COPYRIGHT OVERLEAF

Ph.D —— 1951

M. EL-KAFRAWY

ProQuest LLC.
789 East Eisenhower Parkway
P.O. Box 1346
Ann Arbor, MI 48106 – 1346

EL-KAFRAWY (M.A.A.)

Ph.D - 1951.

(Arabic Literature.)

Loan copy.

IN THE NAME OF GOD, THE MERCIFUL, THE COMPASSIONATE

UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

SCHOOL OF ORIENTAL AND AFRICAN STUDIES

A critical study of the poetry of

Isma'il b. Al-Qāsim known as

Abu'l-Atāhiya

A thesis submitted for the Ph.D.degree

by

M. EL-KAFRAWY

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I should like to express my heartfelt thanks to Professor A. GUILLAUME, D.D., M.A., for the encouragement and assistance which he has given me throughout this work.

I should like to thank the librarians also for their assistance.

The Author.

ABU'L-ATĀHIYA

In this thesis we have tried to throw new light on the life and poetry of Abu'l-Atāhiya.

The greatest event of his life took place in 180 A.H., when he deserted his post as court poet to Hārūn al-Rashīd. Thereafter, instead of composing love poetry for the Caliph, he devoted himself to writing about Death and similar gloomy themes.

Because, moreover, he put on the woollen garments of the ascetics, people thought he had changed his way of life as a result of his failure to win the hand of Otba, a slave-girl whom he loved.

Drawing support from our research, we have tried to show how his failure in love was only a single event in a long series of troubles and disappointments, which began early in his childhood and continued throughout his life. The main cause of all these troubles was his very humble lineage and the low place in society assigned to his father's profession, because of which people of more noble classes looked on him with disdain.

His sense of inferiority was deepened when his beloved Otba refused him on account of his origins. Life began to look futile for him. His dissatisfaction with the part that

Hārūn played in the love-affair increased his hatred of the aristocracy, and of Hārūn in particular.

Thus, when he composed poetry about Death or about the worthlessness of life, he was not inspired by ascetic feelings (though it has been said so by Nicholson, for example, in his "Literary History"). Rather he saw Death as the only power capable of bringing to an end the influence, luxury and glory of the haughty aristocracy and making them equal with the humble classes from among whom the poet had risen. By showing that the present life was worthless, he himself was helping to destroy the happiness of those who destroyed him.

Abu'l-Atāhiya's revolt against society might have been postponed or repressed, had not some of the political movements in the Caliphate at that time encouraged him for their own ends. In addition Zubaida, Hārūn's wife, was jealous of the slave-girls with whom the Caliph revelled, and so she too encouraged such expressions of revulsion.

After giving the circumstances of the poet's life their due, we have concluded with some literary criticism of his verses.

ABU ISHAK ISMAIL IBN AL-QASIM Known as ABU'L-ATAHIYA.

INTRODUCTION.

When Abu'l-'Alā'al-Ma'arrī wanted to quote from Abu'l-Atāhiya's verse, he always referred to our poet as "That crafty man Abu'l-Atāhiya."[1] This opinion of his character coming from so perspicacious a critic as al-Ma'arrī, should make us realise at the start what a difficult task awaits the biographer who would understand Abu'l-Atāhiya's real motives in life.

Abu'l-Atāhiya's career underwent two drastic changes. From being an earthenware-seller he rose to the position of a first-class poet. Later on, in 180 A.H. he was converted from a composer of panegyric and love poetry to an ascetic, disgusted with this World and concerned, or seemingly concerned, only with the Hereafter.

A very conspicuous feature of his character was his inconsistency. For instance, in his poetry he speaks of renouncing this World, while in real life he showed his continuing care for it by remaining notoriously avaricious till the end. He also set himself up as a champion of morals and an admonisher; yet he seldom practised the virtues that he advocated.

---

1. In the introductory formula: .....
Masālik al-Absār. p. 139.

These are but a few of the problems that confronted us in the course of our study.

For some reason our poet has never before been studied comprehensively. There are only fragments of his life-story in old books and modern ones; the most fruitful source being beyond doubt the 'Kitab al-Aghānī'. A few years ago a small[1] book was devoted to him, but it was mainly a repetition of what had been said before. We began our work by reading the Dīwān of the poet, and all that was written about him in the classical and modern books; but no satisfactory solution was found in any of these to the problems mentioned. Indeed a number of such problems were not touched on at all.

The most important event in his life, his apparent conversion to asceticism in 180 A.H., was regarded by both olden[2] and modern[3] critics as the aftermath of his being jilted by the slave-girl 'Utba, whom he had loved for years. The implication was that the sudden personal disaster was in itself sufficient to make Abu'l-Atāhiya sick of the Court, of his luxurious post

---

[1] by A. Barāniq

[2] Mas'ūdī vol 6 - p. 336. top.

[3] Nicholson L.H.A.P. 296.

as composer of love poetry for the Caliph, and of this Life in general, and to change his habits and to force him to give expression to austere and deep-felt piety. Such suggestions did not seem sound to us; not least, since the poet continued his search for money after that time as ardently as before it, and so it was ridiculous to regard the change that took place at that time as a conversion to true asceticism.

However, more help from the old authors was not to be expected. All of them were separated from our poet by more than a century. Furthermore, they were 'narrators', whose only concern was to collect anecdotes from every available source and to heap them together in one book: they seldom gave their own opinion on the problems raised by their information, or even tried to reconcile contradictory reports - let alone analyse them. For instance, the author of the 'Kitab al-Aghānī mentions in one[1] place a report, given on the authority of Abu'l-Atāhiya's son, that the poet's family was connected with the tribe of Anaza by blood; which would mean that the family was Arab. Yet in another[2] part of the same work is given a verse in which the

---

1. Aghānī vol. 3 p. 127 (top)
2. ibid vol. 16. p. 149 (middle)

poet himself admits in plain language that he is a non-Arab. The author of the 'Aghānī' does not refer at either point to which he has said at the other r----- a carelessness that misled[1] a scholar as great as Nicholson, as will be seen in due course.

But in spite of this drawback, the old compilations were of the utmost value to us, because they are accurate in relating the big events in the poet's life to the times and occasions when they took place. For example, the accuracy with which they give us the date of the poet's conversion to 'asceticism', 180 A.H., proved to be vital for our investigation. Without such accuracy it would have been extremely difficult for us to notice the role that politics played in much of the poet's life, or their contribution to this particular drastic change.

The modern critics, who mainly followed the old Arabic authors, were not of great help either. The trouble was that they had not had enough time to unravel the contradictions and look for more than met the eye.

Having failed to find in previous works a satisfying answer to the many questions that arose after our first glance at the

---

[1] In his book L.H.A. he regards our poet as an Arab, p.296

poet's life and poetry, we decided that it was necessary to go deep into the background of Abu'l-Atāhiya's personal career, as well as the whole environment of his class and profession. In so doing, we studied his family and its social position; we also studied conditions at Kūfa, where he was brought up, to find the possible effects of these on his formative years. The investigation proved very profitable, because it uncovered the deep roots of many changes and tendencies that showed themselves clearly only later in his life. Without such a study, we would not, for instance, have become overwhelmingly aware of his sense of inferiority, and his hatred for the aristocracy, both of which motives provoked and inspired a large proportion of his poetry. Therefore the first chapter of this thesis will be devoted to exposing this background.

The second chapter will be concerned with his unsuccessful love. A proper consideration will be given to two points: first, why the affair came to an unhappy end, and which of the two parties, he or 'Utba, was more to blame; second, to what extent his failure in love really contributed to his conversion to 'asceticism'.

It is the reasons for that, the outward sign of the most

important crisis in his inner life, which we shall try to explain fully afterwards. We have come to the conclusion that he was heading for the change for a long time. Nor was 'Utba's refusal even the sole IMMEDIATE cause of it. Rather it was the anti-Barmakide movement, led by Faḍl b. Rabi', simultaneously with the intrigues instigated by Zubaida out of jealousy of Hārūn's slave-girls, which encouraged the poet to take that turn. We shall take pains in this Chapter to prove our hypothesis at some length.

In the fourth Chapter we shall try to show how Abu'l-Atahiya's poetry itself reflects the course of events as we would explain them.

The last part of the thesis will be given up to criticism of his poetry as literature.

CHAPTER ONE: INFLUENCE OF EPOCH AND ENVIRONMENT.

I.

In the year 130 of the Hijra within the epoch that witnessed the downfall of the 'Umayyad Caliphate and the establishment of the Abbasids, a child was born to a humble couple of Kufa, in Iraq. This child was destined to become a poet, and to reflect in his poetry the evils of the troubled times through which he lived.

Of all these troubles the centre was his native town. The Kufa in the midst of which Abu'l-Atāhiya grew up was a distressed, oppressed and perplexed town. From the beginning of the conflict between Ali and Mu'awiya, Kufa had given its support to Ali's cause so unreservedly that he took it as the seat of his caliphate. Ever afterwards it was regarded as the stronghold of Shiism.

How reluctant the inhabitants of Kufa were to endure the authority of the Umayyads, and how long they suffered for their opposition, may be realised from a consideration of the following list of serious disturbances that took place in Kufa or near it during their rule:

the war with Ali against Mu'awiya we have already mentioned;

[1] the murder of Husain b. Ali on his way to Kufa (61 A.H.- 680)

---

[1] Encyclopaedia of Islam vol. II (part 1) P.339 - (top)

[1]its revolt (66 A.H.) under the leadership of Mukhtār, followed by war between Mukhtār and Mu'sab b. Zubair resulting in the defeat of Mukhtār.

[2]the revolution of ibn al-Ashath (ابن الأشعث) killed 83 A.H.

[3]the crucifixion of Zaid b. al-Husain; 121 A.H.

[4]the murder of Hujr b. Adi, along with some of his followers (51 A.H.) for their fanatical support of the Alid cause.

The great enthusiasm with which the Kufans fought for the cause of the Alids, can be better understood if we recall that a great proportion of the Kufans were 'clients'[5] (موالى) Those Mawālī joined the ranks of the Shiites in the hope of destroying a dynasty that they saw as the champions of Arab aristocracy. No wonder then that Kufa supported Ali, when half its population were Persian 'clients'. The very principle of electing a prophet's successor was beyond their experience and understanding: the only succession they recognised was that by inheritance, and since Muhammed had left no son it was clear to them that his son-in-law Ali had every right in support of his claim.

---

1. Encyclopaedia of Islom Vol. 111 (part 2) p. 715
2. Al-Khudarī Vol. 1 p. 542
3. Encyclopaedia of Islam Vol. 1V (part 2) p 1193
4. Tabari 2nd series. 1 p. 111
5. Nicholson Literary H of the Arab p. 219 London 1907

So much for the fortune of the Kufans under the Umayyads; it was hard enough. Yet under the Aboasids undoubtedly they fared worse. Perhaps most bitter for the people was the discovery of how they had been deceived by those they had helped to power. The Aboasids, in the days when they were building up their movement and needed to rally the support of every party of opposition, used remarkable political astuteness and cunning in disguising their own selfish interests. Far from advocating revolution to bring themselves the government, they accepted in their propaganda, sometimes unreservedly, that the Alids had precedence over them for the caliphate. Khudarī[1] reports that even Mansūr at one stage of the campaign went so far as to pay allegiance to the Alid leader Muhammed b. Abdullah having designated the latter to be first caliph of the new regime upon the expected downfall of the ruling dynasty. The difference between such promises and the treatment meted out in the event to Muhammed b. Abdullah together with his brother Ibrāhīm and nearly all their

---

1. Muhādrat vol. 2. p. 60 Egypt 1934

relatives is a measure of Abbasid duplicity. Suffice it to tell how the frail and aged father of Mohammed and Ibrāhīm, likewise uncles and cousins, thirteen in all, having been imprisoned for years[1] at Medina, were carried from thence with chains about their[2] necks and mounted on bare-backed[3] camels, to Kufa, where they were shut up in the palace of [4] Ibn Hubaira. Some of them died in prison, perhaps by poison[5], some were flogged[6] to death and another was buried alive[7].

With surprise and regret at first, the people of Kufa saw that the dream they had long cherished of an Alid caliphate was not to come true. Still the disappointment might have passed had the Abbasids taken some pains to reconcile their cousins honourably. Manṣūr, however, showed no more respect for the common sympathisers with the Alids than with the leaders. His attitude to the Kufas is clearly expressed in one of his speeches:[8]

---

1. Tabarī Vol. 3 p. 169F (bottom)
2. ibid p. 174 (top
3. ibid p. 187 (bottom)
4. ibid p. 183 (top)
5. ibid p. 185 (middle)
6. ibid p. 177 (middle)
7. ibid p. 182 (bottom)
8. Khudorī Vol. 2 p. 69

> "After him [1] came Hussain, who was abandoned by the people of Iraq and of Kufa, who are accustomed to practise sedition, hypocrisy and revolution. Such are the inhabitants of this black town. By God, it is not openly at war with me, so that I might take action against it; nor is it at peace with me, so that I might be at peace with it. May God put a barrier between it and me."

The Caliphs of the new regime were turning out to be more unscrupulous and cruel than their predecessors. Someone horror-struck by the excesses of their repressive government, exclaimed to Abbas b. Salm, who was commissioned by Mansūr to kill Kufans treacherously[2] at night.[3]

> "By God, had your father left you nothing but the finger-rings of the Kufans he (Salm) killed, you would be one of the richest people in the world."

The sufferings, the blood and tears the Kufans had shed in the struggle, had been worse than in vain: now they dared make no firm stand against the turn of events, living as they were in fear of the loyal and powerful army the Abbasids had brought with them from Khorāsān. Nevertheless, there were

---

1. Al-Hassan b. Ali
2. Tabari Vol. 3 p. 294 (middle)
3. ibid

not wanting obvious signs of the resentment and hostility that the Kufans bore towards Manṣūr. He is said to have built Baghdād so as to live far from Kufa, where he feared[1] assassination. According to Ṭabarī the inhabitants corrupted[2] the morale of his armies. The revolt of Iraq under Ibrāhīm b. Abdullah and his death on the battlefield a few months after that of his brother Muhammed at Medina, made a deep impression on the people of the country, and of Kufa in particular[3] For repeated failure has serious psychological effects: either it makes people pessimistic, sullen and vengeful; or else they become dissolute and irreligious. It follows that it was just these moods that swayed the Kufans, sweeping some of them to extremes of hopelessness and turning them into mystics and ascetics; forming in others a mocking and unscrupulous attitude to affairs, and leading them to dissolute lives.

The former group was composed largely of the frustrated

---

1. ibid p. 272. (top)
2. ibid (middle)
3. ibid. p. 293. It is stated here that during the battle Kufa was like a boiling cauldron.

and revengeful Shia, who had suffered always, at the hands of both Umayyads and Abbasids. The path they took was followed also by extremists of the opposite wing, the orthodox pietists, who were disillusioned by the failure of the Abbasid caliphs to restore religion to the public pre-eminence and respect it and enjoyed in the 'Golden Age' of early Islam. Moreover the manner in which alleged enemies of the new regime were treated shocked even the orthodox.

The sceptics and dissolute were represented by such poets as Mutia b. Iyas[1] Waliba and the three[2] Hammads[3]. All these lived most of their lifetime in Kufa, at the end of the Umayyad and the beginning of the Abbasid eras.

At this very time Abu'l-Atāhiya began to open his eyes on the world and become conscious of life and enquire what it was all about. He was born one year before the collapse of the Umyyed Caliphate. This meant that the repercussions of the war between Umayyads and Abbasids, the

---

1. Nicholson (L.H.A.) p. 291
2. Aghānī Vol. 5. p. 100 (top) and Vol. 16 p. 148.
3. Al-Jahiz in Al-Hayawān mentions many others beside these: Vol. 4. p. 143 (middle. Egypt 1323 A.H.)

consequent struggle between Manṣūr and his uncle Abdullah b. Ali, between Manṣūr and Banu Hassan, and the death of Abu Muslim through treachery - all these ugly events took place before he was fifteen years old. We have given above a sketch of the prevailing spirit at Kufa during those years. The two intellectual groups we pointed out, the pessimistic Alids and orthodox pietists on the one hand, the dissolute poets on the other, both put their stamp on his mind while he was still young; the influence of one or the other on different occasions throughout his life may be seen in his mood, conduct and poetry. In the early years of his career as a poet the influence of the dissolutes of Kufa, (the poets Bashshar b. Burd, and the three Hammads) is obvious, especially in his satires. At that stage he was also affected by the company he kept at Baghdād with the ghilmān, a numerous class of effeminate youths; when he was asked why he mixed with them he[1] said he did so in order that he might acquire their artful ways of

1. ~~ibid~~ Aghānī Vol. 3 p. 128 (bottom)

deceiving people, and Ahmad b. Ammār describes him as carrying round a type of basket peculiar to the ghilman in order to pick up their manner of speaking. Only later in life was the impression made on him in his youth by the pessimism of the age, stored meanwhile among his inward feelings, stirred up again by other personal experiences and brought to the fore.

II

When we begin to investigate Abu'l-Atāhiya's more immediate surroundings, in particular when we try to trace his family origins, we are faced with several contradictory statements and allegations. In the first place there is complete agreement in all the sources that the family was connected with the Arab tribe of Anaza. The way Abu'l-Atāhiya's son put it, according to a passage in the Kitab[1] al-Aghānī, was that the connection was a blood relationship. The son claimed that his ancestor Kaisān was an orphan cared for by

---

1. ibid Vol. 3 p, 127 (~~bottom~~) top

an 'Anazite relative after he had been captured by Khālid b. Walīd in the Ridda War. Later Kaisān was given to 'Abbād b. Rifāa the 'Anazite, who set him free, so that thereafter he remained 'Abbād's 'client'. But Abu'l-Atāhiya himself when he said that he was a mawla, meant he was a NON-ARAB client; this is quite clear from the following verses:[1]

> O Waliba, among the true-blooded Arabs you are
> like poor-quality
> dates in the midst of fresh and tender ones.
>
> Come and be welcome among the upright 'clients',
> For by God you are more like us than you are like
> the Arabs.

In the final verse he has identified himself with the mawālī AS OPPOSED TO the Arabs. This statement is so clear and unequivocal that no further proof of his origin is needed.

There need be little difficulty in explaining why Abu'l-Atāhiya's son should claim Arab lineage, a matter so important in the society of his time. Only through the poet and his son had the family emerged from the utmost obscurity and degredation; both were 'self-made men' who had greatly

---

1. ibid Vol. 16 p. 149 (middle)

improved their social standing, but their lack of a proper pedigree was bound to tell against them still. Therefore the son, like many another mawla in his position, took to counterfeiting a blood relationship with a respectable Arab tribe. Abu'l-Atāhiya, however, was more perspicacious and knew it would look ridiculous to make such a claim. He was satisfied to admit unashamedly that he was a non-Arab, so long as he was not further insulted by being classed as a Nabataean.

At this latter accusation he balked, for the Nabataeans were in those days notorious and much maligned for having lost all independence and esteem as a community. They engaged in sedentary agriculture[1] and trade, occupations looked down on with scorn by the Arabs of desert stock. Furthermore they were reputed to be avaricious. Since Abu'l-Atāhiya's origins were in any case obscure and his early circumstances known to have been poor, the aspersion was easily made, for instance by the butcher whose story is

---

1. Encyclopaedia of Islam Vol. 3. Pt. 2. p. 802 (middle)

related in the Aghānī.[1] Indeed we have no conclusive proof to the contrary, only the record of the poet's[2] anger at being so called; and he is deemed to have been a Nabataean by Taha[3] Hussain among modern critics. There are some lines, written by our poet in his old age when he had donned the garment of the ascetic, in which he sympathises with the Nabataens to the extent of hoping for their equality with other superior classes, a sentiment that may possibly amount to a further admission:[4]

> "In the hereafter you shall come to the real abode, because that in which you now dwell happily is only transient.
> A place, O you unfortunate, where all shall be on equal footing, whether aristocracy or Nabataean."

In any case it is sufficient for our study to conclude what one can with certainty, namely that Abu'l-Atāhiya was a client and a non-Arab. His son's pretensions, (although Nicholson apparently accepted[5] them,) could not stand up against the poet's own statement even if the poet had not further

---

1. Vol. 3. p. 127 (middle)
2. ibid
3. In his lectures at school of oriental and African study.
4. dīwān p. 142 V. 3.
5. L.H.A. p. 296 (top)

spoilt the former's case in advance by renouncing[1] his connection with 'Anaza and joining the tribe of Yazīd b. Manṣūr, Mahdī's uncle, as an expedient in time of danger. Had the family been related by blood with 'Anaza he could hardly have done this. The fact was that Abu'l-Atāhiya's status was that of a dependent person not enjoying equal rights with other members of his community, a man who rose from obscure and insignificant origins, wherein lay the cause of much that later troubled our poet's mind. His lack of respectable lineage burdened him with a sense of inferiority. It made him feel that a great divide was put between him and society, and filled him with hatred for the classes that called themselves his betters.

To illustrate further the poet's position in society, we must add a few words here about the status of the mawālī. These were the people who had no tribes of their own to protect them, either because they were non-Arabs, or because they had deserted from their original tribes for some reason.

---

1. Aghānī Vol. 3. p 141 (middle)

So from their need for protectors they looked for strong tribes or families with which to live in association. Sometimes these outcasts found their protectors readily, as in the case of slaves who were freed but stayed close to their former masters. But often protection was sold, and at a high price: the 'client' might have to serve his 'patron' for very little remuneration, or nothing at all, whenever called on. Plainly in no position to set up as equal and independent members of the community, these mewālī were bound to lose self-confidence and self-respect. Thus to contract such an association was simply to chose what seemed the lesser of evils in desperate circumstances: on the one hand to have 'protection' was a matter of life and death; on the other, in the words of Nicholson,[1] "the Mawālī were treated by their aristocratic patrons with contempt, and had to submit to every kind of social degradation."

Abu'l-Atāhiya was the 'client' of Mandal and Hibbān the

---

1. L.H.A. p. 248 (top)

sons some of Ali the 'Anazite. The sources do not say how or whether they were connected with 'Abbād b. Rifāa, who had set free our poet's grandfather, Kaisān, and taken him for a 'client'; but it seems likely that 'Abbād was the grandfather of Mandal and Hibbān and that the poet's family was connected with that of 'Abbād during the intervening generation.

'Abbād was too far removed from our poet to concern us further. About Mandal and Hibbān we should know that they were something of experts in Hadith. Mandal was accused[1] of differing from the recognised authorities on many points, and it was said one should treat with reserve the traditions he handed down. His elder brother Hibbān was even less[2] trustworthy as a Muhaddith. Al-Sam'ānī[3] and Ibn Hajar[4] say Hibbān was a Shiite. About Mandal's religion there is a difference of opinion: Ibn[5] Sa'd says he was a Sunnite, while Ibn Hajar[6] alleges he too was a Shiite. All authors agree, however, that Mandal was a very pious man.

