recognizes the perfect redemption, and to highlight this, al-Ṣūlī shows another poet capitalizing on al-Buḥturi’s success. As if breaking a ritual fast, Yazid al-Muhallabi for the first time composes verse celebrating al-Muntasir’s pro-ʿAlid policies. Al-Buḥturi’s ritual effect thereby becomes a public reality that others could celebrate.

Conclusion

The performance of this ritual before an audience may not dramatize a dualistic struggle for order against disorder, but rather the immolation of one order for the sake of a new one. Moving beyond the reiterative nature of ritual, Turner emphasizes the emergent, unpredictable, and emotional dimensions that give ritual accomplishments dramatic appeal. In the atonement rite, animal sacrifice represents, as it were, the dismembering of an old system, and prefigures the “re-membering” of a new one. In this sense, ritual itself serves a paradigmatic function and confirms to a society its capacity to bring about “creative modifications.” Quite apart from the merits of one order (or leader) over another, it would seem that by upholding values and ideals in ritual, society can foster hope. In the elegy, one can notice that before verse 25, the poet chants of tragic failures (v. 24), that is, failures to meet societal values. In response to the dissonance between actions and values, the poet abandons one path and vows to take another. His vow is the first step in a bid to reassert the Abbasid values of loyalty, honor, and patronage.

To the reader of these odes eleven-and-a-half centuries after their première, the ritual might seem distant and foreign. One might be unsettled by the outright lack of truthful representation. Indeed, there is not even an attempt at reconciling their opposing stances. These odes, in the way they starkly contradict one another on the surface, caution against evaluating court poetry by the standards of historiography. The Canadian critic Northrop Frye notes that, unlike the historian, the poet uses the language of poetry to comment on existence:

The poet makes no specific statements of fact, and hence is not judged by the truth or falsehood of what he says. The poet has no external model for his imitation, and is judged by the integrity or consistency of his verbal structure. The reason is that he imitates the universal, not the particular; he is concerned not with what happened but with what happens.

While it remains to be seen how readers today will receive al-Buḥturi, in large part, the aim of this study has been to demonstrate how productive it is to evaluate his texts not so much as false history, but as mythic poetry serving ritual functions. Though modern readers may appreciate imitations of the particular, the poet and his public longed for imitations of the universal.

151 Turner 1982, 83.
152 Ibid., 81-2.
153 Frye 1963, 52.
20 حلمّهم أصلّتها الأغلبيَّة، ومَدّة
21 ومغتَّصبَ للتقتل لم يُحِّل رهْطَة
22 صبَّع نقاَّصُة السُّوَف حماَشة
23 أداَفْع عنه بالبلديَّان، ولم يَكُن
24 ولو كان سَيِّيِن سَاءة القتلى في يدي
25 حرَّام على اللَّهُ بُعدَة أو أرَى
26 وَهَل أَرْتِبَ أنْ يَتَلَبُّ اللَّهَ واتِّر
27 أكان وَلِي الْعُهْدَ أَصْمَر غُرَة؟
28 فَلا مِلّ البِّاِقَ تَرَاث آلَّدِي مَصِي
29 ولا وَأَنَّ اللهُ كُفُّهُ، ولا نَجَٰ
30 لَسْبَم اللَّهُ المَسْفُوح لِبَلَّةٍ جُفُّر
31 كَانُوكَم لم تَّتَمُّوا مِن وَلَّيٍّة
32 وَإِلَيْنِ أُلْجَوِ أَنْ تُرَد أَمْرُكَمْ
33 مَعَّلِبْ آراء نَحْفٍ أَنْتَانَهُ
34 تَناَتْتَ، وَحَنَّف أَوْسُكَنْتَ مَقَادِرَه
35 وَلَمْ يَحْتَمَّ أَسْبَابَهُ، وَأَوَاصْرُهُ يِجْوَدِهَا وَالْمَوْت حَمْرَةٌ أَظِفْرُهُ.
36 ليَحْنُي الأَعَادَ أَعْزَل اللَّيْل حَايرَهُ
37 ذَرَى القائِل العُجُلَ كَيْفَ أَساورُهُ
38 ذَا بِكَمْ يَجْرَى عَلَى الْأَرْض مَائِرَة
39 نَبْذَة الدَّهْر، وَالْمَرْتُو بَلَدُودُ وَاتَّرَهُ؟
40 فَمَن عَجْبَ أَنْ وَلَى الْعُهْدَ غَادِرَهُ؟
41 ولا حَمَلَت ذَكَ الدُّعاء مَناَرَةٌ
42 مِن السيَّدِيّة السَّيِّيَيَّة اِتْحَرَّيرة
43 هِمْ، وَرَجَحَ اللَّيْل سُوَى دِبَاجَةٌ
44 وَنَعَيَتْ تَحْتَ المُرْهَقَات وتَثَريَةٌ
45 إِلَى خَلِف مِن شَخْصٍ لَا يَتَغْرِيَهُ
46 إِذَا الأَخْرَجُ العُجُلَانَ خَيْفَت بِنَوادِرَهُ
Praise for Murder?