---

1. Al-Sam'ānī (Al-Ansāb) p. 400 Back, bottom, London, 1912
2. Tahdhīb Al Tahdhīb Vol. 10 p. 298 (middle)
3. Al-Ansāb p. 401 (top)
5. Tahdhīb Al-Tahdhīb Vol. 2 p. 174 (middle) Hyderabad 1325 A.H.
5. Tabaqāt Vol. 6 p. 265 Leiden (1909 (botton)
6. Tahdhīb Vol. 10 p. 299 (top)

What strikes us is that both the brothers were suspected of being Shiites. The discrepancy noted above is understandable if Mandal was using 'taqiyya' (concealment), a common expedient to avoid the notice of government agents. When people were warned not to accept with confidence 'hadith' that the brothers narrated, it may have been because they used to alter the traditions to fit Shiite propaganda The views of his 'patrons' could not fail to affect Abu'l-Atāhiya, who certainly came to have Alid sympathies, and was even considered by some authorities to be a full[1] member of the Zaidiya sect (the Alids who followed Zaid b. Ali b. al-Hussain). Through Mandal and Hibbān his first ideas about Shiism must have reached him.

Once the Caliph Mahdī sent for the two brothers, and during the interview he asked which of them was Mandal. Why did Mahdī call them to Baghdād, and why was he interested in Mandal in particular? Was this call connected with the quarrel between Abu'l-Atāhiya and the Caliph over 'Utba, one of Mahdī's slave girls, whom our poet loved and celebrated in

1. Aghani Vol. 3 p. 128 (middle)

his verses against his sovereign's wishes? Did Mahdī warn Mandal and Ḥibbān, as the poet's 'patrons', to persuade him to cease mentioning the girl in his works? It would be no surprise if it were so, because it was these two who intervened in a similar case and brought it to a satisfactory[1] close. That was when Abu'l-Atāhiya attacked 'Abdullah b. Ma'n b. Zaīda on account of the latter's slave girl, another of the poet's loves. Apparently Mandal had more sway in these matters than his brother, which was why the Caliph wanted to rely on him personally to influence Abu'l-Atāhiya.

To return to the subject of Abu'l-Atāhiya's family: a disability that did much to add to our poet's sense of inferiority was the occupation of his father, who was a cupper.[2] This profession was generally looked down on as so degraded that even the jurists, who were supposed to legislate from the principle that all Muslims were equal, could not resist public opinion; and so they made it unlawful for the son

---

1. ibid p. 138 (middle)
2. ibid p. 127. (bottom)

of a cupper to marry a woman out of his class, unless the wife's family, who might be dishonoured by such a mesalliance, renounced their rights. This is only one example of the continual slights to which the cuppers were subjected. The effect on the minds of the members of that class must have been terrible.

Moreover the profession was by its very nature continually attendant at ugly sights and on sad occasions. As the Poet's mother used to help[1] her husband in his work, we may well imagine that much of their free time was spent discussing the various diseases and other forms of suffering to which the people of those days were exposed. Consequently the lives of all the family must have been disturbed by unceasing contact, direct or indirect, with pain, squalor and bereavement.

From an early age Abu'l-Atāhiya was put to selling[2] earthenware, to help out at home. He was kept far too busy to undertake the lengthy training usually required to develop

---

1. Ibid Vol. 16. 150
2. Ibid. Vol. 3. p. 127 (bottom)

the accomplishments of an Arabic poet. The would-be author was supposed to begin by studying thoroughly the classical language with its immense wealth of vocabulary. This he could do either under the supervision of a well-known philologist or better still by mixing among Arabs of the pure-speaking Bedouin tribes, whether in their desert encampments or at the great fairs of al-Mirbad and similar places. Thus, for example, we read that Bashshār b. Burd learnt the best of Arabic by living[1] among the Banū 'Uqail tribe; or that Abū Nuwās, who used to wander[2] in the lands of the desert nomads for the same reason, did not begin composing poetry of his own until he had learnt a great many of the masterpieces by heart, and even then he accompanied Khalaf al-Ahmar[3] for further tutoring.

Abu'l-Atāhiya began quite differently. He could not afford to travel into the desert, nor to study with a philologist and a poet. He had to be his own teacher, to rely for

---

1. Ibid v 3 p. 26 (top)
2. Nicholson L.H.A. p. 293
3. Ibid.

the most part on his innate talent. As his testimonial we might take the remarks of Ahmed b. Ammār:[1]

> Abu'l-Atāhiya came from among the humble, common people. His natural aptitude and talent was more effective (in his development as a poet) than his learning, since he was in his youth accustomed to mix with the humble folk, and he was reproached for doing so.

His poetry is obviously of a type that does not imply that its author had a background of regular education. There is no trace in it of the more complicated grammatical structures, nor the discoveries of erudite philology. In short our poet had a simple mode of expression, and his verse appealed to its audience not on account of precious language, but it overwhelmed their sentiments because it was in complete sympathy with the prevailing mood of the people and the undercurrants that flowed through every channel of the life of the times.

If this was the case and if Abu'l-Atāhiya was not destined from his childhood to be a man of letters, it is appropriate to ask why he changed his career later on from

---

1. Al-Muwashshah p 260 (middle) Egypt 1343 A.H.

that of an earthenware-seller to that of poet.

The basis of our answer must be: his whole frame and outlook of mind, moulded, warped and sharpened as it was by the oppressive circumstances of his life on which we have laid stress, was responsible. More compelling than all the other attractions of poetry was the chance it gave him to compensate in public for his strong inward feeling of inferiority. He had been dubbed 'Nabataean', and of course he was reviled more than once for being the son of a blood-letter. While he was still a young boy he could do nothing to cover up his shame; only weep and sigh. As soon as he grew a little older, he began to look round to find an escape from his misery, to remove himself from the causes of his shame. Selling earthenware was not much higher in the social scale. Then he began to ponder: if he were ever to be content and win self-respect, to forget his past and have others forget it, he would have to become a man of importance and renown. Yet how, when almost all the doors to high position in society and the state seemed firmly closed to people of his class? He was not the scion of a great family that he might place himself in the administration,

or become an army officer and thence perhaps rise to a governorship. He had no time to study to become a jurist[1], philologist or polished writer. He had no capital with which to set himself up as a merchant. Only poetry, whatever the obstacles that would still face him, offered the sought-for solution of his problem. Poetry was an art so highly respected by the Arabs, that those who excelled in it were acclaimed whatever race or class they sprang from; while at the same time innate talent and sensibility gave their possessor an advantage in its composition that no accident of noble birth or diligence of uninspired book-learning could confer. So Abu'l-Atāhiya began to envy the Poets and dream of becoming one.

However, no amount of enthusiasm or dreaming or even talent can by itself teach anyone the CRAFT of poetry. Fortunately for Abu'l-Atāhiya, besides the highly cultured verses of the famous authors, plenty of poetry of a popular

---

1. Note: These branches of study, apart from poetry, were the only fields left to non-Arabs who wanted to distinguish themselves. The administrative and military offices were monopolised by Arabs.

and occasional sort was to be heard on all sides in Kufa at that time; a period moreover when the 'classical' language was nothing like so corrupted in popular usage as it is to-day. Koran, as will be mentioned later on, was recited everywhere, and our poet took it for his model, and began to imitate its style. In that respect he reminds us of John Bunyan who was dependent in his literary study on the bible.

The earliest recorded verses by Abu'l-Atāhiya[1] are about death. No complete explanation is possible of why he began with this subject unless we bring in the well-known fact that he loved in his youth a mourning-girl[2] called Salma. Although she was probably pretty, most men would have been discouraged from courting her because of her occupation. But our poet had no social position to keep up. Moreover his natural humility and melancholy would be much to the fore in his character if we are right in thinking that he lost one or both of his parents about this time.

---

1. Aghānī Vol. 3 p. 149 (middle)
2. Ibid p. 137 (top)

Grief was the link that drew him and her together, their common preoccupation, so that the impression her mourning made on him was very deep. Not only did this influence affect his poetry from the beginning, but as his life wore on it appeared more and more.

His affection for Salma involved him in a quarrel with her master 'Abdullah b. Ma'n. The quarrel moved the poet to compose some satires[1] in which he humiliated 'Abdullah greatly and won a clear victory of prestige for reasons we shall return to discuss later. These were Abu'l-Atāhiya's first satires so far as is known. In such devious ways Abu'l-Atāhiya's first-love was his first inspiration.

---

1. Ibid p. 136. F

CHAPTER TWO: Abu'l-Atāhiya and 'Utbah.

Synopsis: Abu'l-Atāhiya went to seek his fortune at Baghdād. To draw the Caliph's[1] attention, he addressed love poems to 'Utaba, a Lady-in-Waiting to the Queen. Apparently Abu'l-Atāhiya was sincerely in love. 'Utba, though she rewarded the verses, meant only to use them as advertisements for herself in furthering her career at Court. So she kept Abu'l-Atāhiya's affection alive, but escaped behind the influence of her mistress when the Caliph urged her to marry the poet. Earlier the Caliph had banished Abu'l-Atāhiya to Kufa for his persistent indiscretion. On another such occasion, when the formal charge was heresy, he owed his life to the protection of Yazīd b. Mansūr, the Caliph's uncle. Because of these persecutions, and because he failed to see through 'Utba's subterfuges, Abu'l-Atāhiya held the Court and the Caliph

---

1. Tārīkh Baghdād Vol. 6. p. 256 (middle)

responsible for his failure. His embittered attitude towards ruler and regime was most clearly expressed at the time of Mahdī's death. Years later 'Utba still affected his emotions. For his failure in love, magnified by his lack of self confidence, became a symbol of his grievance against life and society.

I

After his victory of prestige over Abdullah Ma'n, Abu'l-Atāhiya began to take pride in his poetry and to feel a growing sense of his own importance. So he left Kufa for Baghdād to seek fame and fortune. In the city that was the great centre for the poets of the age, he became involved in a drama which, as he put[i] it in a verse, began in fun and finished in sorrow: the course and consequence of his love for 'Utbah, a slave-girl at the court of the Caliph Mahdī.

At first, however, he found only how hard it was for an inexperienced provincial poet to make a name for himself

---

1. Aghānī Vol. 3 p. 146 (middle)

in the metropolis. Meanwhile there was the further disadvantage that the cost of living in Baghdād was higher than in the smaller towns. So he retired[1] to Hīrā, in South Iraq, to stay and practise there until he felt his skill had improved enough to make a second attempt worth while.

On his return to Baghdād, though we must still imagine him as a poor and humble youth, he was determined to do better than before. He had two[2] friends, being all of them strangers in the teeming city, hired a room together near one of the bridges and its mosque. For days they loitered about in the hope of making helpful contacts, but nothing happened. Then, with the spontaneous daring of ambitious, foolhardy youngsters, they conceived the idea of addressing love poems to two slave girls of the Caliph's harēm, who were in the habit of visiting the bazaars, accompanied by a number of servants, on shopping errands for

---

1. Encyclopaedia of Islam Vol A. P. 79 by T. Oestrup.
2. Tārīkh Baghdād Vol. 6 Egypt 1931 p. 256

the Palace. One of the girls was called 'Utba, whom Abu'l-Atāhiya chose, while one of his friends took on Khāliṣa, the other girl.

Sometimes the maidens accepted the verses of their two new admirers, sometimes they pushed them away. In the end they were tempted to test the youths to find out whether they were really in love or merely after money: they offered them some money. Abu'l-Atāhiya's friend accepted the money, only to be beaten up and forced to leave Baghdād. But Abu'l-Atāhiya, who had entered the game with more serious aims in mind, did not accept. 'Utba was so pleased with his show of sincerity that she then presented him with a great sum of money to buy himself fine clothes and a donkey to ride.

The question remains, whether Abu'l-Atāhiya refused the first offer of money simply because he was more anxious for fame as one report[1] suggests. To be sure, there was no more likely way to reach all ears at court than to compose poetry

---

1. Ibid

celebrating the beauty of these girls. Vain and ambitious, they would know how to have such verses repeated, and incidentally would mention the author. Abu'l-Atāhiya must have been encouraged all the time by the common knowledge that Mahdī delighted in love poetry; for instance the Caliph was reputed to have commissioned[1] Bashshār b. Burd to write some for him. He is also reputed[2] to have taken pleasure in discussing sexual affairs with his companions.

But whatever the motive for which Abu'l-Atāhiya had first approached 'Utba, her present of money, or rather the sympathy it implied, must have been the first thing to deepen his affection for her. His love grew deeper still with time, until it had a great effect on his life and poetry.

---

1. Aghānī v 3 p 60 (middle)
2. Tabarī Vol. 3. p. 510 (top)

II

The question of 'Utba's attitude to Abu'l-Atāhiya is far more doubtful. Her behaviour as the affair developed looks strange and inconsistent; and only by studying the background of her life shall we come to appreciate her designs.

'Utba was very pretty, judging from Abu'l-Atāhiya's[1] poetry. Already her position in the palace was rather special since she was entrusted with these shopping expeditions. It appears from what will follow that she was a royal lady-in-waiting.

Among the Queens, her mistresses, was one, al-Khaizurān, who had begun her career as a slave-girl, like 'Utba herself. Thence, through her beauty and cunning, al-Khaizurān had risen to such power that her word could over-rule even the Caliph's In so doing, she had shared her luck with all her relatives: her brother,[2] once equally humble, became the

---

1. Aghānī Vol. 3. p. 148 & 151 (middle)
2. Two queens of Baghdad p 30-31

governor of a province; her sister married the Caliph's brother Ja'far; her niece Zubaida was the intended bride of Hārūn al-Rashīd; and another niece was betrothed to Mūsā al-Hādī, the heir-apparent. The lesson was plain: the Palace offered fabulous opportunities to those of its slave-girls who were clever enough to use them. After all, they were the centre of attraction; at that time it was enough for any one of them to catch the Caliph's fancy, or the Heir-apparent's, to become his concubine - Tabarī[1] reports that Hāran had about ten concubines from among his children by slave-girls.

These were the prospects that swelled 'Utba's hopes, al-Khaizurān was the example before her, when she met Abu'l-Atāhiya. At once she saw in him the means to realise her dreams: the one and only thing she needed for success at Court was to draw attention to herself; and nothing was better suited to make the Caliph[2] - and indeed the whole city - notice her charm, than lyrics written in her honour

---

1. Vol. 3. p. 758

2. The author of "Two Queens of Baghdād stated that the Caliph Mahdī had a weakness towards 'Utba. This might have been so, but by returning to the sources, we find that the author of "Two Queens..." was not accurate.

by an infatuated young poet. So while Abu'l-Atāhiya took 'Utba's gift as an open encouragement to love her sincerely, she for her part began to pursue him in accordance with a well planned policy: to keep the situation in hand, she pretended indifference when his ardour became too pressing; then, when he was on the point of giving up, she gave some sign to show she was still interested in him. All the time, the real purpose of her cat-and-mouse game was to keep him at work advertising her beauty in verse after verse.

Both sides of her policy are reflected in the poetry they inspired at the time. Here are some verses mentioning promises that, though unfulfilled, still gave Abu'l-Atāhiya reason to hope and write:

[1]"How many debts owing to us from (Utba) - as God knows - were not paid when they were due;

"She never in her generosity gave me a promise without she took it all back.

---

1. Branic, p. 97 Egypt 1947

"For what good and what use has a coquettish maid who pours the milk she has taken from the cow."

Besides such as these, there are lines clearly provoked by her indifference:

[1]"She begrudged me her love and sincerity, while I gave her my love and pure affection.

"So our passions were not in accord over our affair -- and death lies in discord of passions."

Sometimes she even went so far as to ask Abu'l-Atāhiya, indirectly, to use his art to make his love for her widely known; consider in this context the last line of the stanza -

[2]"I told 'Utba that because of her I was on the way to selling my blood cheaply.

"And I complianed to her of what I was suffering, while my tears were flowing freely.

"Until, when she grew tired of my complaint - as though someone quite insignificant was remonstrating -

"She said, "Well, who knows the truth of what you are saying?"

And I replied, "Everyone".

---

1. Tarikh Baghdad Vol. 6. p 253 Egypt 1931
2. Ibn Khallikān Vol. 2. p. 191 (Egypt)

The final proof of 'Utba's real intentions is her emphatic refusal to marry the poet even when she had the best of opportunities to do so. This occasion is described by the singer Yazīd Hawrā , who relates[1] as follows:-

> "Abu'l-Atāhiya asked me to plead his case (at court) but I dared not speak directly to the Caliph on this subject. I advised him, however, to compose a verse, which I would then set to music and sing before Mahdī. This was done, and the Caliph promised to help. A month went by, and then the eager poet repeated the appeal through the good offices of Yazīd. Mahdī now summoned 'Utba, told her the story, and asked what she wished to do - promising at the same time that he would show both (her and Abu'l-Atāhiya) great favour if she would accept the post. 'Utba asked leave to consult with her mistress Raita, (one of Mahdī's wives). Time pseed and nothing happened. The impatient poet once more reached the Caliph's ear with verse and song. 'Utba was recalled and questioned again. "I mentioned the matter to my mistress and she did not approve. Let the Commander of the Faithful do as he will," said 'Utba. Then Mahdī commented, "Certainly I shall not do anything she dislikes."

How typical of 'Utba's scheming! Instead of a blunt

---

1. Zahr at ādāb Vol 2 p 42 Egype 1931

refusal, which might have thrown Abu'l-Atāhiya into such despair as to cure him of love, she covered herself by using the authority of her mistress. We cannot agree with the suggestion put[1] forward in a recent short work on Abu'l-Atāhiya, that 'Utba loved him sincerely but refused to marry him lest the Caliph or her mistress be offended. Had it really been necessary to consult the queen, Mahdī would have done so before proposing the marriage, and if 'Utba had really loved Abu'l-Atāhiya, she would have jumped at her chance - for she could not be blamed for obeying the Caliph.

Eventually, there came an occasion when 'Utba was not able to slip out of her responsibilities in this manner, and she was forced to give a flat[2] refusal. To compensate Abu'l-Atāhiya and help him forget his disappointment, the Caliph ordered the Treasurer to fill a bowl with money and give it to the poet. Abu'l-Atāhiya was in despair, and so cherished the idea of taking the money. But he continued for a whole year to argue with the Treasurer

---

1. Barāniq p. 98 Egypt 1947
2. Ibn Khallikān Vol. 2 p. 192 Egypt

about the amount. The poet said the Caliph meant to give him gold, while the Treasurer said silver was intended. 'Utba's comment on the haggling was: "Had he really been in love with me, he would not have spent a whole year disputing the money and have ceased to mention me entirely," which we interpret as showing that she had not planned to threw him into quite such despair.

III

The most disastrous result of the affair with 'Utba was to make Abu'l-Atāhiya the enemy of the Caliph Mahdī and the whole Abbasid regime. Abu'l-Atāhiya had been on good terms with the Caliph from the time the poet recited in front of him the eulogy,

> "The caliphate advanced to him, with pomp and pride,
> Alone for him was it fit, he alone for it."

But when the poet began to bring the Caliph's name into his love-affair, the Commander of the Faithful remarked: [1] "Is Abu'l-Atāhiya going to flout me and interfere with my household women?" Mahdī took such offence at the

---

1. Zahr al-ādāb Vol. 2 p. 43 Egypt 1931

verse.

"A deer of the Caliph caught me, but I have no power to constrain the Caliph's deer" --- that he had Abu'l-Atāhiya flogged and exiled to Kūfa

In[1] Kūfa, the poet did not leave off mentioning 'Utba in his poetry, though he did so in a round about way. "Say to a certain person I shall not name: 'You are to me more than my father and mother.'"

In a similar verse he said:-

"My soul is in Baghdād, though my body is in Kūfa."

At the same time he managed to get in touch with the Caliph's son Hārūm[2] and asked him to intercede with his father, which Hārūn did with success. Very likely to Yazīd b. Manṣūr, the Caliph's maternal uncle, helped to bring about the reconciliation; certainly there is a flattering[3] reference to Yazīd in a eulogy Abu'l-Atāhiya recited very soon after returning to the Capital.

Later, Yazīd b. Manṣūr saved Abu'l-Atāhiya on an even less hopeful occasion. The Caliph is reported to have

---

1. Ibid p.44 (top)
2. ibid (middle)
3. ibid

warned the poet: [1]"Wretch, you are going to kill yourself." In response to what was tantamount to a royal command, Humdawih, who was in charge of the Inquisition of heretics, set out to [2]track Abu'l-Atāhiya down with the aim of having him killed. The charge of heresy was a common means of getting rid of people who displeased the Caliph; the case of Bashshār b. Burd is a good example. Meanwhile Abu'l-Atāhiya had quickly gone back to practising as a cupper. The self-humiliating move shows that Abu'l-Atāhiya was well aware of the real reason why he was being prosecuted: a cupper at that time was certainly not less likely than a poet to be suspected of heresy; but the socially degraded blood-letters were fit company for someone who wanted to clear himself of suspicion that he was vain enough to challenge the Caliph, or bold enough to interfere with the Palace women. At this point Yazīd b. Mansūr intervened on Abu'l-Atāhiya's behalf and saved him. Undoubtedly the poet owed his life to the fact that about that time he had renounced his connection with the Northern tribe of 'Anaza,

---

1. Zahr al-Ādāb Vol. 2 p. 44. Egypt 1931
2. Aghānī Vol. 3 p. 129

and joined the Yemenite one to which Caliph's uncle belonged. Since any injury to a 'protege' reflected disgrace on his 'master', Yazīd was bound to give protection. Abu'l-Atāhiya's verses[1] of gratitude to Yazīd show how narrow was his escape:

> "Were it not for Yazīd b. Mansūr, I would not be alive; it was he who gave me back my spirit (soul) when I was as good as dead.
> I was continually scared and afraid of the vicissitudes of Fortune until he - following God's will - removed what I stood in fear of."

Abu'l-Atāhiya did not forgive these incidents. 'Utba's excuses, which her lover unfortunately failed to see through, seemed to Abu'l-Atāhiya to imply the whole court was against him. In this manner 'Utba's irresponsible trickery widened his resentment until its object was the whole regime, and aristocracy as well.

Fear restrained the poet for a while, but even so his hatred showed itself from time to time in disguise. For instance, when Mahdī's daughter died, the poet recited a stanza[2] in front of the Caliph, the whole meaning of which was ambiguous:

---

1. al-Marzubānī p. 262 Egypt 1343 A.H.
2. Aghānī Vol. 3 p. 162 (middle)

"Consider day and night, whose alteration
never fails, and everything new that they
embrace decays and passes away.
O you who has forgotten his beloved one, you
too will be forgotten after your Death.
Your pleasures are all of them nothing but
a mirage.

"Don't let this World dupe you, when you
see so many warnings and examples there.
Every good deed - and that alone - is a
means to outwit Death. Otherwise there
is no stratagem in face of it for anybody.

at its face value it was a sermon enjoining the Commander of the Faithful to do good deeds before he was dead and forgotten in the grave; but to those who know how the poet looked on Death as a power to wipe out the upper classes, this stanza looks decidedly like an ill wish. When Mahdi himself died, Abu'l-Atāhiya was able to show his animosity more openly as can be seen in the following verse:-

[1]"They (Mahdī's household women) departed in
brocades and returned in sack cloth.
Every person who gores others will some day
be gored (by Death)
Weep for your own destiny, O wretch, if you
must weep at all.
It is certain that you will die, even if you
are given a life as long as Noah's."

---

1. Mas'ūdī Vol. 6. p. 226 (top)

It is almost certain that the verse[1]

> The Caliph died, O mankind and jinns, and
> it is as if I had broken my fast, during Ramadān."

was likewise compared on this occasion, since Abu'l-Atāhiya remained on good terms with Hādī, while our poet was too old for such reckless jesting by the time Hārūn died. (The author of a recent work on Abu'l-Atāhiya takes this line to mean that the poet was[2] feeling the sincere regret of a pious man who has sinned by breaking his fast before the right time. Mr. Baraniq therefore disapproves of the unconventional languages in which Abu'l-Atāhiya expresses his sorrow. But we see in this verse the humour of a man who was now free to enjoy himself and find new hope after a period of hardship and repression.)

IV

The fact that he was flogged, banished and imprisoned for indiscreet avowals of his passion, and that he still persisted to the point where his life was in danger, is proof enough that Abu'l-Atāhiya was sincere in his love for 'Utba.

After his seeming conversion to asceticism, the poet continued to remember her with tenderness. He used at that period to listen while his poetry about her was sung by the

---

1. Barāniq 183 Egypt 1947
2. ibid

great[1] Mukhāriq. Another anecdote[2] in the Aghānī tells how he asked a poet called Ibn Abi Umayya to recite some poetry for him; when Ibn Abi Umayya uttered the line:

> "I see that the days do not bring me nearer
> what I hope for from you; but they bring me
> nearer my appointed term."

Abu'l-Atāhiya repeated it over and over again, and, with tears in his eyes, embraced the reciter.

Even as late as the reign of Ma'mūn, Abu'l-Atāhiya could still be affected by her. There is a story[3] that tells how Fadl b. Rabī had asked him whether he still cared about 'Utba. Abu'l-Atāhiya replied vaguely. Then Fadl called 'Utba into the room. At this Abu'l-Atāhiya ran off in haste leaving his sandals behind him, a sign of his confusion.

Having seen how fickle was 'Utba's behaviour towards her admirer, and when we think how disillusioning her final flat rejection of marriage must have been, we cannot but wonder what was the psychological mainspring of such an intense and enduring passion as Abu'l-Atāhiya's. (As he himself said[4], he was not quite blind, in the end, to the cunning way she had treated him.

Once again the answer to a problem in Abu'l-Atāhiya's

---

1. Aghānī Vol. 3. p. 164 (bottom)
2. Ibid Vol. 3. p. 169 (bottom)
3. Two Queens of Baghdād p.158, Mas'ūdī, VII 84.
4. Tārikh Baghdad Vol. 6. p. 252 (bottom)

biography is to be found in the background of his life and the way that background affected his outlook permanently. The sense of inferiority with which he was burdened because of his humble birth was a factor to deepen his love for 'Utba from the moment she made some gesture of response. On the other hand his failure in love made an impression on him that was likewise deepened by his sense of inferiority, and was turned into a sense of grievance against life and society. As a result he no longer saw the problem of marrying 'Utba simply as one of having a certain girl or losing her; it became merged in the problem of the success or failure of his whole life — a problem to which his lineage, the unjust distinctions between classes of society, and Mahdī's undue punishment of him for his love, had already contributed. He put all his hopes of self-respect on his chance of winning something as worthy of a man's pride as 'Utba's love and her hand in marriage. His success in this was to compensate for all that had gone before in his life; his failure was therefore a final humiliation.

ABU'L-ATĀHIYA'S RELATIONSHIP WITH HADI

It may be asked, how Abu'l-Atāhiya dared to compose a malicious verse commenting on the news of Mahdī's death. But if we recall that the new Caliph was even more pleased at the death of Mahdī than Abu'l-Atāhiya was, this boldness at once ceases to be astonishing. It is well known[1] that Mahdī had set off at the head of a great army to reduct his disobedient son to submission.

Furthermore, our poet might have been paving the way for acquiring the patronage of Hādī, who was angry with him[2] for his close association with Hārūn, Hādī's rival brother during the reign of Mahdī.

Hādī was another who suffered from an early sense of inferiority. His upper lip is stated[3] to have been too short, so that when he was a young boy he had difficulty in making both lips meet. This defect, certainly, had a great part in shaping his character, with both good and bad effects on him. However, the records describe him as physically brave. They also credit him with self-assurance[4], energy, and resolution. It is certain that he was exceedingly generous.

Such a personality inspired a passionate desire to please

---

1. Tabarī Vol. 3. p. 523
2. Aghānī Vol 3. p. 152 (bottom)
3. Two queens of Baghdād p. 61, and Tabarī 3rd p 580
4. Ibid.

in the hearts of the poets of those days. Therefore, when he succeeded to the throne, Abu'l-Atāhiya immediately strove to gain his confidence and goodwill on the one hand; at the same time doing his best to escape any reprisal. There are some verses of Abu'l-Atāhiya that may indicate that Hādī did in fact threaten him on account of his previous association with Hārūn. Indeed such a leaning on Abu'l-Atāhiya's part would hardly be surprising: he found the Caliph and the Queen favouring Hārūn, and he, like any dependent poet, would be bound to follow in their steps. The supposition that Hādī may have threatened him is justified by these verses:[1]

> "Is there anyone to intercede for me with the Caliph
> so that he might save me from misfortune to come?
> In spite of my great hope, I am afraid, as if
> spears were levelled at my head.
> Mūsā is threatening me, blameless though I am - but
> is not Mūsā's forgiveness all-embracing?"

After a second, similar[2], stanza, Hādī relented and gave Abu'l-Atāhiya permission to enter his presence; whereupon Abu'l-Atāhiya recited a brilliant poem in honour of the Caliph. It begins like this:-

> [3]"What a pity it was such a short while that I
> enjoyed life between Al-Khawarnaq and Sadir..."

and most of the rest of it was devoted to wine and women. Alas, it would seem that the poem was deliberately cut short

---

1. Aghānī Vol. 3 p. 152 (bottom)
2. ibid p. 156 (top)
3. ibid

to avoid the anger of Hārūn, because the main purpose of eulogy, namely to enumerate the virtues of the Caliph, is not well served in the part we now know of. It is almost impossible that a shrewd poet like Abu'l-Atāhiya could have committed that blemish by negligence while he was bent in reconciling a proud and revengeful Caliph like Hādī. One of the few verses which escaped omission is quite significant:

> "Even before he was weaned, he was as wise and dignified as any grown man."

It thus refers to the very quality that made Hādī stand high above his brother Hārūn, who had been given to pleasure[1] up to that time. Even in the prime of his reign, Hārūn held Hādī to be the symbol of pride and dignity.[2]

On this occasion Hādī gave Abu'l-Atāhiya a generous reward, which encouraged him to further attempts. A good chance presented itself when a boy was born to Hādī. Then Abu'l-Atāhiya, forgetting his past days in the company of Hārūn, and not knowing that Hādī's reign was all too soon to end, threw himself unreservedly into Hādī's circle. Some passages in his congratulations on the birth of the new prince could not but provoke Hārūn:

---

1. The author of "Two queens of Baghdād" stated that he was about to renounce his claim to the throne and retire to his harim in order to enjoy the company of Zubaida p. 138.
2. Aghānī Vol. 17 p. 80

[1]"Mūsā has increased the anger of his envious
rivals but brightened the world by his children.
His stock has given us, O lord, as proud as his
forebears.
The earth blossomed at his birth, and this event
augurs well for the kingdom.
I can see him soon riding among his followers and
generals,
In a great procession with fluttering banners
around him, an army that covers the earth."

When we recall that Mahdī intended to replace Hādī by Hārūn, and that Hādī later on tried to nominate his own son as the heir-apparent, it is unmistakable that the "envious rival" to whom Abu'l'Atāhiya refers in the first verse quoted above, was Hārūn.

In doing this, Abu'l-Atāhiya allowed himself to appear unfaithful and short-sighted. In explanation it must be said that Hādī, even after allowing Abu'l-Atāhiya into his presence, did not necessarily accept the poet as a partisan wholeheartedly. Therefore Abu'l-Atāhiya had to prove his sincerity to Hādī with a libel by which he would be cutting himself off from Hārūn for good. To prove that Hādī was not completely reconciled towards Abu'l-Atāhiya, we adduce the verse:-

[2]"O Trustee for God, what has happened to me nowadays?
I do not know;
I have not received gifts from your generosity as others
have done.
You fulfil your royal commitments, and distribute money
right and left,
But I am left poor, and you do not pity my poverty."

---

1. ibid Vol. 3 p. 153
2. ibid Vol.3 p. 162

HĀRŪN'S REIGN

By the untimely death of Hādī, Abu'l-Atāhiya faced the same problem that had troubled him at his accession, namely a new and dissatisfied Caliph. After the unpleasant insinuation mentioned before, it was to be expected that Hārūn would revenge himself upon the poet as soon as he came to the throne; and this he actually did.

It is stated[1] that Hārūn sent Abu'l-Atāhiya and Ibrāhīm al-Mawsilī to prison soon after he succeeded his brother. The trouble is said to have come about in this way:

"When Hādī died, Hārūn said to Abu'l-Atāhiya, 'Compose some love poetry'. But he answered, 'I am not going to compose any poetry now Hādī is dead.' Then Hārūn ordered him to be imprisoned. Hārūn also ordered Ibrāhīm al-Mawsilī to sing for him; but Ibrāhīm refused to do so, because Hādī had been generous to both Abu'l-Atāhiya and himself. Then Hārūn ordered him to be imprisoned with Abu'l-Atāhiya and said to them, 'You will not be released from this place unless one of you composes a good verse and the other puts it to music.' They bore it for some time; but in the end Abu'l-Atāhiya said to al-Mawsilī, 'How long shall we argue with the Caliph? Let me compose a verse, which you might set to music.' Then he recited: 'It is a pity that one who loved me, and whom I held as dear as my father, has forgotten me. O you family of 'Abbās, there is a King amongst you who is the source of all generosity and good deeds; Hārūn is entirely good; all evils disappeared on the day when he was born.'"

This report can not be accepted as it stands. To say that Abu'l-Atāchiya and al-Mawsilī refused to compose poetry in honour of the Caliph or to sing it, is to propose something incredible. To be asked by a Caliph to compose poetry was

---

1. ibid Vol.3 p. 162

a great honour and favour. Why should Abu'l-Atāhiya refuse? It is alleged that he refused because he owed so much to Hādī, and he did not want to compose poetry after he had died. This is all the more incredible, since it would imply that he was at heart a fanatical supporter of Hādī, and that al-Mawsilī was likewise. After examining the background of the whole affair carefully, we would say rather that Hārūn cast them both into prison because of their close association with Hādī, though it was purely self-interested in the manner we have explained.

It seems that Hārūn was very sensitive about the question of the succession to the throne. For instance, at the start of his reign he even killed[1] Abu Ismah because while the latter was acting as a guard to Ja'far (Hādi's son), he met Hārūn going across a bridge and said to him, "Let the Heir-Apparent pass first." It was, then, impossible that he could forgive Abu'l-Atāhiya's disloyalty[2], let alone ask him to compose poetry. The simple fact remains that Hārūn was annoyed about Abu'l-Atāhiya and al-Mawsilī's unfaithfulness and prejudice, and took revenge on them. However, after some time they were released on account of the verse just quoted.

Apart from the temporary disagreement that took place between Hārūn and Abu'l-Atāhiya, the accession of the former

---

1. Tabarī Vol. 3 p. 602
2. which showed itself at the birth of Hadī's son.

to the throne meant certainly the revival of Abu'l-Atāhiya's love for 'Utba which we will discuss soon

CHAPTER 3: A NEW LIFE AND A NEW POETRY

We have been at pains to show that the change that occurred in the poet's life in 180 A.H. was not the result of a single[1] event, but the consequence of various factors combined together. Some of these factors can be traced back to a very early date, even to his childhood. 'Utba's refusal of marriage was only the last straw.

In dealing with this controversial subject, we would like to divide our discussion into two chapters. The first will be devoted to establishing our theory of why and how the change took place; and the second will be concerned with explaining how closely his poetry during that period was reflecting his thoughts and grievances.

In the first chapter we referred both to the general and immediate environment of the poet, and showed that in both respects it was extremely depressing. The bloodshed taking place in Kufa during the Umayyad and Abbasid ages, together with the ugly sight of blood involved in his father's occupation, must have left a deep and unfavourable impression on the mind of the poet during his early childhood. Now, it is generally agreed that this period is of incalculable importance in moulding the temperament of a person and deciding his future. It is said that the experiences we go

---

[1] i.e. 'Utba's refusal to marry him as it was suggested by Nicholson in his book L.H.A. p. 296 and Mas'ādi Vol. 6. p. 336 (top)

through at that early age sink deep into our unconscious mind to be reflected in our emotions and prejudices later in life, making some people happy and others miserable. No doubt the seeds of the pessimism that showed itself afterwards, were sown in the poet's mind as soon as he was capable of intelligent feeling.

Also in the first chapter we spoke about Abu'l-Atāhiya's lineage, and showed how humble and insignificant it was, and how this unenviable social position was made worse by his father's profession of cupper. The effect of such a position on Abu'l-Atāchiya must have begun immediately after he had left the arms of his mother and begun to mix with other youngsters in the streets of Kufa. In a highly civilized country, where democracy has given all people equal opportunity, and where every infant has his manufactured toys to play with, it may be difficult to imagine any violent social friction between children; or between parents on account of their offspring. But in less organised communities, where children have no means of passing their time except in intercourse with one another, it is a different matter. Disputes are always occurring between children for one reason or another, and lead often to the heated interference of their families. In such quarrels Abu'l-Atāhiya and his humble parents must have been at a considerable disadvantage. The question of their obscure lineage and outcast profession must

have been raised many a time on such occasions; for, pity though it is, in the midst of quarrels the question at issue is frequently left aside, and people turn instead to personal insults.

A good example is provided by the fight[1] that took place between the then young Abu'l-Atāhiya and a certain butcher, who wounded him, and offended him by calling him a Nabataean. The helpless poet resorted to the protection of his guardians Mandal and Ḥibban, without even waiting to staunch his blood, asked them to define his position in the tribe to make it clear whether he was a Nabataean or not. He declared that he would wander aimlessly in the world if that shame were not removed. The fact that his mind was thus distracted from his wound, shows how sensitive and weak he was on the question of lineage. Furthermore, it confirms the theory that the poet's sense of inferiority on account of his lineage rooted itself in his mind from an early date. But his sense of inferiority with regard to his own family must have been accompanied by an ever-rankling feeling of envious hatred for his betters, those who claimed to be his superiors, and who insulted[2] him on account of his birth. All this was added to his already established pessimistic outlook on life.

Abu'l-Atāhiya, who was obviously an intelligent and

---

1 Aghānī Vol. 3 p. 127
2. Ibid. p.178 (top).

ambitious man, decided to shake off all traces of his humble origin. The profession of earthenware-seller, which he adopted before he was old enough to see prospects of anything else, was not much better than that of his father. Nothing short of becoming a famous poet could extricate him from his difficulties. He hoped that as a successful poet he could gain universal esteem, and thus wipe out the humiliation of his base birth. This dream was not, however, entirely realised. His rivals spared no efforts to taunt him where he was most[1] vulnerable. They also made fun of the new nick-name Abu'l-Atāhiya[2] given to him by Mahdi. And so instead of obliterating the memory of his origins, his very success in poetry caused it to be brought to the fore. Consequently his sense of inferiority continued to be fostered and was given a new lease of life.

His love for 'Utba made the greatest contribution to the intensification of both his sense of inferiority and his hatred of the aristocracy. As we said before, the poet was unaware of the way in which 'Utba was using him as a means of celebrating her beauty in the palace. The parts played by the Caliph and the Queen in the affair not only alienated the poet from the royal couple, but it brought afresh to his

---

1. An example of this is to be found in Aghānī Vol. 16. p.150
2. This nickname implies accusation of madness. Lisān al-Arab Vol. 17 p. 407 (bottom)

memory all the bitter experiences that he had undergone at the hands of the haughty nobles, and so he covered the whole class of them with his indignation.

How his sense of inferiority must have nagged him over the question of 'Utba! What made her look upon him disdainfully and cause her to waver in her love for him? Was it his previous work as an earthenware-seller and his father's work as a cupper? Nothing else could have made a strikingly successful poet like himself unworthy of the hand of a slave-girl. 'Utba's reference[1] to the unpleasant facts when at last she refused him more frankly, is an indication of what was going on in her mind and his for a long time.

It was at this point[x] that the first warnings of the change that was to occur in full in 180 A.H. showed cautiously Indeed had it not been for fear of death at the hands of Hamdawaih, the whole event might have taken place in Mahdī's reign instead of later. During that reign the poet was inspired twice, if not more[2] often, to compose some verses with the same tone as the poetry that he later devoted himself to under Hārūn.

The first outburst was provoked when Mahdī ordered[3] his ex-minister Abū 'Ubaid Allah to be humiliated by being dragged

---

1. Ibn Khallikān Vol. 2 p. 192, Egypt.
2. The verse which he composed on the Death of Mahdī can be regarded as another example of such early poetry concerning Death. Supra - p- 46.
3. Aghānī Vol. 3. p. 154 (top)

x her refusal to marry him and Mahdi's threat to have him killed

along the floor by his feet towards the prison. The poet, who was present, recited this verse: "The more wealth and eminence people get in this world, the more they become involved in trouble. The world humiliates those who prize it and gives honours to those who are indifferent, When you do not need a certain thing abandon it, and cherish only what you need most." This is the first recorded poetry of Abu'l-Atāhiya to reveal his malicious contempt for the aristocracy. Abu 'Ubaid Allah was a proper example of the disdainful class whom Abu'l-Atāhiya hated so much,[1] and so the embittered poet grasped this chance to revenge himself in some measure on that class at the expense of the unfortunate minister.

The other occasion was at the death of Mahdī's daughter.[2] The poet found in that event an opportunity to bring the Caliph to his senses by reminding him of his end, when he would be deserted and forgotten, without luxury or glory around him. We have mentioned these verses before:[3] their style is typical of Abu'l-Atāhiya's verses on Death recited later on in front of Hārūn,[4] or before his son Ma'mūn. They are made to look like a sermon, but nevertheless ill wishes lurk through out.

---

1. The great conspiracy that Rabi' b. Yunus stirred up against Abu 'Ubaid Allah, was provoked by the latter's arrogant treatment of Yunus. (Tabarī - III - p. 489)
2. Aghānī Vol. 3 p. 162 (middle)
3. Supra p. 54. 46
4. his diwan. p. 92 and p. 53.

In spite of occasional verses like these, Mahdī's reign passed without serious change in the poet's life.

It looks quite astonishing that the change should in the event have taken place after ten years service at Hārūn's court. One might expect that the Court poet, who kept the company of his patron both at home and in travel, and who received from him a great[1] sum of money, would have been happy and in complete harmony with his sovereign. It does not appear to have been the case: on the contrary, the poet had been disappointed by a patron from whom he justifiably expected more than he received.

Our poet was connected with Hārūn for a long time before the latter's accession. It seems that the relationship between them in Mahdī's reign was so intimate; when Abu'l-Atāhiya wanted someone to plead his case with Mahdī, he found no one closer to him to do so than Hārūn.[2] That early association was on account of Abu'l-Atāhiya's love poetry for 'Utba - poetry which seems to have met all requirements of the royal prince, who was at that time in romantic mood. The recitation of these verses associated him sentimentally with the poet and gave him much pleasure and comfort. Indeed nothing shows the extent of such comfort better than the

---

1. Aghānī Vol. 3 p. 157 (bottom)
2. Zahr al-ādāb Vol. 2 p. 44

report saying that the Caliph once ordered the poet to be brought from prison to recite[1] his stanza which reads:

> "O, 'Utba, my mistress, do you not believe
> in any religion? How long will you hold my
> heart to ransom?
> I am ready to endure humbly and willingly all
> the suffering you are causing me. I am wretched,
> miserable and poor.
> Nowadays I comfort and console all who weep;
> I am the companion and friend of all unfortunate
> lovers.
> No harm in that; it is rather comforting that
> I meet sad people like myself.
> O 'Utba, where can I go to escape from you?
> I am wrapt in my thoughts as if I were shut in
> a castle."

Hārūn who gave the poet fifty thousand dirhams, must have been aware of the sense embodied in the third and fourth lines: namely that the poet, by his love poetry, was easing Hārūn's troubles over love.

It was not only this old association which gave the poet reason to expect help from the Caliph in his love affair: during his actual reign Hārūn was no less in need of Abu'l-Atāhiya's lyrics. The beautiful singing and dancing girls were brought to the Court of Baghdād from every quarter of the Muslim world. Hārūn who was infatuated by them, could not express the thoughts that surged in his heart, yet he wanted to hear these thoughts embodied in verses and songs. On many occasions a romantic idea occurred to him and he

---

1. Aghānī Vol. 3 p. 158.

managed to compose one line about it but failed to complete it, and so he was in need[1] of someone to complete it on his behalf. This task was left to Abu'l-Atāhiya, for whom composing poetry was so easy that Bashshār b. Burd had said[2] about him: "It seems that Abu'l-Atāhiya picks his poetry from the opening of his sleeve". No doubt the sad and desperate air in Abu'l-Atāhiya's poetry, enclosed within its elegance and lucidity, made it very appealing to Hārūn.

Hārūn continued for ten complete years to enjoy the beautiful lyrics in which our poet poured forth his heart, and yet the Caliph gave him no real help in winning 'Utba. Hārūn went on gaining time by giving the poet unfulfilled promise after promise. The only recorded serious attempt by the Caliph to remedy the situation, met[3] with a refusal from 'Utba. The Caliph received this reply calmly, and regarded his job as finished. But the poet was far from being satisfied: he could not believe that the absolute Caliph, whose word was unquestionable, had been unable to over-rule the whims of a slave-girl. This meant for him

---

1. Aghānī Vol. 3 p. 162 (bottom) and 163 (middle)
2. ibid p. 154 (bottom)
3. Mas'ūdī Vol. 6 p. 335 (top)

that the Caliph had taken the whole matter lightly, and that after years of service and devotion Abu'l-Atāhiya was deemed unworthy of a single serious and firm stand, a move that could have changed the poet's whole life and given him peace of mind.

An impatient and prejudiced person like Abu'l-Atāhiya could not put up with such a situation indefinitely. He could not see Hārūn continuing to enjoy the exquisite lyrics occasioned by the poet's desperate love for 'Utba, yet remaining indifferent to his suffering.