Panegyric of al-Muntaṣir

1 تَبِّأَمَ عِنْ وَاصِحٍ ذِی أَشْرٍ
2 وَهَنَّى هَیْرًا عَضُنٍّ الآرَا
3 وَمَا يُبَدِّدُ لَبَّ الْحَلِیمَ
4 وَمَا آَنَسْ لا آَنَسَ عَهْدُ الْمَبِیْسَ
5 كَوْاْکِ ۡمِنَ ۡعِلْقَةَ الصِّبَابَا
6 وَإِنَّى وَجَدْتُ فَلا تَكْذِبْنِ
7 وَلَا بُدْ مِنْ تَرْکُ إِلَی اِنْتَیْنِ
8 أَلَمْ تَرْ لِلْفَرْقِ كِیْفَ أَنْبِرْی؟
9 خَیالَ أَلَمُ لِیا مِنْ یَسُوْی
10 وَمَا أَرَادَتْ إِلَی مُخْرَیِ
11 سَرَّا مُوجِفِینَ لِسَعیَ الصَّفتَا
12 حَجَّنَتْهَا الْبَیْتَةُ مُکْرَأ لِیا
13 مِنْ الْحَلِیمِ عِنْدَ اِنْتَقَاسِ الْحُلُوْ
14 نَطْوَالِ بَالْعَدِی لَمَآ فَقَسَّبِ
15 وَدَامَ عَلَی خَلُقٍ وَاحِدٍ، جَیِلَ الْحَطَّرٍ
16 وَلَمْ یُسَبِّعَ فِی الْمَلِکِ سَعی أَنْرَا
17 وَلَا كَانَ مُخْلِفُ الْحَالَاتِنِ
18 لَیکُنْ مُقْصَدٍ كَأَنَّ الْعَمَا
19 تَلَاّفَ الْرَّءَیَةُ مِنْ ۡفِنْدَةِ أَظْهَرُوهُ لِیَلَّها المُتَمْکَرْ
20 وَلَمَآ آَذَلَهُمْ ۡیَبِیْرُهَا ۡبِذَلِیْجِهَا فِیا فَکَانَ الْقَمْرَ
21 بِحُرْمَ يَحْلِيّ الدِّجْيِيّ والغَمِّيّ، وعَشِّمُ قُمْيُ الصَّغَأ، والصَّعْرَ
كَحْلِيّ الخَلَاقَةَ حَتَّى أَسْتَمَرَّ
عَلَى كَاهِليّ المُلِكَ حَتَّى أَسْتَقْرَرَ
بِتَبِيكيّ الخُطْوَبِ، وَلَمْ يَقْتَزِرَ
يَدَالِكَ الحَقَّيّ لَمَنْ قَدْ فُهِّرَ
أَذِيٍّمُ بِبَيْسِيّمَهُ. فَأُعَرَّضَ
تَكَاذِكَ الْمُجْعَاءِ لِلَّهَا تَنْفَطْرَ
وَقَدْ أَوْسَعَكَ الحَذَلَ أَنْ يَتَبَيّنَ
وَصَفيَّتُ مَنْ يَشِيّبِهِمْ مَا كَئِرَ
هَا لَا عَنَّ نُأَا وَلَا عَنْ عُمْرَ
إِخْنَاوُتُكُمْ دُونَ هَا الْبُشْرُ
وَحَدَا حُسَاَمٌ قَدِيمٌ الْأَثَرُ
وَتَسَلَّى فَضْائِلُكُمْ فِي السَّوْرِ
وَارْكِيّ يَسَّدَا عَنْدَكُمْ مِنْ عُمْرٍ
لْ يُذْهَبَ التَّفَاصِيلِ دُونَ الْغَرْزُ
نُجْدَدَاً مِنْ نَهْجِهِمْ مَا ذَكْرُ!أ
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