Thus Abu'l-Atāhiya was looking for an escape from this irritation and was eager for the chance that was presented to him. In[1] 179 A.H. Fadl b. Rabi was appointed High Chamberlain in the place of Muhammed b: Khalid the Barmakide. This reshuffle meant that the Arab party at Court, whose leader Fadl was, was beginning to win power. From that date Fadl made it his only[2] concern to prepare and bring about the downfall of the Barmakides. His main weapons against them were slanders and plots, through which he hoped to alienate Hārūn from his established favourites. These were the methods that his father Rabi' had[3] used with success against Abu'Ubaid Allah, in the reign of Mahdi.

---

1. Encyclopaedia of Islam Vol. 1 part 2 p. 665 (top)
2. ibid Vol. 2 part 1. p. 36 (bottom)
3. Tabarī vol. 3 p. 489

Of course there were many things to give Fadl the opportunity for calumny: there were the Barmakide mansions, which resembled or[1] even excelled the royal palaces; likewise there were their large estates.[2] Fadl could stir up Hārūn's jealous suspicion of the Barmakides' unbounded generosity: let it be remembered that Caliphs always resented the generosity of their followers.[3] The affair of Yahya B. Abdullah, the Alid rebel, shows the great pains Fadl b. Rabi' was taking to watch every movement of his rival's: it was Fadl who discovered the release of Yahya,[4] through a spy who was working in Ja'far's house as a servant.

Nevertheless, it was not easy for Fadl to turn Hārūn against the Barmakide family, since Ja'far b. Yahya was the first favourite and boon-companion of the Caliph. We may recall as an illustration of their intimate relationship, how Hārūn and Ja'far used[5] to share a single garment that had two neck openings. Under these circumstances, any poison that Fadl might instil into Hārūn's mind was liable to be of little avail, since the harmonious relationship between the Caliph and Ja'far was an effective antidote.

It was therefore of prime importance for anyone who wanted to cause a rift between Hārūn and Ja'far, to bring to

---

1. Palmer (Hārūn al-Rashīd) p. 81 F. London 1881
2. ibid p. 86
3. Mir'āt al-Janān Vol. 2 p. 74 Hyderabad
4. Ja'far the Barmakide released him without the knowledge of Hārūn.
5. Palmer p. 83

an end the high-spirited banquets and parties at which relations between them were continually smoothed. In this connection Fadl, who was aware of the poet's discontentment at his position at Court, cherished the idea of taking the heart out of the merry camp of Hārūn and Ja'far by enticing away that essential figure in their festivities, their chief lyricist. Having begun in this way, he hoped to go on to instigate the poet to denounce the frivolous amusements of the Court, with the object of making them unpopular and so putting pressure on the Caliph to stop indulging in them.

It was not Fadl only who was interested in ending these notorious parties; the queen, Zubaida, was even more anxious to secure such a change. She wanted the Caliph to be hers exclusively; but these carousals, which appealed greatly to Hārūn, on top of his duties as head of a broad empire, gave him no time to spend with his queen and cousin. Even worse than that, she was extremely jealous of the beautiful singing-girls who attended the Caliph on these occasions, infatuating him and overshadowing her.

When Fadl approached Abu'l-Atāhiya for his own purposes, a new stage began in the poet's life. Abu'l-Atāhiya, however, did[1] not turn his coat so quickly. It took him a whole year to change from a lyricist into an aggressive and melancholy author: 'agressive' because he began to attack

---

1. He began his quarrel with Hārūn by refusing to compose love poetry, but did not compose any aggressive verses.

the Caliph and aristocracy as a whole in his poetry: 'melancholic in that he began to recall all the failures and misfortunes in his own life and instil them into his verses.

Indeed the poet began his withdrawal from Court quite reasonably and cautiously. Encouraged by the instigations of both Fadl and Zubaida, the poet made it clear to the Caliph that he would not compose any more love poetry unless he were married to 'Utba. Even when the Caliph sent him to prison, the poet did not hasten to attack Hārūn. He simply spent a whole year in reciting nothing except[1] verses from the Koran and similar pious formulae. In taking such a moderate attitude, the poet was hoping that the Caliph would come to his senses and make a serious move towards marrying him to 'Utba. He did not omit to remind the Caliph from time to time of the many promises that the latter had given him but never kept: hence, for instance, the following verse:[2]

> "O you, righteous Caliph, guide me on the right path,
> may you never lack guidance
> Help the frightened one and have pity on his lament,
> when he raises his hands to you in supplication.
> What a miserable aspiration is mine, the nearer I approach
> it, the more it recedes.
> I am continually put off to the morrow. Life passes but
> tomorrow never comes."

---

1. Aghānī Vol. 3 p. 140 (top)
2. ibid p. 159

He also argued very logically when he wondered how Hārūn upset him by denying him 'Utba, who inspired him to compose love poetry, yet asked him to go on producing such poetry --[1]

However, when the Caliph continued to treat him harshly and showed no sign of understanding, Abu'l-Atāhiya's attitude towards Hārūn's father Mahdī, and the aristocracy as a whole, surged again to his mind. Fearing no danger on account of the support of both Fadl and Zubaida, he began to give vent to his long-repressed grievances against life, and his hatred of the upper classes. Thus, by the end of the year that the poet spent in prison patiently, he was convinced that no good was to be expected from Hārūn; and the only course open to him was to join Fadl's camp and Zubaida's as well.

Now we have outlined our theory, let us see how far it can be confirmed by the records that have come down to us.

First: the coincidence between the time[2] when the poet left off composing love poetry and the appointment of Fadl as High Chamberlain, cannot be passed over without comment. Indeed it was the first thing to draw our attention to the possibility of a real link between the two events. Our argument is this: had the poet's abstention from love poetry been based entirely on Hārūn's failure to fulfil his promises

---

1. ibid p. 158 - that verse reads: وكلفتني ما حلت بيني وبينه

2. Fadl's appointment was 179 and the poet left composing love poetry at 180 A.H. It is natural that Fadl was busy during that short intervening time with putting his various plans for the downfall of the Barwakiide.

of marrying 'Utba to the poet, why had Abu'l-Atāhiya not taken a firm stand earlier, instead of remaining patient with the Caliph for ten long years? There can be no doubt that the most suitable time for such a firm stand was at the death of al-Khaizurān (173 A.H.)[1] since in her lifetime the Caliph could always excuse himself by pretending he was unwilling to force his mother to give up her loyal servant: and 'Utba herself had the excuse that she was unwilling to depart from her mistress.

Another point of significance was in the statement of the poet's son about the beginning of his father's abstention from love poetry. It[2] goes like this: "When Hārūn went to Raqqa my father ceased composing love poetry and assumed the garb of the ascetics, and no longer joined in the Caliph's drinking parties." If there was no connection between the two events, why did the poet's son, who is in general the best contemporary authority on the poet's life, link them together? There must have been something on his mind to make him do so. The connection, in our opinion, was that Hārūn's departure to Raqqa and his making it the temporary seat of his governments, was caused by his impatience with

---

1. Encyclopaedia of Islam Vol. 1 part 2 p. 665 (top)
(2) Aghānī Vol. 3 p 157 (bottom)

the various measures Zubaida had taken to limit his opportunities for holding his beloved parties. So he went to Raqqa to be away from her spies and agents. This suggestion is confirmed by the fact that Hārūn, when he left Baghdād, did not go directly to Raqqa, but spent some months wandering[1] about trying to find a substitute for Baghdād: this means that his main aim was to leave Baghdād.[2] It can be confirmed also by the fact that when the Caliph settled at Raqqa, Zubaida did everything in her power to draw him back to her in Baghdād. One of her devices for persuading him was to offer a great sum of money[3] for the best poetry in praise of Baghdād, its climate and atmosphere. If this explanation is accepted, then the statement of the poet's son, and the hint in it of a connection between the departure of the Caliph and the poet's ceasing to compose love poetry, is quite logical.

When we leave this speculation and come to the records about the poet's relations with Fadl and Zubaida on the one hand and the Barmakides on the other, we find them still more assuring. With the former clique he was in complete accord; with the latter it was, just as we should expect, the very reverse. These records are clear about the fact that Fadl

---

1. Tabarī Vol. 3. 645 F (bottom)
2. In spite of Hārūn's own ingenuous claim that he went to Raqqa only to be nearer to Byzantiam omayyads Tabari vol-3 P-706
3. Ibn al-Mu'tazz, tabagāt, p. 115; of Baghdād Vol 1 p.51-52 Tarīkh

1 Tarikh

had undertaken to protect the poet against any possible reprisal by the Caliph. Fadl had also - and this was the poet's first concern - to find a way to secure as much money as possible for Abu'l-Atāhiya from the Caliph and anyone else. As High Chamberlain, Fadl was to make sure that Abu'l-Atāhiya's verses on Death and similar poignant poetry would reach the Caliph's ear.

The most definite record as to the existence of a collaboration between Fadl and the poet goes like this:[1]

> "While Ar-Rashīd was at Raqqa he lost his temper with Abu'l-Atāhiya, who was in Baghdād. So Abu'l-Atāhiya was expecting that Fadl b. Rabi' would speak up on his behalf. But the latter was slow in acting for him in the matter, so Abu'l-Atāhiya wrote to him:
>
> > 'And you too deserted me like others who did the same - as if my interests were not yours.
> > For a long time you assured me firmly that what I now see happening would not occur;
> > Until, when the times turned against me, you joined with time.'

Thereupon Fadl spoke to Ar-Rashīd, who grew more pleased with (the poet). As is obvious from the first line, this verse was sent to Fadl, at a time when all people kept away from the poet of whom the Caliph had shown his dislike. The second verse is a direct reference to the secret agreement between the poet and Fadl. The former reminds the latter that he assured him more than once that nothing untoward would follow his breakaway from the Court. It does not seem to us

1. Aghānī Vol. 3 p. 141 (top)

that this verse could ever mean anything else, and so we regard it as one of our most concrete and reliable pieces of evidence in favour of our theory.

Apart from this report, we come across many records in the Aghānī which show the great pains Faḍl took to obtain money for the poet from Hārūn and his son Anīn after him. Other poets had to compose lofty and extremely fine panegyrics in order to obtain the royal reward. In many cases even such excellent poetry was not enough in itself; poets had to speak ill of the Alids in order to please[1] Hārūn and secure his handsome gifts. But Abu'l-Atāhiya needed to do nothing of the sort. He had only to recite a few spiritless lines to the Caliph in the presence of Faḍl, Hārūn's first adviser, in order to obtain a disproportionate amount of money with the help of Faḍl's fantastic comments on such poetry.

Typical of this procedure is what followed the verse recited by the poet when he knew that the Caliph had given a huge sum of money to some of his slave-girls.

> [2]"God made the World little in your eyes, and made it hateful to you.
> So you were not satisfied until you had made cheap everything in your possession.
> The World was never so despised by anyone as by you."

Faḍl grasped the opportunity to tell the Caliph that never had

---

1. ibid Vol. 20 p. 75 (bottom)
2. ibid Vol. 3 p. 159 (bottom)

kings been praised with such poetry before; and 20,000 dirhams followed that fanatical testimony. Similar insignificant verse was provoked by Hārūn's illness. Abu'l-Atāhiya recited[1] the poetry to Faḍl, who conveyed it and recommended it to the Caliph. On account of it Abu'l-Atāhiya was asked to keep the Caliph company during his illness - an attendance that resulted in great profit for the poet. No wonder that someone in the audience of Ibn al-Arabī, who was telling this story, showed his astonishment that such trifling[2] verse could be awarded such honour.

Of course Faḍl's first concern remained to lead the Caliph gradually in the direction in which he wanted to change him, using Abu'l-Atāhiya's poetry among other devices. So it was of great importance to him to make sure the poet's conscience-smiting verses about Death were brought to the attention of his Sovereign. Since he was High Chamberlain, this was never very difficult for him, though the means were sometimes ingenious.

A good example of that is the case of one of Abu'l-Atāhiya's poems on Death, which reached the Caliph through the medium of some sailors[3], who sang it to him. The Aghānī does not explain fully how it came about that such a gloomy poem could

1. ibid p. 131 (botton)
2. ibid
3. ibid p. 178

be sung in front of the Caliph; the author simply tells us that the poet passed it to the sailors, and they sang it. The poet's aim, it is said, was to spoil the pleasure of Hārūn, who was fond of sailors' shanties. But in our opinion, such an inappropriate poem could not have been sung without the secret intervention of Fadl. It would be ridiculous to suggest that Hārūn's sailors were so simple as to accept and sing such verses unless they were specially encouraged.

Again, when we read that Hārūn was reading[1] a long poem about the lesson one may learn from the death of previous kings, we may wonder how such works could reach him. Obviously it was the narrators[2] who were encouraged by Fadl, and rewarded generously whenever they did as they were told. Anything that reached an Abbasid Caliph had to pass the scrutiny of his High Chamberlain: and this was the position that Fadl enjoyed to the full.

In Amīn's reign Fadl continued to support the poet. One of the most fantastic occasions was that on which the poet gave Fadl a shoe[3] with two lines of poetry in his praise inscribed in it. Fadl, however, managed to rid himself of the shoe and spare himself having to reward it, by carrying it to Amīn;

---

1. his diwan p. 123
2. It is very likely that the al-Aarabī was engaged in that work as it can be seen from the poet's oliwan p. 197
3. Aghānī Vol. 3 p. 166

and so he obtained 10,000 dirhams for the poet, who was still waiting outside on his donkey. It is fitting to conclude with a reference to Abu'l-Atāhiya's statement in which he recognises Fadl as one of his kindest[1] patrons.

1. ibid p. 170 (middle)

ABU'L-ATĀHIYA AND ZUBAIDA

The Aghānī expresses in quite plain language[1] that there were good relations between the poet and Zubaida.

One of the most obvious signs in that respect is her[2] intervention in favour of the poet when he quarrelled with al-Qāsim, Hārūn's son (and destined to be the third Caliph after him). The quarrel arose because the poet believed that the prince had slighted him. Abu'l-Atāhiya was sitting by the roadside as al-Qāsim was passing with his followers and attendants in a great procession. Seeing him approaching, the poet stood up as a gesture of respect, and kept standing until the procession passed. But the Prince, who was notoriously[3] conceited, did not acknowledge the poet's gesture or even look his way. Feeling, as always, hostile to the aristocracy and especially to the snobs amongst them, Abu'l-Atāhiya gave forth a typical verse about them: a verse in which he cherished the Prince's death. When the poet's malicious verse was carried to al-Qāsim, he had the poet brought home, flogged and detained. Whereupon the poet sent to Zubaida asking her to get him out. Zubaida acted quickly; and, following her recommendation, Hārūn called the poet, gave

---

1. Zubaida liked the poet (وكانت من أميل الناس إليه) Vol.3 p.159 (middle
2. ibid (middle)
3. ibid (top)

him money and clothing, and compelled the Prince to apologise to the poet and give him more money. Is not this to be marvelled at? To insult the Caliph's son and then to make him apologise.

Al-Qāsim was not the only member of the royal family whom Abu'l-Atāhiya attacked in this reckless way. Thus Ṣālih al-Mkskīn was boldly attacked by the poet, who went so far in one verse as to threaten to cut off[1] his head. All this was merely because the Prince failed to pay the poet due respect when Abu'l-Atāhiya visited him at home. And there were many other people of[2] importance whom the poet ridiculed and satired for the slightest reason: we admit that Abu'l-Atāhiya was easy to provoke on account of his inferiority complex and his unmitigated hatred of the aristocracy. Nevertheless, he could not challenge all these people with complete impunity unless he was confident that he could fall back on some influential person to protect him against their revenge.

As an evidence of the prestige that Abu'l-Atāhiya gained through his close relationship with Zubaida - a prestige that even Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī referred[3] to in a verse - we may recall

1. ibid p. 168
2. Such as Humaid al-Tūsī (ibid p.173 bottom) and Yaḥya b. Khāqān ibid p. 169
3. ibid 177

that Manṣūr b. al-Mahdī had made a proposal[1] to marry the poet's daughter. Manṣūr b. al-Mahdī was not a man to trifle with: he was once invited[2] by the people of Baghdād to proclaim himself Caliph. His refusal to take part in such a risky fiasco shows that he was wise as well. One would be bound to wonder why such a great man should propose to a poet's daughter unless her father was of some influence at that time. That is what the poet meant to imply when he said: "Manṣūr wants to marry her because she is Abu'l-Atāhiya's daughter."

Abu'l-Atāhiya on his side was very loyal to Zubaida. He showed his steadfastness right from the beginning. Just a short time before leaving the prison that he stayed a whole year in for refusing to compose love-poetry, he composed the following verse:[3]

> "Who will help a heart desperately smitten by love,
> pierced by longing and lengthy separation?
> Long has been my yearning for my wife; would that
> I knew when we shall meet.
> She is my portion in life; I confine my attentions
> to her, of all (that sex) who wear beads and necklaces.
> May God bring us together quickly in the near future,
> and unloose my shackles."

The author of the Aghānī sees nothing in this verse more than an attempt on the poet's part to satisfy the Caliph, who had sworn not release him unless he composed some love-poetry.

---

1. Ibid p. 170
2. Brockelman (History of the Islamic people) p.122-123
3. Aghānī Vol. 3 p. 140.

In our opinion the case is not so simple as that: in reality the poet was even here serving Zubaida's cause. To make that clear, we must recall that Zubaida managed to have Abu Nuwās beaten[1] nearly to death by her maidens for praising the slave-girls in front of Hārūn. Later on she gave the same poet a handsome reward when she knew that he had learned his lesson, and heard him from behind the curtain advising the Caliph to confine himself to the 'Flower of Quraish', i.e. his Queen and cousin Zubaida. Abu'l-Atāhiya was simply doing the same sort of thing in this stanza. The third line is quite obviously to be taken in that context. It is not after all very probable, if Abu'l-Atāhiya continued to love 'Utba all his life,[2] that he was so very enthusiastic about his wife.

We believe that this part of our thesis will not be complete unless we explain in some detail the great anxiety and jealousy that perplexed Zubaida over the question of the palace slave-girls.

At the time when our poet began to work for Zubaida, she was middle-aged. This, coupled with the familiarity and close blood-connection between her and the Caliph, made the romantic aspect of his sexual relations with her die down with time.

---

1. Palmer "Hārūn al-Rashīd" p. 200 F London 1881
2. It was proved in another place of this thesis that he continued to do so.

Her place in his heart was taken by the young, sweet and gifted slave-girls, who were brought to Baghdād from Persia, Byzantium and other countries reputed for the beauty of their women. So much money and effort was spent to develop the gifts of these girls, that some of them were sold at prices equal to tens of thousands of pounds. Literature, music and singing were amongst the fine arts that they were taught. Hārūn, who had a strong tendency[1] to sexual indulgence - a tendency attributed also to his father[2] before him - could not resist his passion for them. He is known to have had children by as many as ten[3] of them, and in truth God only knows how many others he had beside these.

Zubaida's pride was hurt, and she tried every possible device to stop the Caliph from going so far. Sometimes she forgot her pride, and sought the help of the Caliph's uncles as in the case of Dnānīr. Dnānīr was a slave-girl of Yahya the Barmkide. Hārūn, who was overwhelmed by his infatuation for her, went so far as to visit[4] her at Yahya's palace from time to time; and he presented her with a necklace worth thirty thousand dīnārs. The jealous Zubaida complained of Hārūn's infatuation to his[5] uncles. When they spoke to him

1. Mir'āt al-janān Vol. 1. p.444
2. Tabarī Vol. 3 p. 510 (top)
3. Tabarī vol. 3 p. 758
4. Aghānī Vol. 16 p. 137
5. ibid

about the matter, he said that he was interested in the girl for her singing only. Zubaida accepted the situation; and by way of apology for her unfounded jealousy, she herself presented Hārūn with ten slave-girls. Or at least so it was said;[1] but it may not be far from the mark to suggest that this was only a device of hers to make Hārūn forget Dnānīr, against whom Zubaida was by then particularly embittered.

Seeing that Hārūn would not yield to the pressure of his uncles, Zubaida tried a more persuasive influence. When she was alarmed by another charming girl that the Caliph had become infatuated with, Zubaida asked the help of the Caliph's sister 'Ulayya,[2] who comforted the Queen and swore an oath to bring Hārūn back to her. When evening came and Hārūn was taking the fresh air in his palace courtyard, Ulayya and Zubaida, each at the head of her train of maids, all splendidly attired, rushed into Hārūn's presence singing as with one voice: "Departed from me, though my heart will not part from you." Hārūn was flattered and overjoyed. He rose to meet the ladies and enjoyed their company, declaring he had never before had such a happy night. One cannot read such a story without feeling sympathy for the proud Zubaida, who was carried away by her jealousy and had to try in a humble way to get her consort back.

---

1. Two queens of Baghdād p. 40
2. Aghānī Vol. 9 p. 88

It was not only Hārūn's uncles or sister whom Zubaida used as a means to dissuade him from flirting with the slave-girls: she sought the help of anyone who could provide it. For instance, in the case[1] of a slave-girl called Inān, a songstress whose poetic gifts were considered of the highest order, and with whom Hārūn was for a while infatuated, Zubaida sought to enlist the aid of al-Aṣma'i (the great authority on literature). He was promised whatever he should ask for, provided he could make Hārūn forget the girl. One day Inān 's name was mentioned in front of Hārūn, and he commented that he had no interest in her except for her poetry. With Zubaida's offer in his mind, al-Aṣma'i struck while the iron was hot: "Indeed, by God, poetry is her only gift!" he said, "Would the Commander of the Faithful fall in love with Farazdaq?" Hārūn broke into hearty laughter, and was cured of his folly for a time.

This last example is significant, as it shows how well Zubaida knew the art of using men of literature as agents for her in the presence of the Caliph. Indeed this is not the only occasion that proves Zubaida was in close contact with the literary world. Once Zubaida was annoyed with Hārūn's stay at Raqqa and promised a great reward for the poet whose

---

1. Two queens of Baghdād p. 146-147 and Iqd Vol 3 p. 258 (an old copy)

verses would make Hārūn long for Baghdād. The prize, a gem valued at 800,000 dirhams, went to Mansūr[1] al-Namrī, whose nostalgic verse led Hārūn to visit Baghdād. This shows that Zubaida was aware of the influence that poetry could exert on Hārūn, and shows that her use of Abu'l-Atāhiya's compositions to influence the Caliph's mind was quite in keeping with her methods.

After a long period of bitterness, Zubaida was anxious to revenge herself on Hārūn for having humbled her position as Queen. She did so by ridiculing him in a sly way, as is told by the anecdote, in "The Two Queens[2] of Baghdad" about Zubaida's pet monkey. Aub Khalaf, and one of Hārūn's principal generals, Yazīd b. Mazyad, who killed the monkey 'in anger.'[3] Historians have failed to attach any importance to this extraordinary story. But the fact that the lucky monkey was called Abu Khalaf, a name that is etymologically connected with the word Caliph, is the key to the matter. In her desire to ridicule the Caliph, Zubaida wanted to show him that neither girdle nor sword nor great processions could make a Caliph, for even a monkey could have

---

1. Ibn al-Mu'tazz (Ṭabaqāt p. 115
2. p. 168
3. We cannot really accept the idea that Yazīd b. Mazyād killed the monkey in a spell of anger. We believe that Hārūn had grasped the idea behind the fantastic attention that Zubaida was giving to the animal, and ordered his general to kill it. To summon the general later and demand an explanation, was just a matter of formality to avoid Zubaida's displeasure.

the same appearance and attendants. Thus the monkey provided an object for her mockery, which she was afraid to vent on the Caliph directly.[1]

In conclusion, we would like to emphasise that the death of Hārūn did not result in any change in Zubaida's attitude towards her favourite poet. As late as the reign of Ma'mūn she continued to rely on Abu'l-Atāhiya. For instance, he composed for her a poem that she sent to Ma'mūn after the death of her son Amīn, with the purpose of reconciling the Caliph to her. Her attempt was successful, and the poet was generously rewarded by both Ma'mūn and Zubaida.[2]

---

1. She even might have wanted to tell Hārūn that if he had found slave girls more attractive than her, she also had found a monkey more amusing than him.
2. Iqd Vol. 2 p. 20

ABU'L-ATĀHIYA'S RELATIONS WITH THE BARMAKIDES.

There are many reports concerning the Barmakides' displeasure with Abu'l-Atāhiya, which go to confirm that the poet's good relations with Fadl b. Rabi' had a political significance. For instance, it was mentioned[1] once in the presence of Yahya the Barmakide that Abu'l-Atāhiya had adopted ascetic habits and had begun to practise as a cupper. He took no fee from people, the report continued, but his only aim was to seek God's reward and to show his deep humility. On hearing that, Yahya asked, "Used he not to sell earthenware?" The answer was, "Yes." Then Yahya commented: "Is not the lowly position of an earthenware-seller humble enough for him, that he seeks further humility by becoming a cupper?" Such a refined and highly civilised man as Yahya could not have made this spiteful remark unless he was very annoyed indeed with the poet.

Again, it is extremely strange not to find a single line of panegyric poetry by Abu'l-Atāhiya in honour of the Barmakides. It is really astonishing seeing that the Barmakides were very lavish towards poets, while Abu'l-Atāhiya had an importunate love of money. This was not because our poet had not heard of their proverbial generosity, but because they were determined

1. Aghani Vol. 3 p. 129 (middle)

not to show him any favour. So much is clear from an anecdote in the Aghānī[1], which tells us that the poet wanted a favour from Fadl b. Yahya. Feeling unable to approach him directly, Abu'l-Atāhiya asked Ṣālih al-Shohrozūrī (a close friend of the poet) to approach Fadl on his behalf. Ṣālih, however, refused because, as he said, he was not accustomed to ask Fadl for such things even for himself. Nevertheless he was ready to give from his own purse as much money as Abu'l'Atāhiya wanted. Abu'l-Atāhiya took Ṣālih's refusal as an offence, and began to lampoon him in verse, threatening to denounce his friendship with Ṣālih. In the face of such persistence Ṣālih went to Fadl with the verses sent to him by Abu'l-Atāhiya. Whereupon Fadl said: "God knows that nothing in this world is more repugnant to me than bestowing favours upon him. Nevertheless, I am going to give him what he asked for but only for your sake." The point of the anecdote is perfectly clear: while Fadl b. Rabi' was close enough to the poet to recommend his protege's poetry to the Caliph and obtain for Abu'l-Atāhiya great sums of money Fadl b. Kahya was unapproachable.

We have remarked before how the Barmakides looked with displeasure upon Abu'l-Atāhiya's so-called religious poetry,

---

1. ibid p. 174

since it was intended to shake their position at Court. Here is an anecdote that shows the Barmakides' attitude clearly:[1]

> "Hārūn held a banquet and had the banqueting-hall beautifully decorated. Then he said to Abu'l-Atāhiya, who was present, "Describe for us the pleasures of this life that we are enjoying." Whereupon the poet recited:
>
> "Live safely in the shadow of your lofty palaces as long as you will.
> Morning, noon and night, you are provided with everything you desire.
> But when the souls are groaning their last - while the Death-rattle of the chest is louder,
> Then you will know for sure, that you have only been in vain illusion."
>
> On hearing this, Hārūn burst into tears; and Fadl b. Yahya said to the poet: "The Commander of the Faithful sent for you to cheer him up, but you have saddened him." At this Hārūn interjected: "Let him speak his mind. He has seen that we are blind, and does not wish to increase our blindness."

In this displeasure of the Barmakides with Abu'l-Atāhiya's poetry may perhaps be found a clue to explain an extraordinary event in Arabic literature on which the last word has yet to be said. In his book[2] 'Al-Awrāq, al-Sūlī tells us that Abān b. Abd'l-Hamīd versified the 'Kalīla wa-Dimna' into the Muzdawij. He also composed a long ''Urjūza'[3] about the Beginning of the World, and furthermore he composed a great

---

1. his dīwān p. 92
2. p. 2 (Egypt 193a)
3. ibid p. 1

amount of poetry connected with Islamic rites.[1] In all of these works he was sponsored by the Barmakides. Anxious to have the translation of the 'Kalīla wa-Dimna finished as quickly as possible. Yahya detained[2] Abān in a house until he completed it; which the latter did in three months. Yahya was pleased enough with the work to give Abān a great sum of money. The reason given for all this, is that Yahya b. Khalid wanted to learn the Kalīla wa-Dimna by heart,[3] and in order to ease the task he asked Abān to put it into verse. Is this a plausible story? One may still wonder why Yahya took such an interest in that particular book, and why he wanted to learn it, or some of it, by heart. Furthermore, why was there such a hurry about the versification?

It seems to us very likely that Abān was to the Barmakides and their partisans what Abu'l-Atāhiya was to the rival 'Arab' party headed by Fadl and Zubaida. In asking Abān to deal with the 'Kalīla wa-Dimna,' the Barmakides were striking at both Fadl and Abu'l-Atāhiya: for almost the whole of the book is about friendship and enmity, intrigues and betrayal and thus represents the Barmakides' answer to the plots of Fadl b. Rabi' against them. The sponsors of the new version

1. ibid p.51
2. ibid p. 2
3. ibid p.2

wanted it to reach the ear of the Caliph, to put him on his guard against the mischief that Fadl b. Rabi', through his slanders, might draw upon both the Caliph and his best friends and ministers.[1] The book had to be put into verse, because that was the best vehicle by which to bring anything to the Caliph's ear. Certainly the Barmakides and their agents and partisans learned a great many of the tales by heart, in order to recite them to Hārūn whenever the opportunity presented itself.[2] The fact that Ja'far the Barmakid in[3] particular learned it by heart is significant.

It is also related that Yahya b. Khālid asked Abān to compose some verses on asceticism.[4] Yahya was sufficiently a connoisseur of literature to know that true asceticism comes from within and not by commission. Was he trying to break the practical monopoly of that kind of poetry which Abu'l-Atāhiya had guarded jealously? The latter warned[6] Abū Nuwās not to try to share that monopoly with him; an intrusion by Abān or anyone else would threaten the prestige

1. The first and foremost story in it is the tale of the Lion and the Bull; or, as Knatchbull puts it: "the emblem of two friends whom a liar contrives to disunite."
2. Whenever Yahya saw Hārūn had done something he disapproved of, he never showed his disapproval openly. He only used to tell him stories about the kings of previous times. This shows that Yahya's use of "Kalīla wa Dimana to influence Hārūn's mind was quite in keeping with his methods (5)

5. al-Jihshyārī (al-wozarā') p. 203
6. Akhbar Abi Nuwas p.70 (bottom) Egypt 1924.

5. al-Jihshyārī (al-wozarā') p. 203
6. Akhbar Abi Nuwas p.70 (bottom) Egypt 1924.

that the poet had built up for himself.[1] It is noteworthy that Abān's religious poetry concerning fasting and alms-giving represents the opinion of the jurists in these matters. Was this a deliberate warning to Abu'l-Atāhiya, that religious poetry should be confined to the service of the principal devotions of Islām, such as fasting, and not used for meditation on Death and for cherishing the destruction of the World? This is the only satisfactory explanation for Abān's incursion into a subject that he had otherwise nothing at all to do with.[2]

---

1. Although the first motive for his poetry in that genre was partly political and partly self-dissatisfaction. Later he gained great prestige through it.
2. He was a leading member of the heretics, according to Jāhiz. (al-Hayawān Vol.4 p. 144 (middle) Egype 1323.A.H.)

CHAPTER 4.

In the previous chapter we mentioned the various factors that combined to bring about the change in the poet's life in 180 A.H. It remains to show how his poetry after that date is in complete harmony with our explanation, and how it reflects all the thoughts that were active in the poet's mind at that period. It is most relevant to begin with Abu'l-Atāhiya's poetry concerning Hārūn. Having considered earlier the poet's reasons for hating the caliph and attacking him, we have to show here the evidences of such hatred and attacks in his poetry and behaviour.

First comes the poem[1] sent to Khuzaima b. Khāzim, one of Hārūn's most loyal and capable generals. Here is part of it:

> "You seem to me to be a person who lives in hopes of God's forgiveness, yet you are continually doing that of which He has no love.
> You show (others) the way to Piety, while you yourself fall short of it. O you who dispense cures though you are sick yourself!
> Verily he is wise who does not allow the present to distract him from a morrow that brings fearful things:
> And that man who does not make good deeds the material of his hoarding, is poor though he may possess the things of this World."

The full significance of these verses cannot be appreciated apart from the record of the occasion when they

---

1. His Dīwān p. 242. A part of it is in Aghānī Vol. 3 p. 176

were recited:

> [1]"Once Khusaima was sitting with some people, and in the course of the conversation they spoke about the blood that was shed at that time. Commenting on their speech, Khusaima said: By God, we have no excuse or pretext on account of which we may hope for God's mercy. Nothing will avail us except His forgiveness and grace. Had it not been for my love of glory and power, my hatred of humiliation, and fear of being reduced to the ranks after my high position as a commander, no one on earth would have been more ardent than I in asceticism and piety'. As Khuzaima finished, his Major-domo came in with a letter from Abu'l-Atāhiya, in which there were these verses ....."

It is obvious that some people (perhaps sympathisers with the Alids) were quietly blaming the General for his reckless actions against the enemies of the Abbasid regime, the Alids among them. Trying to excuse himself, Khuzaima drew their attention to the humble position that he would revert to if he ceased to serve the Caliph. In his verses Abu'l-Atāhiya warns the General that Hārūn's favours will not be of any benefit to him once he is buried[2] in earth, and tells him that it is the glory[3] of the Hereafter, not of this World, with which he ought to be concerned. The poet is plainly implying criticism of Khuzaima for his loyal service to Hārūn, and instigating him to withdraw. Nothing could be more harmful to the Caliph than to lose the services of such a man.

---

1. ibid
2. his dīwān p. 242. v. 5.
3. ibid p.243 v.1.

For further evidence of Abu'l-Atāhiya's beligerence, we would refer to a poem[1] composed after he had been in prison for a long time - a piece that reveals intense hatred and malevolence. It begins:

> "By God, oppression is vile? And the oppressor is for ever defames?"

In it the poet reminds the Caliph of the Day of Judgment, when they will confront each other before God. He also wonders at Hārūn's hoping to live for ever though all generations before him had passed away. The poem could not have been conveyed to the Caliph in its entirety, because it would have cost Abu'l-Atāhiya his head. But it is most likely that the three conciliatory lines at the end of it were sent to Hārūn. In those few verses the poet petitions Hārūn humbly to release him from prison.

[2]A similar short poem is mentioned in Abu'l-Atāhiya's Dīwān. Like the one just described, it reveals the poet's embittered feelings. We know that Hārūn is alluded to in it, because it was in his presence that the poet recited a few lines of it - the most moderate ones - as a sermon. The rest of the poem, which was not recited on that occasion, is still of ill-wishes for the Caliph.

Abu'l-Atāhiya's opinion of Hārūn is also expressed in the following stanza:

---

1. his diwan p. 246 f and Aghani Vol. 3 p. 160 f.
2. p. 132 f.

3"Truly monarchs are a mischief wherever they reside,
for you may well find you get no protection under
their aegis.
What do you hope for from people who, when they
are angry, lose their tempers; who treat you
unjustly: who, if you please them, grow tired of you;
Who think you are deceiving them if you give them
advice, and find you as burdensome as they would
a helpless dependent,
So let it suffice to stay proudly away from their
door: for truly to dance attendance on them is a
humiliation."

Although no particular Caliph is mentioned in the stanza, it is almost certain that the poet had Hārūn in mind; for he speaks of a Caliph whom the poet used to advise to such an extent that the latter grew tired of it. That description cannot be applied to any Caliph except Hārūn, since the poet's relations with others were more formal, and so gave no opportunity for such treatment.

Here is another anecdote[2] in the same vein. Mukhāriq, the great singer and friend of our poet, tells us that while walking with Abu'l-Atāhiya, the two of them came across a ruined house. Whereupon Abu'l-Atāhiya remarked: "Look at what the king did to the inhabitants of this house." It is almost certain that the Caliph in this case too was Hārūn, because another part of the same report tells us that the incident occurred at the period when the poet was adopting[3]

---

1. Brāniq p. 174
2. Aghānī Vol. 3 p. 164 (bottom)
3. another report which helps in timing this event is to be found in Aghānī Vol. 3 p. 177 (bottom)

ascetic habits.

Worthy of fuller consideration is the curious story[1] about Abu'l-Atāhiya and the Emperor of Byzantium; particularly since the affair may have been closely connected with the poet's attacks on the Caliph in verse. The story goes, in the Aghānī, like this:

> "The messenger of the Emperor of Byzantium, while on a visit to Hārūn, inquired about Abu'l-Atāhiya, who came to him and recited for him some of his poetry. Being well versed in Arabic, the messenger appreciated the verses and told his sovereign about Abu'l-Atāhiya. Then the Emperor of Byzantium sent an ambassador to Hārūn, asking him to send Abu'l-Atāhiya to Byzantium, and promising to give the caliph as a recompense whomever Hārūn wished to ransom. On receiving the message, the Caliph approached the poet with the proposal, but the latter declined. Later on Hārūn learned that the Emperor had given an order for a verse of Abu'l-Atāhiya's to be written on the doors of his chambers and on the gates of his city. The verse reads:
>
> 'Night does not alternate with Day, nor the stars in the heavens revolve in their spheres.
> Save to transfer authority from one ruler, whose term is up, to another.'"

The story as it stands looks innocent: the Emperor of Byzantium, like his messenger, was impressed by some of Abu'l-Atāhiya's verses, and wanted him to augment the glory of his court. However, we suspect there is more behind the story than meets the eye. It may be true enough that

---

1. ibid p. 179

the Byzantium messenger knew good Arabic, and so could appreciate Arabic poetry: but what about his master, who did not know? The best thing the Emperor could have done, if he was really keen to hear Abu'l-Atāhiya's poetry for himself, would have been to have it translated into his own language. At the same time this action would save him the trouble of having to offer a free ransom in exchange. We believe that there was another reason for the proposal. It may well have been that the Byzantine diplomats were aware of Abu'l-Atāhiya's disagreement with Hārūn, and his round-about attack on him in his poetry; and so they cherished the idea of bringing him to Byzantium and giving him the chance to say freely all he wanted to about Hārūn's frivolous life - a life that constituted a serious departure from the strict tenets of Islam. Such poetry could have led to Hārūn's defeat in his Holy War against Byzantium, since most of his army was in complete obedience to him on the understanding that he kept himself the champion of Islam and Islamic principles; and once it was made clear to the devoted Muslims in the army, that their Caliph was nothing but a frivolous tyrant, their morale would be broken.[1] Such poetry would also help foster the revolts that were going on

---

1. A great proportion of the army was volunteers.

everywhere in the Muslim empire: in egypt, Syria, and North Africa. It would also encourage the Khawārij, who were fighting Hārūn in North Iraq; and the Abids, who were ceaselessly plotting and revolting against the Caliphate. In those circumstances it is hardly probable that hārūn was sincere when he asked abu'l-Atāhiya to go to Byzantium; rather he was putting the poet to a test - but fortunately the latter was not deceived.

One last thing may be asked: did the Emperor of Byzantium, when he wrote the verse on the doors of his chambers, think to apply their theme to all equally? Or was he, in sympathy with the poet, awaiting the day when Death would rid him of Hārūn![1] This is the explanation which we could offer on the assumption that this story is authentic. There is, however, a great possibility that the story is invented, perhaps to show that even a Christian Emperor was more receptive of moral teaching than Moslem tyrants.

Our theory is supported by the expressed opinion of al-Ma'arri, who was the only critic of those times to show a deep insight into our poet's way of life. That opinion is

---

1. To show that that sort of propaganda was in keeping with the Emperor's method, we may recall that Yūnus b. Abi Farwa had written a book about the defects of Islam, as he saw it, for the Emperor. Hayawān v. 4 p. 143 Egypt 1323 A·H

given in two stanzas. The first reads:

[1]"Let God promote whom he will, rank by rank,
Al-Atāhiya showed off his piety, and repented of
his love for 'Utba;
(In the same way) fear drove Sufyān to[2] burn his books."

The tone of the whole of this stanza is sarcastic; and clearly the reference to Abu'l-Atāhiya's 'piety' is meant to be scathing. But it is particularly significant that al-Ma'arri connects Abu'l-Atāhiya's case with that of Sufyān; unmistakeably al-Ma'arri is suggesting that our poet's apparent conversion to asceticism was a result of his disagreement with the Caliph, as in the case of Sufyān.

The second of these stanzas is even more pointed. Al-Ma'arri blames people of art and letters before him for using their talent as a means of gaining their livelihood. After mentioning several such men, he concludes with this verse:

[3]"Is not what the Kufan[4] has said about asceticism
just like what the Basran produced[5] in description
of wine?"

He means that, in his opinion, Abu'l-Atāhiya was no more pious in his religious poetry than Abu Nuwās in his drinking songs: for each his way of life was merely a lucrative affectation.

---

1. Al-Luzūmiyāt Vol. 1 p. 118 Egypt 1891
2. Tarīkh Baghdād Vol. 9 p. 161 (top)
3. Al-Luzūmiyāt Vol. 1 p. 374
4. i.e. Abu'l-Atāhiya
5. i.e. Abu Nuwās

THE IDEA OF DEATH IN ABU'L-ATĀHIYA'S POETRY.

Most of Abu'l-Atāhiya's poetry after 180 A.H. was devoted to the theme of Death. After a long consideration of these verses in the light of our previous study of the poet's life, we have come to the conclusion that he was inspired to compose such poetry by two different kinds of motive, the one ulterior and the other more subjective.

One aspect of his work was his appeal to his audience, especially the Caliph, to lead a moral and serious life in preparation for Death, which would befall them as it befell their predecessors. It was no mere coincidence that by such poetry Abu'l-Atāhiya was serving both Zubaida and Fadl b. Rabi', in a manner we have already described. We may add at this point a secondary aim of the same class: the poet's desire to establish himself in the public eye as an admonisher, a defender of morality and religion.

But there is another point of view we may look at his period from, which has nothing to do with his interest in Zubaida's or Fadl's affairs, nor with his pretensions to influence as the champion of piety and asceticism. The bitterest and most fiery element in his public reproaches was provided by his simply relaxing his self-control and giving unrestrained expression to his long-repressed hatred of the aristocracy, and Hārūn in particular. These passions showed

themselves in verses in which the poet rejoiced at the humiliation inflicted on the aristocracy through Death: Death was the leveller that alone brought equality between all classes, and as such he rejoiced at it. By portraying Death as a sword hanging over the heads of the Aristocracy, he wanted them to live in fear of it, and thus, as he put it, spoil[1] their happiness.

A typical poem of the first type[x] is the one in which Abu'l-Atāhiya says to Hārūn,[2]

> "Will you take your lesson from those whose villages
> fell into ruin on the day they died;
> Whose thrones and pulpits fell vacant;
> Whose cities were reduced, and their armies dispersed?"

Al-Asma'i tells us that he saw Hārūn reading this poem while the tears flowed over the Caliph's cheeks. After finishing it the Caliph said to al-Asma'i: "By God, it looks as if I am meant by this poetry, to the exclusion of all other people." And indeed he was, for no other man at that time had thrones and armies, towns and villages, as he had.

This poem is only one of many in which Abu'l-Atāhiya reminded the Caliph of the fate of people in the past, and warned him to do good deeds before Death overtook him as it had overtaken them. Another example begins like this.[3]

---

1. his dīwān p. 296 v. 8
2. his dīwān p. 122F and Mas'udi Vol. 6 p. 359
3. dīwān p. 75 F

x. which was meant to be warning.

"Death is abroad in every town, and Death
annihilates all men."

The poet made his purpose clear when he said in one of these poems, after mentioning some of the most powerful kings and tribes of the past:

[1]"Truly there is a lesson for us in their story,
and a pointer to the way of righteousness.

It is not difficult to find the model that Abu'l-Atāhiya imitated in composing such poetry: the Koran is full of stories of peoples of the past. The Meccans were warned repeatedly not to reject Islām, lest[2] the disasters that had befallen previous tribes for rejecting their prophets should befall them too. Indeed Abu'l-Atāhiya's poetry becomes almost identical with the Koran when they both speak about the same tribes, for instance 'Ad and Thamūd.[3] The main difference between the two versions is that in the Koran a specific universal disaster threatens; whereas Abu'l-Atāhiya, since he was not a prophet, could only threaten more vaguely with Death. Only once[4] was he bold enough to predict the speedy occurrence of the Day of Resurrection, with all the horrors and torments it would bring: he claimed further that he could see its heralds and feel its approach.

---

1. ibid p. 76 V. 5.
2. Chapter No. 41 "Fussilat" v. 12.
3. dīwān p. 75
4. ibid p. 57 (here also he was following Koran Chapter No. 47. v. 17.

It is not only the Koran to which we can trace the imagery of this poetry: the Hadīth also had their effect on our poet. To lessen his followers' unhealthy interest in worldly affairs, the Prophet advised them to keep Death in mind. He is quoted by 'Uthmān b. Affān[1] as having said, "Never have I seen a sight more dreadful than graves." The epithet 'The Extinguisher of Pleasures', applied to Death in Abu'l-Atāhiya's poetry,[2] had already been given to it by the[3] Prophet at an early date. Thus in using this language in his poetry to warn the Caliph, Abu'l-Atāhiya had Koran and Tradition on his side.

There is even an indication that the idea of warning and admonishing later generations by telling the stories of their predecessors, had been used before the revelation of the Koran. Many of the kings of those days, like Hārūn, had unlimited power over their subjects, and were unapproachable and awe-inspiring. Even their most sincere and loyal friends or servants lived in constant fear of them; and the Abbasid Caliphs in particular were notorious for breaking faith with their ministers. One comparatively safe way to counter the aggressive temperament of such tyrants, was to remind them of the possibility of their absolute power coming to

---

1. Tirmithī Vol. 9 p. 188 (Egypt 1934)
2. dīwān p. 34
3. Tirmithī Vol. 9 p. 187.

end through Death. This is what must have been in the mind of 'Adi b. Zaid[1] when he was composing his verses in Death for an-Nu'man, King of Hira; and what was in Abu'l-Atāhiya's mind later, when he was composing his similar verses for Hārūn.[2]

The Caliph's response to Abu'l-Atāhiya's religious-like warnings was not encouraging at first. But in time he began to listen to them attentively; until the idea succeeded so far as to cause Hārūn to shed tears, and make him pause for meditation and heart-searching.[3] Sometimes the Caliph even asked Abu'l-Atāhiya to admonish him. It seems that Abu'l-Atāhiya succeeded better than anyone else in smiting Hārūn's heart and conscience. The appeal of the simplicity and elegance in Abu'l-Atāhiya's poetry must have greatly affected the Caliph, as it once had done in his love lyrics.

---

1. Aghānī Vol. 2 p. 36
2. Abu'l-Atāhiya referred to the same tribes as did 'Adi; and both alluded to the wanderings of these peoples throughout the world.
3. The affect of this poem again reminds us of 'Adi b. Zaid. When one of 'Adi's poems was recited to 'Hishām b. 'Abdu'l-Malik, Hishām, who was camping at a pleasant and blossoming oasis in the desert, ordered his pavilion to be folded up and cut his holiday short. When the reciter, the Iraqi Khālid b. Safwān, was blamed for upsetting the Caliph, he retorted, "Keep away from me! I have given a pledge to Allāh that I would never accept the opportunity of sitting with a king without reminding him of God, who is most Mighty and Majestic."
4. Aghānī Vol. 2. p. 35 F.

Since the main aim of Abu'l-Atāhiya's invoking Death was to lessen the Caliph's interest in worldly affairs, especially the frivolous pleasures so disliked by Zubaida and Fadl, it is not surprising that such pleasures are denounced in his poetry on many grounds. He regards them as incompatible[1] with the piety required from all good Muslims - let alone Hārūn, who was governing in the name of God, and who also claimed a close blood-relationship with the Prophet. Abu'l-Atāhiya also denounces them as a sort of craziness,[2] which should be shunned by the wise. He argues too that every pleasure ends in sorrow[3] and regret; so if only for the sake of peace of mind, one should avoid them. To dissuade the Caliph from them the poet draws his attention to the damage[4] done to health by excess in pleasure.

Hārūn's untimely hoariness was of great help to Abu'l-Atāhiya, who repeatedly drew attention to the conventional idea that people should increase in piety as their years advance. Hārūn was very sensitive about his grey hair. He must have been very embarrassed by such poetry - to the delight of Zubaida. To show his reluctance to admit his hoariness, we may recall his cruel handling of one of his

---

1. dīwān, p. 188 V. 8.
2. ibid p. 254 V.6.
3. ibid p. 43. V. 5.
4. ibid p. 298. V. 3.

singers, for singing the following verse:[1]

> [2]"I notice that women that are natural beauties do not care to mix with men who have already lost their youth; but they keep company with beardless lads."

In the Koran[3] the age of forty is the high time for those who want to prepare themselves for the Hereafter and devote themselves to good deeds. The poet referred to grey hair as the forerunner[4] of Death, or even as actual Death.[5] In his opinion grey locks form a turban woven[6] in the grave, and on it the marks of Death are drawn. His whole aim with all this imagery was to tell the Caliph that there was no more time for frivolous behaviour. Abu'l-Atāhiya also drew attention to the fact that old people do not feel the same[7] happiness as youths do when they try to behave frivolously, and this alone should deter them from the attempt.

As we said at the beginning of this chapter, there are many verses about Death in which the poet was not so much

---

1. In his anger, the Caliph summoned the singer, abused him, and said: "How dare you sing a verse in which youths are praised and old people are despised. You know for certain that my hair is grey; were you then making a spiteful allusion to me?" The unfortunate singer was flogged and dismissed from Court for a long time. It may not be out of place to remark that here was most likely yet another case of Zubaida's instigation: we find it hard to believe that 'Ulmiya was so foolish as to sing such a verse of his own accord.
2. Aghānī Vol. 5 p. 45
3. Al-Ahqaf (chapter No. 46) V.15.
4. dīwān p. 224 V. 11
5. ibid p. 307 (bottom)
6. ibid p. 44 (bottom)
7. ibid p. 145 V. 4.

much interested in admonishing Hārūn or any particular person, but was rejoicing generally at the destruction and humiliation that would befall the aristocracy as a class, the caliph included. If in the former kind of verses the poet was deliberately serving Fadl's and Zubaida's cause, or building up his public prestige, in these others he was expressing wholly spontaneous emotions. It is difficult, sometimes impossible, to draw a definite line to distinguish between the two types. We can only take account, in each case, of the context, the spirit of the verse, and the occasion on which it was recited. In the poems directed at Hārūn himself, as the examples already given show, the poet reminds the Caliph of the short span of life left to him, and preaches to him in an elegant and appealing way; in some of these verses he constantly quotes[1] the Koran. But in the other type, which we shall now go on to consider, the reader feels as if the poet had abandoned self-control, and adopted a hostile attitude towards all those he had reason to envy.[2]

> "How long will you behave like a child, though
> your hair is grey? Do you think Death will mistake
> your name (and pass you by?)
> Or do you think Death is without authority over YOU?
> No, by the Lord, it does have that authority!
> "Some time I have seen Death spring upon the bodies
> of kings, at other times it wanders hither and
> thither."

---

1. ibid p. 71 (bottom) F and p. 75 (bottom) F
2. ibid p. 141 (the rest of the stanza is even more malicious)

We have already dwelt on the experience that gave passion to his prejudice: the lifetime of humiliation on account of his lowly origins; his consequent dissatisfaction with the great distinctions between classes in the society of his time. He had himself no means nor hopes of abolishing these distinctions in this life. But Death he saw as a power finally capable of bringing to an end the privileges, luxury and force of the aristocracy -

> [1]"I have visited graves: the graves of those who held sovereignty in this world, and the graves of the frivolous and the lustful.
> They were the Kings of food and drink and raiment and the aromas of fine perfumes;
> But behold their bodies naked because of Death, and their faces covered with dust."

More than this, Death, besides depriving the high, would ennoble the humble comparatively, by treating all alike with the same inevitability, reducing all to nakedness, and thus making those who had despised the poet the bare equals of the very classes from whose ranks he had emerged. Many verses of Abu'l-Atāhiya's put it beyond doubt that this was what was going on in his mind: for instance:

> [2]"We differed in power, but God has levelled us in
> [3]Death, so that we have become equal.
> He who dies is finished, and in the grave the noble and the humble are levelled beneath the dust."

---

1. ibid p. 41 F
2. ibid p. 256 V. 10
3. ibid p. 163 V. 5 (to these examples should be added his verse in dīwān p. 142 V. 3)

His tone towards those who are to be degraded by it, is often one of sarcasm and taunting:

> [1]"O dwellers in the depths of graves! For those who come down to the grave, shall there be any turning back.
> What has become of those who left their sovereignty behind them, the owners of great domed pavilions and halls?
> Do they build palaces amongst you? Or have they any glory or importance?"

Nothing could illustrate his whole attitude more clearly than the following couplet:

> [2]"Be satisfied that Death comes to every tyrant.
> Rejoice that Death is the lot of every oppressor.
> How many a man whose bones lie rotting, once used to swagger when he walked abroad (in this life)?"

The word ارضَ (meaning 'be satisfied with'), which is used by Abu'l-Atāhiya in similar contexts in a number of[3] places, is itself the proof of the poet's attitude to the Death of those he regarded as tyrants.

The occasions on which verses similar to these were composed are even more convincing that such stanzas were not meant to be a religious warning, but were inspired by malice. A verse typical of this ill-spirit is the one intended to insult al-Qāsim, when he failed to acknowledge the poet's greeting.[4] Another is the verse recited in connection with

---

1. ibid p. 94 F
2. ibid p. 119 V.1.F
3. ibid p.101 V.14 and p. 113 (bottom)
4. surra p. 78 and aghani vol-3-159.

an incident concerning the great general Humaid al-Tūsī.[1] The latter was passing in procession, with horsemen and footmen ahead of him as was the custom. When the outriders came across a humble villager on his donkey, they whacked the donkey's face and pushed it out of Humaid's way. Meanwhile the haughty general kept his eyes fixed on his horse's mane, paying no attention to the bystanders, who were looking at him with wonder. This disdainful bearing provoked the poet, who was sitting at the roadside, to say:

> "There are children of Death who have all the haughtiness and arrogance you care (to mention). And for me Death is like a millstone turning (to grind) its children."

From these two lines and similar ones,[2] we cannot fail to become aware that Abu'l-Atāhiya was particularly fond of portraying Death as a millstone, with human beings as the grist of the grain. He himself drew attention to his predilection for the image, when he pointed out the following verse as his masterpiece:[3]

> "While people stay heedless, the millstone of Death is grinding."

In his passionate bitterness, the poet was not satisfied to see Death - as he put it in other verses -[4] 'slitting the throats of the aristocracy as ferociously as a butcher, or

1. Aghānī Vol. 3 p. 173 (bottom.)
2. dīwān p. 271 v. 3 and p. 272 v.13 and Aghānī Vol.3 p.159
3. Aghānī Vol. 3 p. 151 (near the bottom)
4. dīwān p. 101 (the lost verse)

preying[1] on them as a wild beast preys': he wanted them to be crushed to powder, so that no recognisable trace of them would be left. The process of the millstone took longer than mere slaughter, and so it prolonged his morbid enjoyment.

If the Koran, Traditions, and even the poetry of 'Adi b. Zaid, were most likely the models Abu'l-Atāhiya followed in his more[2] elegant verses on mortality, it is difficult to trace any literary origins for his poems expressing utter delight at the death of the aristocracy. They are far from the spirit of the poems by Muhalhil b. Rabi's or 'Antara b. Shaddād, in which they rejoice at the murder of their opponents. These pre-Islāmic poets were far more concerned with their own prowess than with the fall of their victims; indeed some of them pitied their killed opponents. There is only one verse in pre-Islāmic poetry, so far as we know, which has something in common with Abu'l-Atāhiya's poetry of the kind we are now discussing. It reads:

> [3]"I see the grave of a miser, who is stingy with his fortune, is just like the grave of a fool who squanders his on vanities."

The author of this verse, Tarafa b. al-'Abd, had squandered all his fortune on wine until he was, as he admitted[4] shunned

---

1. ibid p. 141 v. 3.
2. which were meant to be sermons.
3. Mu'allagāt p. 43 - Turkey 1320 A.H.
4. ibid

and deserted even by his close relations. Being, like Abu'l-Atāhiya, dissatisfied with his lot in this life, he cherished the equality that he would have in the Hereafter with those who were more prudent than he with their money. Clearly in another verse, Ṭarafa is rejoicing at the loss that misers and careful people eventually sustain:[1]

But to hate a whole class of society without a personal quarrel with each member of it, to feel relieved and happy at their deaths, and to express one's delight in poetry, was certainly something quite new in Arabic literature. Abu'l-Atāhiya was unprecedented, probably because no other poet before him had his outlook of mind formed amidst the same conditions as those under which our poet had suffered. Whatever his personal attitude towards the aristocracy might have been, Abu'l-Atāhiya would not necessarily have followed the line of attacking them in his poetry had not the idea of Death been stamped deeply on his mind from an early age. There was first the impression caused by the bloodshed that was taking place in Kufa or near it. His love for Salmā the mourning girl, had its lasting affect on him also. It looks as though even his guardian Ḥibbān contributed: after the death of his brother Mandal (towards the end of Mahdī's

---

1. ibid

reign), Hibbān mourned him in poetry that reveals much grief[1] and pity. Our poet, who was close to both brothers, must have been impressed by such elegies.

However, Abu'l-Atāhiya had no need of earlier classics to imitate. To rejoice at the death of one's enemy is a natural human weakness, which reveals itself strongly amongst base and oppressed peoples. Our poet, therefore, ought not to be regarded as the first person to have felt such a sentiment, but simply as the first Arabic writer to have expressed it repeatedly in his poetry.

Unlike the Koran, in which Death is mentioned for a different purpose, Abu'l-Atāhiya puts great emphasis on the actual event of Death and its immediate affect on the body, rather than on what is to happen later when the Day of Judgment comes. It is not difficult to see why he did so: as can be understood from one of his stanzas.[2]

> [3]"I questioned the grave: 'What became of them after they departed from me, the faces within you, covered with dust?'
> It replied: 'I have turned their fragrance to a stench in place of the aromas of sweet scents;
> And I have swallowed up bodies accustomed to luxury, whom a soft life made swagger (in the days when they were) flourishing.
> I have left naught save bare skulls, white and shiny, and hollowed bones."

---

1. Mizān (ميزان الاعتدال) Vol. 3 p. 199 (bottom)
2. dīwān p. 121 V. 9 F

3. dīwān p. 121 V. 9 F

he wanted to have a look[1] at the graves of the aristocracy and see them stripped of their power and finery. Such a sight would heal his inward wounds and ease his tense hatred; but speculation on the Day of Judgment was too abstract and philosophical to serve the purpose.

Abu'l-Atāhiya's attitude to death is not to be confused with that of Abu Al-'Ala al-Ma'arrī, who also makes many references to it in his poetry. The troubles prevailing throughout the Muslim world at that time, combined with his physical handicap that limited his personal pleasures and opportunities in life, pervaded Abu Al-'Ala's outlook with pessimism. Without hope of improvement, he saw no point in life;[2] and the peaceful solution for ending the unpleasant existence was Death, which was therefore delectable and welcome.[3] Whereas for Abu'l-Atāhiya Death was always an ugly and frightening event, which he threatened people with in many a verse; and when he rejoiced at it, it was because of its attack on his enemies.

---

1. ibid p. 120 V. 13.
2. In his opinion it was a crime to cause an innocent[4] child to come into this miserable world. In accordance with that doctrine, he abstained from marriage lest, as he put it, he should commit a crime like that which his father had committed against him by procreating him.
3. In one of his verses, he regards Death as a comfortable[5] sleep, while life is as tiring as sleeplessness.
4. Ibn Khallikā Vol. 1. p.243. Egypt 1937.
5. Soqt al-Zand p. 350 (middle) Egypt.

As we have seen a number of examples of verses that express the poet's ill-wishes for Hārūn personally or kings[1] in general, the question must arise: what was Hārūn's reaction to such verses, and is it not strange not to hear of any severe punishment inflicted upon the poet on account of them? On the other hand there is, in the first place, no evidence that all, or even some, of these reckless verses actually reached the Caliph. When Abu'l-Atāhiya's compositions were conveyed to Hārūn, it was usually through Zubaida and Fadl b. Rabi', both of whom were keen to convey to the Caliph only those compositions that served their ends. Second, and even more important, is the fact that the poet was the favourite of both Zubaida and Fadl b. Rabi'; he could be confident that no serious punishment would be inflicted on him while these two influential persons remained on his side. Thirdly, it was not an easy matter to prove that the poet had composed this verse or that out of malice. This was because Abu'l-Atāhiya had assumed the woollen garb of an ascetic, and was careful in some of his verses on Death to follow the line of Islamic tradition, as we pointed out earlier. So when the poet lost his self-control and expressed his ill-wishes, it could be doubtful whether he was being carried away in the torrent of his discourse, or whether he was merely taking up a different line of thought. As we have just said, all the

---

1. Many examples are to be found in his Dīwān almost everywhere.

more inflammatory verses were composed only on the occasions when the poet lost his self-control. It may have been that this was the reason why the Caliph gave him the benefit of the doubt.

ABU'L-ATAHIYA'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE ALID CAUSE.

With the establishment of the Abbasid Caliphate, the task of the Alids became very difficult. Shi'ite propaganda during the Ummayad reign was based on the fact that the Alids were the relations and heirs of the Prophet. But after the accession of the Abbāsids, this claim was effective no longer; both opponents claimed a close blood-relationship with the Prophet. The Abbāsids even alleged they had a better right to the Caliphate on these grounds than the Alids, as appears in this polemical verse by Marwān b. Abi Hafsa:[1]

> [2]"How could it be - and indeed it is not so - that the daughters' children should have the inheritance of the uncles'"

This verse was very upsetting to the Alids, who were stung to try to answer it with another, less successful, one:

> [3]"Why is it impossible? It certainly is possible that the daughters' children, etc."

After they realized they had been forced to share their principal advantage, with its strong appeal for the masses, the Alids sought other grounds on which to base their propaganda against the Abbāsids. They advanced more than one argument. But we are concerned here with only one of them,

---

1. Who thereby wrote his own death-warrant, since he was assassinated by a fanatical Alid for it: Aghani Vol. 9 p. 48 (bottom)
2. Aghānī Vol. 9 p. 48 (middle)
3. ibid.

namely the devotion and piety of the Alid leaders, in contrast to the frivolity of the Abbāsid Caliphs. It was the task of Abu'l-Atāhiya, whom we have shown elsewhere to have been a Shi'ite, to hammer hard at that point. Admittedly the poet had numerous reasons for attacking Hārūn's way of life; nevertheless, his bias in favour of the Alids must be counted as another in addition. One can imagine that Abu'l-Atāhiya's ceaseless denunciation of worldly pleasures must have been all the more embarrassing to Hārūn in this situation, and correspondingly welcomed by the Alids.

Unfortunately for the Abbāsids, Hārūn's rival claimant, Mūsā'l-Kāzim, was an extremely righteous man.[1] It seems that Mūsā exercised such influence over people by the attractiveness of his strict and pious personality, that Hārūn was afraid of him, and[2] imprisoned him to spare himself any possible trouble. It is reported that Mūsā's followers went as far as regarding him as their actual[3] Caliph, and making over to him a big share[4] of their wealth.

Hārūn did not give up however. If he could not be as good as al-Kāzim, he could at least appear so by assuming the cloak of piety for show. Thus we find him giving great

---

1. Of course, in the eyes of his followers he was infallible.
2. Encyclopaedia of Islām Vol. 3 part 2. p. 741
3. ibid (top)
4. ibid

sums[1] of money daily as alms; performing, or claiming to perform, an imaginary[2] number of prostrations. He also went regularly alternate[3] years to Mecca as a pilgrim and on expeditions with the army for the Holy War. To make a show of his exploits, he wore a cap[4] on which were written the words "Pilgrim and Crusader" (غازي حاج). Poets, Abu Nuwās in particular, sought the favour of the Caliph by celebrating these deeds. In one of his poems Abū Nuwāas had to say:[5]

> "You have worshipped God as is His due, and you have exerted yourself more than the (average) pious man."

Abu'l-Atāhiya, however, did not acquiesce in such pretensions. He warned Hārūn, as is clear from the following verse, not to delude himself, since people were too intelligent to be deceived by such hypocrisy:

> [6]"Say to him who impersonates pious men,
> Let him not deceive himself by his impersonation.
> Far from it! The piety of a truly pious man cannot be hidden; nor can a man hide his pretentiousness."

Beside the many poems denouncing Hārūn, we find more than one stanza celebrating the devotion of the Alid Iman and calling on people to support him. Or at least, so we interpret the verses given below: in coming to this conclusion we have relied on the spirit of the verses combined

---

1. Hkudarī Vol. 2 p. 135 (bottom)
2. ibid
3. ibid
4. ibid p. 136 (bottom)
5. his dīwān p. 62 V. 5 Egypt 1898
6. dīwān p. 287 (top)

with the background of the poet's life and the times, rather than on any precise evidence. We may even go so far as to suggest that it is Mūsā al-Kāzim, kept in prison by Hārūn from 179[1] to 183 A.H., when Mūsā died, who is alluded to by these verses.

In the first of these stanzas the part that concerns us goes like this:

[2]"O you who find honour in this World and its base soil!
it is no honour, for earth to exalt earth.
If you want to find the noblest of all mankind, then look for a king in the guise of a pauper.
He it is whose sanctity is great among men; and who is fit for Life and for Religion.

Goldziher[3] sees in this stanza an allusion to the Buddha; on the other hand Nicholson[4] rejects that interpretation and regards it as praise for the man that follows the ascetic way of life, without reference to any individual in particular. We, however, see it differently from either, and regard it as a reference to the dispute between the Alids and the Abbāsids over the Caliphate. The poet praises his subject as the noblest and most venerated of all mankind, and that is just what the head of the Alids was regarded as by his followers, on account of his direct descent from the Prophet. The poet also describes him as a king, and this

---

1. Encyclopaedia of Islām Vol. 3, part 2, p. 741 (top).
2. dīwān p. 274 V. 8 F.
3. Transactions of the Ninth Congress of Orientalists, Vol. II, p. 114.
4. L.H.A. p.297-298.

fits in with the fact that Mūsā al-Kāẓim was treated as Caliph by the Shi'a, and was given tribute by them. Moreover, we know that the Caliph was recognised to be the spiritual and secular head of the nation; who then would fail to discover, especially in the second hemistich of the last line, a very thinly veiled reference to the Alid Iman? It would seem that both Goldziher and Nicholson ailed to give enough attention to the background of the verse; nor did they give sufficient weight to the last hemistich, which we regard as decisive for interpreting the stanza.

Similar is the nine-line stanza beginning:

> [1]"The truly happy man is the person who fears God and leads a good life."

Eight lines of it are devoted to the description of a wholly pious and ascetic man. The ninth and last line is a call to people to hold fast to the man described, if they be given the good fortune to meet him. Again there is the question: is this merely a description of some unidentifiable ascetic, or a reference to a particular person, viz, the Imam of the Alids, with the aim of calling on people to join him in his struggle against the established regime? We prefer the latter suggestion, as being more in keeping with the poet's cast of mind.[2] The second hemistich of the second line can thus be

---

1. dīwān p. 79F (bottom)
2. It has been shown in another part of this thesis that Abu'l-Atāhiya was a revolutionary Alid, a member of an Alid sect that urged each one of its members to join any Alid Imam, should he revolt against the government.

taken as a reference to the infalibility of the Alid Immam.

Our third example opens with:

[1]"O my two friends, the plight will perhaps be eased.
For him who desires the Truth, the Truth is clear."

The poet begins this stanza by urging the Alids not to be disheartened, because their plight is nearly at an end. At the same time he calls on them to hasten that end by taking action. He proceeds to tell them that there is no doubt of the fact that justice and truth are on the side of the Alids; and that the piety and devotion of the Alid Imam are reflected in his face as a shining light. Since the issue is quite obvious, they will have no excuse for their failure to support the cause. The poet afterwards warns Hārūn that his power is inevitably coming to an end; and at the same time anticipates ultimate victory for the Alids. Finally he warns people not to refrain from supporting the Alids for fear of being deprived of their worldly possessions, reminding them that their happiness in the Hereafter is more important than the benefits of this World.

The fourth[2] and last stanza of this kind seems to have been composed after the death of Mūsā'l-Kāẓim in prison. In it the poet regards Mūsā as still alive, on account of the undying memories people preserve of him; while it is his

---

1. dīwān p. 62 V.9 F
2. ibid p. 40 V. 11 F

opponent and murderer Hārūn who is as if dead in reality.[1] This interpretation may be confirmed by the following two lines, which come towards the end of the stanza:

> "My people still do not lack an orator, nor a poet, nor an arbitrator who is just in his judgment, decisive and sure.
> Nor one (to act like) a snake in the ground, (its bite) beyond hope of healing, - you can see it now wriggling towards its enemy."

Does this not mean that although Mūsā died, there were still in existence all kinds of people whom the Alid movement needed: orators, poets and strategists, who could be as deadly as poisonous snakes, and who were lying in wait for the Abbāsids?

The stanza the poet composed in celebration of Abadān[2] (the town in South Persia) may also have been inspired by his sympathy with the Alids. A curious collection of people settled there at that time, pretending to be ascetics and living on money given to them out of charity.[3] Were they really ascetics; or disguised Alid missionaries for whom the poet wanted to make propaganda by praising their devotions? The fact that Abadan is the nearest Persian town to Kufa from which Shi'ism spread to Persia may confirm our suggestion.

---

1. It was alleged that Mūsā was poisoned in prison by Hārūn's orders.
2. dīwān p. 218 F (bottom)
3. Yaqūt V. 6 p.105. Egypt 1916

Besides these stanzas, there are many other isolated verses that the poet was probably concerned with the Alid cause in. For instance, we find him warning people at great[1] length not to make their secrets public. The earnestness with which he speaks leads us to suspect that this was no ordinary issue. In such verses the poet may be urging the Alids to hold to their doctrine of 'taqiyya',[2] so that their underground movement can spread out safely.

In one of his verses Abu'l-Atāhiya claims that there is an inward and[3] an outward explanation for every speech. In another, he asks people not to speculate[4] beyond the limits of their knowledge, since every subject has two sides: the one can be known, and the other is unknown. In these verses he may be referring to what is 'Batin' (concealed), knowledge of which is supposed to be a privilege of the Alid Imam.

Last but by no means least in Abu'l-Atāhiya's contribution to the Alid cause, was his help in keeping up the spirits of the distressed and disheartened devotees. The Alid's need for such heartening thoughts was such that they resorted to the idea of 'raj'a'[5] to prevent their followers

1. dīwān p. 215 V. 9F
2. An Alid doctrine that teaches it is permissible for Alids to pretend to follow any other sect, if that is the only way to secure one's safety.
3. Baraniq p. 186 (the orjaza)
4. dīwān p. 193 V.4.
5. The doctrine of the eventual resurrection of their Imam.

from falling into despair and apathy. Abu'l-Atāhiya's verses on the disasters looming ahead of rulers, and the eventual destruction of these tyrants by Death, must have been of great value in the darkest days.

ABU'L-ATAHIYA'S ATTACK ON THE 'ULAMA.

Since piety was one of the great issues on which the Alids based their propaganda against the Abbāsids, the latter attempted to create an air of religion around themselves by gathering the most influential and venerated 'ulama together under their control. However, they did not always succeed in doing so, since many important 'ulama sympathised with the Alids. For instance, Abū Hanīfa had sent money to[1] Zaid b. Ali; and Mālik had encouraged[2] the people of Madīnā to join Muhammed b. Abdullah in his revolution against Mansūr. By his refusing the office of 'qādī, and his flight[3] lest he were compelled to accept it, Sufyān showed his reluctance to co-operate with Mahdī.

Some of the 'ulama, however, saw no harm in associating themselves with the Abbasids. Amongst these were most of the Mu'tazila, whose alliance with the Abbasids was firm[4] even before the Umhyyads were overcome. There were also other individuals: such as Sharīk, who accepted the office of qādī after Sufyān had refused it - an action which caused Sharīk to be lampooned in verse. Abū al-Bakhtari[5] made

1. DUHA'L. Islām Vol. 3 p.273 f (bottom.
2. Tabarī Vol. 3 p. 200
3. Mir'āt al-Janān Vol. 1 p. 347
4. Encyclopaedia of Islām Vol. 3 part 2 p.789
5. Tabari vol-3-p-619

himself unpopular by releasing Hārūn from the vow that the Caliph gave to Yahya b. Abdullah not to kill him after his surrender; this verdict was disapproved of by Muhammed b. al-Hassan, who did not absolve the Caliph from his covenant. At the top of all the 'ulama who associated themselves with the government, came Abu Yūsuf, whom Hārūn took as companion and chancellor.

It was this state-controlled type of 'ulama whom Abu'l-Atāhiya satirised in his poetry. As an Alid, he regarded the Abbasids as usurpers, with whom no good Muslim should[1] co-operate. Although his verses against the 'ulama are few, they show us to some extent the poet's reasons for attacking them. For instance, he blames them in one verse[2] for remaining silent in face of the many violations of religion committed by the Abbasids. Their reason for such silence, he says, is their desire to maintain their friendship with the Abbasids, and consequently to attain wealth and power. By this remark he is most likely referring to Abu Yūsuf, who was so close to Hārūn, yet did not raise his voice against the Caliph's transgressions. Abu'l-Atāhiya's verse reminds us of a similar remark by the poet al-Attābī, who said[3] to

1. In his dīwan p. 307 he advises people and perhaps 'ulama in particular to busy themselves with their study and avoid palaces.
2. dīwān p. 37
3. Tabaqāt (Ibn al-Mu'taz) p. 123

Abu Yūsuf: "Fear God, and do not let yourself be a shield for the unjust governor. Caliphs do not gather the 'ulama round them out of interest in them or in their counsel, but in order to weaken the position of pious people, since the 'ulama's silence can be interpreted as an approval of the Caliph's deeds." It was that ambiguous silence that Abu'l-Atāhiya resented and attached in his verse.

In another stanza[1] the poet accuses the 'ulama of causing Islām to shed tears, and of remaining unmoved at the pitiful sight of those tears.

He proceeds to condemn them for disagreeing with one another, and for sticking fanatically to their opinions; and he concludes by wondering which of them can be relied on. This verse may be taken as a reference to the disagreement between Muhammad b. al-Hassān and Ibn al-Bakhtari, which we mentioned in a previous paragraph.

It seems that relations between Abu'l-Atāhiya and the Mu'tazila were very bad indeed. In their argument[2] with him about the doctrine of 'qadar' (predestination), they showed the poet's utter lack of education. Moreover they bitterly attacked him for his failure to practise the virtues he advocated.[3]

---

1. Dīwān 11 v. 2 F
2. Aghānī Vol. 3 p. 128 (middle)
3. According to the Aghānī, one of the Mu'tazila reproached him with appealing to people to give alms, though Ab'l-Atāhiya never did so himself. Vol. 3 p. 132 (bottom)

In return the poet in one stanza[1] accuses the Mu'tazila of being so greedy that they do not hesitate to rob widows, orphans and the aged, of their rags. To rally the common people round him in his attack, Abu'l-Atāhiya demonstnated the folly of the Mu'tazila in involving themselves, and the Muslim world with them, in an unnecessary argument: to wit, the question of the 'creation' or 'non-creation' of the Koran. Such verses were bound to be enthusiastically received by the masses, who resented the doctrines of the Mu'tazila concerning the Koran; and likewise by the Sunnis, who were tortured and imprisoned for their stand against the Mu'tazilia[2]

The reasons for such clashes were probably the dislike the poet took of the Mu'tazila's alliance with the Abbasids; and on the Mu'tazila's side, their disgust with the poet for his ill-advised interfering[3] in theology, about which he knew nothing.

---

1. dīwān p. 207 V. 9 F
2. The Mu'tazila being at that time allied with the government.
3. his reason for such interfering is mentioned in another place of this thesis. (Chapter 5).

THE VERSES OF CONTENTMENT

In more than one of his verses composed after 180 A.H. Abu'l-Atāhiya claimed that he had at last become a contented man.[1] The following couplet shows us what was his idea of contentment:

> [2]"I have decked out my character with contentment and pride, and thus my character is as a store of gold to me.
> I have come across no lot in life that (benefited) its recipient as contentment does, nor as does being courteous so long as one is asking for something."

It is clear from this quotation that the poet saw no contradiction between contentment and the quest for money, provided the latter were done in a polite and reasonable way. His connection agrees with that of the Arabs.[3]

Our task now is to find the reasons that caused the poet to set himself this standard of contentment; and whether it came about through a change of heart or not. Then we shall see how far he stuck to his principles.

Greedy and impatient as he was, Aby'l-Atāhiya made himself unwelcome and even[4] distasteful wherever he went. As a Court poet, however, he did not fully realise this fact, since many of his patrons kept peace with him for fear of

---

1. dīwān p. 199 V. 14.
2. ibid p. 26 V. 9 and 10
3. According to these Lisān al-Arab (Vol. 10 p. 172) قنوع generally means to be satisfied with your lot. But it quotes al-Farra'a as considering قنوع to mean asking for something, and then being satisfied with what you are given.
4. dīwān p. 79 V. 3 and 4.

arousing his satire, which could be dangerous at that time. But when he left the court in 180 A.H. those who had sought his favour on grounds of expediency were relieved at his departure, and their simulated friendship turned at once to neglect. A short poem,[1] composed on that occasion,[2] illustrates the way that he was treated by his former patrons, and his bewilderment at such treatment. In that poem, and in many similar[3] verses, Abu'l-Atāhiya heaped blame on his deserting patrons, whom he had regarded, perhaps rather blindly, as friends: and lamented the lack of sincere amity amongst people.

There was an obvious lesson to be learned from such treatment: the poet had to do something to change people's attitude towards him, and so resume good relations with them. He had to restrain his lust for wealth, and behave sensibly when approaching people for their money. So that his talk of contentment was probably not the result of a change of heart, but was rather an attempt to adapt himself to the new situation that he found himself in at that time. In the following verses we have Abu'l-Atāhiya giving himself good advice on the subject - and incidentally revealing very

---

1. ibid p. 279
2. It is clear from the first verse that it was composed shortly after he had assumed the garb of ascetics.
3. ibid p. 255-9 260 V 9 F and 275 V 9 F

clearly what was at the bottom of his new mood:

> [1]"Take what is pure of all the things of this World,
> and leave aside what is impure.
> And be courteously tactful to all men. Accept from
> people what they give freely:
> For men are only like glass - if you don't treat it
> gently it breaks."

In any case, Abu'l-Atāhiya's appearance as an ascetic made it necessary for him to show less interest in money, whether he liked it or not. In point of fact many rival poets wondered[2] how he could reconcile his ascetic pose with his keen acquisitiveness.

The question remains: did the poet practise what he preached? The answer is that he tried his hardest to do so, but did not always succeed. For instance, he once reproached the Caliph Ma'mūn for his failure to send him money: the verse reads:

> [3]"You strike people down with Indian swords for their
> breach of faith, yet you forget to pay your debts."

On another occasion, while he was asking Fadl b. Rabī for some money, he went to extravagant lengths of flattery scarcely worthy of a contented man: he expressed his willingness to make a sandal for his patron from the very skin[4] of his face, if he were only able to do so. On yet another occasion he severely criticised[5] his friend Sālih al-Shohrozūrī for the

---

1. ibid p. 118 V. 13 F
2. Aghānī Vol. 3 p. 164
3. ibid p. 151
4. ibid p. 166 (top)
5. ibid p. 174

latter's hesitation to wheedle some money for him from Fadl b. Yahya.

Some indulgence, however, ought to be granted the poet when his conduct is judged; for he was, as can be seen from his poetry, struggling to break free from a very narrow mind. In several verses he argues with himself, and blames himself for failing to live up to his own standards. One such stanza reads:

> [1]"O my soul! be not disturbed, but have faith in your Lord and ask Him for help.
> "O my soul! you are mean; and meanness belongs to the weak of faith."

We would conclude by recalling something mentioned earlier: namely that a great proportion of Abu'l-Atāhiya's verses on contentment must have been inspired by his ambition to establish himself as an admonisher. Therefore they cannot always be taken as binding oaths. Yet other verses were intended to ward off the charges of rival poets that he was greedy: to speak continually about contentment was likely to confuse his audience and nonplus his critics.

---

1. dīwān p. 277 V. 6 and 7 (similar verses are to be found in the same work p. 264 V. 1 F)

ABU'L-ATĀHIYA'S ASCETICISM.

Any idea that Abu'l-Atāhiya was a true ascetic should be put aside. An essential feature of asceticism is to renounce the world with all it stands for: wealth, power and so on. Yet our poet remained, as we have seen, acquisitive, even avaricious, till the end of his life.

Particularly, we should not be deceived by the verses in which Abu'l-Atāhiya speaks of renouncing[1] the World, and proclaims his disgust with it. Such verses were inspired by the bitter agony he felt on account of his failure in life; so they express his discontent with his fortune in the World, rather than his voluntary contempt for this Life as such. Had these announcements been from the heart, they ought to have been - as one of his enemies[2] said - supported by action.

In the same way must be interpreted his putting on the woollen garb of the ascetics, and his shutting himself up in his home. The following verses[3] show that he did this because he was tired of lkfe and people, and not on account of religious feeling: (this stanza was sent to Hārūn, when he asked the poet his reason for confining himself to his

---

1. ibid p. 194 V. 12 F and p. 199 V. 3 F
2. Ibrāhim b. al Mahdī Aghānī Vol. 3 p. 177 at the end of his satire.
3. Aghānī V. 3. p.

home):

> "I am tired of people and their characters; I have come to the point where I feel at ease alone.
> "How many people there are, by my life! And how few of them count in the real reckoning!"

The Aghānī gives a complete[1] account of one of these self-imposed detentions. It tells us that on the eve of his confinement, the poet ate and drank with his friend Mukhāriq, the singer, until they were full up. Then Mukhāriq sang for the poet many of the latter's verses in which he lamented his failure in love and in life. Finally the poet poured away all the wine he had, destroyed all the musical instruments, and began his self-confinement. Dissatisfied with the coarse woollen clothing of the ascetics, he dressed himself in two baskets made of palm-tree leaves.

This sort of behaviour suggests a man mentally sick rather than a true ascetic. It looks as though the poet was struggling within his own over-ambitious self. When he mixed with the community, it pained him to find himself less worthy or successful than some of them in one way or another. To avoid such pain and envy, he shut himself up. This explanation of his action is confirmed by his words to his friend Mukhāriq, who went to him to sing him a song the poet desired to hear: [2]"Please do not do it, because I am afraid

---

1. Vol. 3 p. 180 (middle) F
2. ibid p. 181 line 12 F.

that your singing may stir up my love for the World now that I have brought myself under control,"

The poet himself was quite modest about the whole matter, and did not claim that he was a true ascetic. He explained in plain language that he made some attempts in the direction of asceticism; but that all of them failed when his will failed him and his nature overcame him. In that sense he says:

> [1]"I pretended to give up this World, while really I was longing for it: I see that my longing was mixed up with my renunciation.
> I had accustomed myself to a particular habit,[2] and I stuck to it. It seems very difficult for me to break away from my habit.
> A weak will goes with a defective mind; and if my mind were more sound, my will would be sounder too."

---

1. dīwān p. 50 V. 4 F.
2. i.e. wanting money.

PESSIMISM IN ABU'L-ATĀHIYA'S POETRY.

The unpleasant conditions in Kufa by and large, and within his own family circle, combined to sow the seeds of pessimism in Abu'l-Atāhiya's mind at an early age. The sad looks of his poor and helpless father and mother must have contributed largely. The poet's own experiences in later life, especially his failure in love, perpetuated his pessimistic outlook.

In addition - or perhaps partly as a result - the poet's anti-social traits, like his greed and hatred for his superiors, made him unable to live in peace with his society, and made life an all the more unhappy place for him. He would fly into a temper for the slightest reason. Indeed the many[1] anecdotes about him in the Aghānī show that he was always asking for trouble, and alienating himself from people unnecessarily.

It is against this background that we must understand the great number of verses where the poet repeatedly complains of Life and its mishaps. In the course of his complaint, he alleges that happiness is always fighting a losing[2] battle against grief; that opportunities for rejoicing are but few, while[3] disasters press thick and fast upon us. In his final opinion, Life is a long succession[4] of sorrow and horror.

---

1. Aghānī Vol. 3 p. 134 (bottom) and 168 F (bottom) and 169 (top) and 171 (top)
2. dīwān p. 27 V. 13.
3. ibid p. 49 V. 12.
4. ibid p. 5 V. 1.

The more we seek pleasure and wealth in Life, the more it vexes us; and the only way out of the troubles of this life is to break away[1] from it altogether.

Apart from the many verses on the theme, scattered here and there in his 'Dīwān', we find sometimes a whole poem that is wholly devoted to expressing his pessimistic view on Life. A typical one begins:

> [2]"Beget for Death, and build for ruin: for all of you shall come to destruction."

Following the poet's thought throughout the poem, we find that what perplexes him most is the cat-and-mouse game the World has been playing him: he complains that life gave to him, and took back what it gave. He complains also that his dreams never come true, and his hopes end always in disappointment.

In a similar poem, he laments the[3] perplexity and bewilderment that the World heaped on him at the time when he was most enamoured of this Life.

Some of his meditation about the World, however, was an indirect attack on his superiors. By showing the futility, unworthiness and transitoriness of this World, he was trying to spoil the happiness of those who had gained more from it than he. At the same time, he was also easing the feelings of those who, like himself, had little from it.

---

1. ibid p. 189 V. 2.
2. ibid p. 23 F (bottom)
3. ibid p. 199 V. 6 and 7.

As in his verses on Contentment and Death, here also he was sometimes merely quoting the sayings of the Prophet and other sages, for the sake of gaining prestige. The Koran[1] and Traditions had much to say about the unworthiness of this Life, no doubt with the purpose of consoling the first group of Muslims, who were mostly from amongst the poor and humble.

1. Chapter of 8 the family of Imran V. 12 and 13, also the chapter of "Ornaments of Gold" v. 32 and 33 and 34.

THE SIMILARITY BETWEEN ABU'L-ATĀHIYA'S ACTIVITY AND OTHER CONTEMPORARY MOVEMENTS.

AND OTHER CONTEMPORARY MOVEMENTS.

It is necessary for the complete understanding of Abu'l-Atāhiya's poetry, to give some description of the various movements that had something in common with the poet's activities and coincided with them.

First of all: Abu'l-Atāhiya's religious poetry must be looked upon as connected with the widespread ascetic movement that undertook, as one of its aims, to correct and resist an erring government. We may quote, in support of our opinion, the words of Goldziher:[1] "We have data for the assumption that the trend towards asceticism coincides with resistance against the authorities." In his 'Literary History',[2] Nicholson stressed the point by saying: "There were many who shared these views, and their determination to renounce the world and live solely for God was strengthened by their disgust with a tyrannical and impious government, and by the almost uninterrupted spectacle of bloodshed, rapine, and civil war."

Fudail b. Iyad and Ibn al-Sammāk were amongst those who admonished Hārūn. Al-Yāfi'ī reports[3] that Hārūn said to Fudail: "What a wonderful ascetic you are." Whereupon Fudail replied "But you are more wonderful than I; I have only given

---

1. Mohamed and Islām p. 160
2. p. 225 (bottom)
3. Mir'āt al-Jarān (مرآة الجنان) Vol.1.p. 415

up this Life, which will come to an end soon; but you have given up the Hereafter, which is eternal."

A shining example of Abu'l-Atāhiya's contemporary ascetics is 'Abdullah b. 'Abdu'l-'Azīz, who boldly criticised Hārūn while on the Pilgrimage, saying to him:[1] "When an ordinary person squanders his own money, he deserves to be put under restraint. What then ought to be done with him who squanders the wealth of all the Muslims?" Later on he intended to visit Hārūn in Baghdād, but the latter resented his visit and asked[2] 'Abdullah's relatives to keep him away. In the course of his conversation with them, Hārūn said: "I tolerated him in Arabia (on the Pilgrimage). But is he coming now to the capital of my empire to incite my loyal servants against me?" It is worth noticing that 'Abdullah expressed his[3] admiration for some of Abu'l-Atāhiya's verses concerning Contentment.

However, there was during Hārūn's reign a group of people - we might call them 'opportunists' - whom Fadl b. Rabī' and Zubaida came in time to use as tools for influencing Hārūn. And although our poet claimed to belong to the ascetics, he was in reality one of these 'opportunists'. The difference between Abu'l-Atāhiya and true ascetics is not to be found in his words, in which he resembles them deceptively.

---

1. ibid p. 367
2. Tabarī Vol. 3 p. 755
3. Aghani Vol. 3 p. 131 (middle)

but in his aims. For while sincere ascetics are inspired in their devotions by religious feelings, Abu'l-Atāhiya was moved by personal ambitions or grievances: serving the cause of Fadl and Zubaida, revenging himself on the aristocracy, or building up his own prestige.

Each member of the opportunist group had to serve the cause of Fadl and Zubaida in his own way: Abu'l-Atāhiya, as we now know, was the first poet to utilise ascetic poetry for their ends. There even appears to have been some sort of tacit agreement to keep order between members of the group, as the following story[1] suggests.

"Once Abu Nuwās composed some religious poetry. On learning that, our poet became alarmed and sent one of his friends to Abū Nuwās, asking him to compose no more poetry on this subject. In the course of his message our poet said, "Remind Abū Nuwās that I have left for him all the themes of poetry except one subject only, to which I have confined myself, and that is asceticism. And I will not let anyone share it with me." Embarrassed by this message, Abū Nuwās paused for a moment, then replied, "It is a matter of great sorrow for me not to go on with a subject that I am very interested in. But I cannot go against Abu'l-Atāhiya's wishes."

Certainly it is obvious from this anecdote that neither Abu'l-Atāhiya nor Abū Nuwās was sincere in composing ascetic poetry. Had they been really sincere, the former would have had no cause to be alarmed, nor would the latter have been forced to give it up. True ascetics do not resent the enlargement of their group, as our poet did; and a true

---

1. Akhbār Abī Numās p. 70 (bottom) Egypt 1924.

lover of asceticism does not abandon it merely because someone else does not want him to practise it. If we recall that Abū Nuwās was beaten nearly to death[1] for praising the slave-girls, and then rewarded generously for disparaging them, we realise why he began to think of composing ascetic poetry: he had learned his lesson that the service of Zubaida could be very profitable. Still Abū Nuwās dared not challenge our poet in his own preserve, and so withdrew peacably.

It seems that Abū Nuwās was not the only man to covet Abu'l-Atāhiya's position. The latter's own son, who certainly knew his father's way of life as well as anyone, for some time entertained the idea of imitating him in composing religious poetry, and sharing with him the rewards of Fadl and Zubaida. To prepare himself for the adventure he adopted[2] ascetic habits, as his father had done to mark the beginning of his new life. Abu'l-Atāhiya, who knew how difficult it was to play that game, rightly advised his son to go back to his trade and leave asceticism aside. In the course of his speech the poet said to his son: "Asceticism needs sweet manners, which you do not possess." This remark, in our opinion, indicates that the proposed asceticism was not for God's sake.

To show how common pretended asceticism had become, we may recount the case of Ishaq al-Mawsilī. Ishaq for some

---

1. Supra p. ~~50~~ 81
2. Zahr al-Ādāb Vol. 3 p. 225 (bottom) Egypt 1931

reason did not want to attend Ma'mun's parties; perhaps because the Caliph had failed to agree to some of his requests. Yet to refuse to entertain the Caliph was considered intolerably disrespectful. So the only safe way to put pressure on the Caliph was to stay[1] at home and pretend to be converted to asceticism - a device that Abu'l-Atāhiya had used earlier with Hārūn, with the aim of compelling the Caliph to make an effort over the problem of 'Utba. Later, when Ishāq was persuaded to return to the Court, he cast aside the woollen clothing of the ascetics and returned to his art, singing the verses[2] that Abu'l-Atāhiya recited to Hārūn when he went back to the court.

The case of Bahlūl is uncertain: some[3] critics counted him among the sincere admonishers, but he does not seem really to have been. He pretended to be crazy, yet many of his actions point to his[4] shrewdness; and one can assume (as the author of 'The Two Queens of Baghdad'[5] does) that there was method in his madness. It is most likely that he was one of these people who acted as agents for Zubaida and Fadl b. Rabī'. Like asceticism for Abu'l-Atāhiya, madness to him was a mask to cover his real self. This mask Bahlūl made use of in order to launch remarks at Hārūn which were at the same

---

1. Aghānī Vol. 5. p. 101 (bottom)
2. ibid p. 102 (top)
3. Mi'rāt al-Janān Vol. 1 p. 444 (Hyderabad 1337 A.H.)
4. Mas'ūdī Vol. 6 p. 290
5. p. 167, (middle) p.

time amusing and in the interests of his patrons. As later in the West, jesters were considered an effective means of drawing the attention of monarchs to important issues without offending them. The explanation is confirmed by the facts that he used to admonish[1] Hārūn - of course in his round-about way - and that Zubaida was kind[2] to him.

Mansūr b. 'Ammār, a very eloquent storyteller and admonisher, was very likely yet another member of the group that we are here concerned with. It seems that, while Abu' l-Atāhiya was trying to influence the Caliph's mind through ascetic poetry, Mansūr was pursuing the same end by his tales. Mansūr's success in this direction was doubtless the reason for the prolonged quarrel between him and Abu'l-Atāhiya, who saw in him a great rival for influence. Although this was the basic reason, it seems that the actual dispute began when our poet slighted Mansūr by accusing him of stealing[3] his speech about the Mosquito from a Kufan. When he heard that, Mansūr spared no effort to damage Abu'l-Atāhiya's reputation. He accused our poet of heresy, an accusation that caused Abu'l-Atāhiya great trouble[4] at the hands of the common people. In return, our poet revenged himself on Mansūr by satirising him in a number of verses, some of which were very biting indeed. For instance, he accused Mansūr of

---

1. Mir'āt al-Janān Vo. p.
2. Two Queens of Baghdād p. 167
3. Aghānī Vol 3. p. 142 (bottom)
4. ibid p. 151 (middle.

hypocrisy in the form of admonishing people to be good while he himself was extremely bad; and he likened him in this to a man that covers up other people's private parts while his own remained naked.[1]

These were by no means the only people engaged in the service of Fadl and Zubaida. We have good reason to believe that the intriguers did not let pass a narrator, singer, jester,[2] or anyone close to the Caliph, without using him. The task of the reciters was to convey to the Caliph Abu'l-Atāhiya's poetry, and similar verses and stories that might serve the cause of the Queen and the Chamberlain. Ibn al-'Arabī, to give an example that concerns us particularly, seems to have conveyed many of Abu'l-Atāhiya's poems to Hārūn;[3] indeed this may be why he was such an ardent[4] admirer of Abu 'l-Atāhiya. We have already mentioned the activities of al-'Asmā'ī, another important narrator. Then too, much of the instigation against the Barmakides was put on the tongues of singers.[5]

---

1. ibid p. 142 (bottom)
2. Khudarī Vol. 2 p. 135.
3. There is a reference to this in Abu'l-Atāhiya's 'Dīwān p. 197.
4. Ibid
5. It is said that a couplet of Omar b. Abi Rabi'a's, sung in front of Hārūn with that purpose, helped to hasten the disaster that befell the Vizieral house. The couplet runs:

> "Would that Hind would perform promptly what she promises, and cure my soul of what I feel.
> Would that she would act independently just for once;
> only the weak do not act for themselves."

Another group that Abu'l-Atāhiya had something in common with, was the 'hypocrites'. Like our poet, each member of that group adopted a particular sign of piety, and kept on practising it with the purpose of making himself popular at a time when religion and devotion were a sure way to popularity. Thus while Abu'l-Atāhiya chose preaching and admonishing as his path to widespread esteem, one called al-Nawshajānī chose fasting, and another called Qaḥtaba chose prayer, and yet another mountebank exaggerated ablution. (الوضوء) Curiously enough, these people were so notorious that the Caliph himself had full knowledge of their tricks.[1]

Finally, our task would not be complete without a glance at Ṣālih b. 'Abdu Al-Quddūs, who had much in common with our poet. Even it may well be that Ṣālih had a great influence on Abu'l-Atāhiya who must have met him since they both lived in Iraq.[2] Ṣālih's impression on our poet showed itself clearly after 180 A.H., when Abu'l-Atāhiya began to imitate Ṣālih in composing verses of morals and maxims. It was by just such verses that Ṣālih had become the famous admonisher that Abu'l-Atāhiya aspired to be. Both of them disliked the government of the day, and incited people against it. On account of his opposition, Ṣālih was accused of

---

1. Khudari Vol. 2 p. 226 (bottom) (there were many other hypocrites beside these as it is clear in the referred to book).
2. Ṣālih was killed in the reign of Mahdī.

heresy and put to death[1]. (It must be remembered that the charge of heresy at that time was a pretext often used to eliminate enemies of the regime). Ṣāliḥ's real crime seems to have been his sermons, which he used to preach at[2] Basra, and in the course of which he used to rouse the people against the government. In one of his surviving sermons,[3] he treats co-operation with unjust governors as a grievous sin. His poetry too shows a hostile attitude towards the governing class:

> [4]"I have got used to my solitude and confined myself to my home; thus my joy and pleasure were achieved. As long as I live I shall not be ever saying[5] (such things as): 'The army has gone on' or 'The prince has come'."

---

1. Ibn 'Asākir Vol. 6 p. 373 (top)
2. ibid
3. Al-Mashriq (the periodical) year 24 p. 336.(
4. Ibn 'Arākir Vol. 6 p. 375 (middle)
5. As the hangers-on of generals and royalty are.

CHAPTER 5. HIS RELIGIOUS BELIEFS.

Introduction. Abu'l-Atāhiya was accused[1] of Heresy by his contemporaries and was suspected[2] of it by later critics. It was known that he had definite views on theology. We hope, however, to establish here that he did not seriously depart from orthodox Islam. As far as theology was concerned, our task will be to show that he was merely a layman. We shall see how all his views on theological matters were not the outcome of systematic and comprehensive study, but rather the expression of his particular outlook on life and his personal experiences of it. He was more guided in these ideas by his temperament than by his mind. That is why they did not constitute a complete and consistent[3] doctrine, but mere fragments of thoughts borrowed from here and there.

His Heresy Although our poet was accused of heresy more than once in his lifetime, only one accusation levelled against him by Mansūr b. 'Ammār, a plausible and eloquent admonisher, was serious. Mansūr based his accusation on two points. First, that the poet had composed some verses in which he showed little respect for Islam. For instance, he trifled with the maidens of Paradise in his poetry, and regarded his beloved 'Utba as more beautiful than they:[4]

---

1. Aghānī Vol. 3 p. 142 (bottom)
2. Nicholson L.H.A. p. 296 and 297 (bottom)
3. As Abbas b. Rustum stated Aghānī Vol. 3 p. 128
4. ibid Vol. 3 p. 151 (middle)

"Utba in her beauty is like an icon that seduces
the priest, who prays before it.
O Lord! Though what is in the garden of Paradise
should disturb my memory of her, I shall not fail
to recall her."

In another passage he made her the model after which God had fashioned the maidens of Paradise.

[1]"Verily God considered you the best of His creations
as He contemplated your beauty;
So he fashioned, by His divine power, the maidens
of Paradise after your likeness."

Of course this accusation by Mansūr was not fair. We agree with him that the poet was to blame for expressing his phantasy in such exaggerated terms. But to accuse him of departing from religion on that account is a swooping judgment. To show that there is not much heresy in such flattering poetry, we may refer to a similar song sung often in Arab countries, yet no one, however, narrow-minded he may be has shown the slightest disapproval of it. It goes like this:

"Your beauty is so magnificent that when we go to Paradise, we will hope for nothing but you."

It was not Abu'l-Atāhiya's religious beliefs which led him to write such verses, but rather his character. He was the sort of man who gave no consideration to any principles when he intended to flatter some one in expectation of his or her favour. On two occasions[2] he pretended to have been

---

1. Aghānī Vol. 3. p. 151 (middle)
2. Aghānī Vol. 3. p. 166 (top) and Aghānī Vol. 3 p.144 (bottom

willing to make a shoe of the very skin of his face for his patron to tread on as a token of self-humiliation. So far as we know, no one before or since went to this length in so humiliating himself.

The other ground on which Mansūr accused the poet of heresy was, to quote Mansūr's words:[1] "that the poet did not mention Paradise or Hell in his poetry, but only Death." By this argument Mansūr obviously wanted to imply that the poet did not believe in resurrection, and that he was like the pagan Arab who said:[2] "They say there is naught but this life of ours here below and we shall not be raised from the dead."

But this accusation seems strange, since there are numerous verses in Abu'l-Atāhiya's poetry in which he speaks both of Paradise and of Hell. To reconcile these two contradictory facts, we have to assume either that the poet did not mention Paradise and Hell until he had been accused by Mansūr or that Mansūr maliciously exaggerated the fact that his references to both of these were few in comparison with his references to Death.

We would like to emphasise here, that, regardless of whether he had not spoken of Paradise and Hell until he was

---

1. Aghāni Vol. 3 p. 142 (bottom)
2. The Chapter of Cattle (الأنعام) v. 28 (~~verse 28~~)

compelled to do so by the attacks of his enemies, or had made little mention of these, this circumstance has nothing to do with his faith. The reason why he did so is to be sought in the background of his life. As we said before, he was dissatisfied with the distinctions between the classes of society in his time and hoped for its abolition through Death. This is why he was more concerned with Death than anything else, and why when he had to refer to Paradise and Hell, his references to them were in keeping with that theme. He saw in these two a humiliation and torture[1] for the haughty tyrants and happiness[2] for the poor and humble classes. That this accusation was the outcome of a personal[3] quarrel between him and Mansūr shows that it was built on prejudice and distortion rather than genuine fact. It is also related in Aghānī[4] that Abu'l-Atāhiya said:

> "I composed last night a poem which is better than the chapter of the Information."

This, however, should not be taken very seriously.

His Theology. It may seem strange to find Abu'l-Atāhiya arguing about theology, since it is almost certain that he had not studied it. His youth was spent in selling earthenware. His ignorance of theology showed itself in the various

---

1. his dīwān p. 196 line 9
2. Ibid Vol. 10 F.
3. Supra p.154
4. Vol.3 p. 142 (middle)

discussions which he had with theologians. At the end of one of these unsuccessful arguments, the Caliph Ma'Mūn said to him:[1] "Did I not ask you to mind your poetry and leave that about which you know nothing aside?" This remark of the Caliph shows that the poet was known to be a trespasser on the domain of theology.

If so, one might wonder: why did the poet engage in a subject about which he knew nothing! The answer depends on the particular matter with which he was concerned in his argument. First let us take the most important point, about which he sometimes argued with the Mu'tazila, and to which he referred more than once in his poetry; namely, the doctrine of "Jabr".

He chose this doctrine for several reasons. He wanted to find a ground for arguing with and attacking the Mu'tazila who were disliked and even were looked upon as heretics[2] by orthodox Muslims, whether these were Ahl-Al-Hadīth or the common people.

Since the poet suffered from a sense of inferiority he found a certain relief in the praise and flattery which the orthodox were bound to lavish upon him, on that account. Similarly, he hoped by such argument to be reckoned amongst the 'Ulama. It is amusing to find him referring to himself solemnly as one of them,[3] another instance of this sense of

---

1. Aghānī Vol. 3 p. 128 (middle)
2. Encyclopaedia of Islam Vol 3. p. 789 (bottom)
3. Aghani Vol. 3 p. 130 (top)

inferiority already referred to.

In these days it was possible for him or any one else to take part in this discussion of "Jabr" since this theological problem was a favourite theme and was often discussed by the wayside.[1] The only difference between a genuine theologian and a mere pretender, like Abu'l-Atāhiya, was that the former could carry the discussion to a satisfactory conclusion, whereas the latter could not, and this was precisely his great failing.

To be counted amongst the "'Ulama'" was a general aspiration at that time, owing to the great respect which they enjoyed. For instance, Ishqq Al-Muṣilī asked Ma'mūn as a favour to permit him to sit in the ranks of the "'Ulama'" instead of sitting among his colleagues, the singers.[2] Abu'l-Atāhiya, who sometimes acted as an admonisher, had surely a better claim to such a position than Isḥaq.

Abu'l-Atāhiya also found in the doctrine of "Jabr" peace of mind and relief for his strained soul. He suffered many setbacks in his life, and so he preferred to hide his head in the sand and put the responsibility for his failures on fate. According to him one ought not to be blamed for evil deeds since he is only carrying out what was imposed on

---

1. Al-Kāmil (المبرد) Vol. 1 p. 248
2. Aghānī Vol. 5 p. 60 (middle)

him by higher authority in whatever he does. The following verses illustrate this point:-

> [1]"It is fate! Reproach me or spare me! If I have [2]erred, fate surely has not."
> [2]You are far from success unless you are backed up [3]by fate and predestination.
> [3]No one gains wealth or glory by his own power, but [4]through God's generosity and grace.
> [4]Your own insight will not avail you if you are not under the guidance of God. Real insight is to be guided by God."

It seems that the Shi'a[5] (except the Zaideya) had adopted the doctrine of "Jabr" for the same reason. Their revered Imams were killed and crucified everywhere, whereas their enemies, both Ummayyads and Abbasids were in power and luxury. In that doctrine they found relief for their disturbed souls and excuse for their failure.

Abu'l-Atāhiya and the Shi'a were quite right in finding such consolation in the doctrine of predestination, since the Koran itself had used it for the same purpose:[6]

> "No accident befalls in the earth or in yourselves, but it was in the book, before we created them; verily, that is easy unto God. That you may not vex yourselves for what you miss, nor be overjoyed at what He gives you."

Thus it is clear that this doctrine was put forth as a means of encouragement, in periods of hardship, like the one which the Moslims had to live through some time, and to lessen their grievances against the injustices of life.

---

1. Aghānī Vol. 3 p. 143 (middle)
2. his dīwān p. 95.
3. his dīwān p. 235
4. his dīwān p. 174
5. Duha al-Islam v. 3 p.275 (bottom) and Kifafi p. 268
6. The chapter of iron (الحديد) v. 21

The Creation of the World: In the Aghānī it is related that Abu'l-Atāhiya believed that God had created the world from two opposite substances and that all things will be converted to these two substances before the ultimate annihilation of the world.[1] He likewise seems to have held that the world was created both with respect to its substances (العين) and construction (الصنعة). It is obvious that this idea is alien to Islam, which on that point mentions only that heaven and earth were smoke at one of the earliest stages of their evolution.[2] The source of Abu'l-Atāhiya's theory is to be found in Mani's doctrine, which states that the world was created from two opposite substances,[3] Light and Darkness, and that they will separate one from the other eventually. Mani said also that these two substances are eternal and that they are the creators of the world.

Although the two theories appear to be identical, there is a fundamental difference between them, since the two substances are eternal according to Mani, and are responsible for the creation of the Universe, whereas Abu'l-Atāhiya regarded them as created by God in time.

To show that Abu'l-Atāhiya must have been influenced by Mani in adopting such theory, we would draw attention to the

---

1. Vol 3. p. 128 (top)
2. The chapter 'detailed' (فصلت) verse 10
3. 573 v. xvii Encyclopaedia Brittanica.

fact that the former had followed the latter not only in regarding these two substances as the origin of the world, but also in holding that they will separate from one another at the end of the world.

Let us now see why the poet adopted this curious doctrine, which is neither purely Islamic, nor purely Manichaean.

We have referred[1] to the fact that Abu'l-Atāhiya's life was full of disappointments and his temperament fraught with contradictions. He felt the contradictory nature of life in his own soul and mind. He had many anti-social traits: greed, miserliness, hatred for his superiors and so on. These traits surged up from time to time, but in order to keep at peace with society, he suppressed them. As a result of this suppression there was an inward rift in his personality. To this rift he refers in the following verse:[2]

> "There are two tendencies in every person; the one restrains him from action, sometimes, while the other urges him on."

In another verse he says:[3]

> "I feigned asceticism in this world, although I am full of desire. I find my asceticism fully coupled with desire."

He also saw this inconsistency of life in the way in which it treated him. It gave him something with one hand and took it back with the other.[4] It glittered alluringly

---

1. Early in the thesis.
2. his dīwān p. 150 V. 14.
3. " " p. 50 v. 5.
4. " " p. 24 v. 2

before his eyes, but when he sought to lay hold of it, he found that his vision was nothing but a mirage. This was life's habitual treatment of himself as well as others for his age was full of turmoil and political unrest.

This contradictory character of life suggested to him that the very material from which the world was created was contradictory. It was only natural for such a man to be attracted to a doctrine which conforms in principle with his attitude towards life, a doctrine on which A.H.§ F.C.C. writes:[1]

> "The self-contradictory character of the present world forms the point of departure for Mani's speculation. This contradiction presents itself to his mind primarily as elemental, and only in the second instance as ethical, inasmuch as he considers the sensual nature of man to be the outflow of the evil elements in nature. From the contradictory character of the world, he concludes the existence of two beings, originally separate from each other, light and darkness."

As a believer in Islam, Abu'l-Atāhiya tried to keep within the boundary of his faith, and at the same time to seek an explanation for the contradictory nature of the world. This he finds in the thesis that the world was created from two inconsistent substances, and that its creator is God. It should be noticed that the additional statement: "The world is created both in its substance and structure and that there was no creator for it but God"[2] was a safeguard against the possibility of his opinion being confused with that of Mani.

---

1. 573 v. xvii Encyclopaedia Brittanica.
2. Aghānī vol.3 p. 128 (top)

One is tempted to think that the influence of Mani's doctrine on our poet was not confined to the issue of the creation of the world. It is very likely that the poet might also have been influenced to a certain degree by that doctrine in advocating asceticism and preaching pessimism. But let it not be forgotten that Mani's doctrine was not the driving power behind Abu'l-Atāhiya's tendency towards pessimism; it only gave impetus to an already existing tendency to view things pessimistically.

Abu'l-Atāhiya's conception of creation of the world runs through all his writings. In some verses he voices despair of the reality of complete happiness, since for him life is a mixture of good and evil:

> [1]"How can you hope for the pure and unalloyed when there is nothing pure anywhere; some things are bad and some others are good."
>
> [2]"How can you hope to find something pure when all things are mixed up together so as to cause conflicts and doubts to rage in the soul."

He clearly refers to these two opposite elements in these verses:

> [3]"Every man has two natures; one good and one bad, each being the opposite of the other."
>
> [4]"In this world good and evil exist always together, and each one of them produces its own kind."

It is worth noticing that all of it are in his "ordjoza."

---

1. Aghānī v. 3 p. 144 line n.5.
2. ibid Vol. 1.
3. ibid Vol. 6.
4. ibid Vol. 3.

HOW FAR WAS HE AN ALID.

We have every reason to agree with those who, like Sūlī, held, as related to Aghānī[1] that Abu'l-Atāhiya was an alid. He was brought up in Kufa, where the Alids were continually rebelling against the Abassids and continually tortured and persecuted. His guardians (Mandal and Hibbān) were Alids.[2] His disagreement with Mahdī and Hārūn had given him yet new reasons for clinging more and more to their enemies, the Alids.

We must not, however, take it for granted that he believed in Shi'sim as a hard and fast set of doctrines. He believed in one aspect of it only and rejected the others. When we examine the Alid doctrine, we find that it differs from the sunni'te in two respects, the one political and the other speculative, i.e. theology and jurisprudence. The poet's main interest in Shi' ideas was confined to the political aspect, since he was eager to see the downfall of the Abassid regime. On the other hand, he showed no interest in their speculation, because he was almost a Sunni'te in that respect.

This is the only satisfactory explanation one can offer of his inconsistent attitude towards the Shi' doctrine as opposed to Sunnism. For instance we read that he was

---

1. Aghānī V.3 p. 128 (top)
2. Supra p. 21

belonging to Zaidiya Butriyyah (الزيدية البترية) and we find him attacking Hārūn in his poetry and instigating the people against him.[1] Yet we find him extoling the Caliph Uthman[2] and giving him his due as any sunnite could have done. As further evidence of his indifference to the speculation of Shi'a, we may draw attention to his break with his sect, the Zaidiya over the doctrine of free will.

It was in keeping with his trend of mind to join himself to the Zaidiya, because they were the most revolutionary sect on the one hand, and the nearest[3] sect to the Sunnis in theological doctrines on the other hand. Their radical revolutionary tendency is illustrated by the fact that they did not regard any Alid as worthy of Imamate, unless and until he had revolted against the authorities in power.

Abu'l-Atāhiya's revolutionary spirit showed itself also in his adherence to the Butriyyah, a sect of Zaidiya whose chief difference from the main body of Zaidiya consisted in the fact that their followers were urged to join any Alid Imam, who rose in revolt against the government, no matter[4] who and what this Imam happened to be. This attitude naturally gave great impetus to disturbances and rebellion.

No weight, however, ought to be attached to the allegation that Abu'l-Atāhiya, in spite of his adherence to that sect did not advocate revolt against the government.

---

1. his dīwān p. 242
2. " " p. 104
3. Duha al Islām Vol. 3 p. 276 L 3
4. Thesis of Dr. Kifāfi p. 28.

This was only a kind of 'taqiyyah' (dissimulation)

His opinion[1] on the way in which knowledge is acquired, namely, by means of reflection, deduction and research can best be understood in the light of the Zaidiya belief[2] that the Imam, being endowed with special discretionary insight, is able to find a solution to any religious or legal difficulty by the use of reason.

---

1. Dīwān p. 158 v. 10
2. Duha-al-Islām Vol. 3 p.276

CHAPTER 6. CRITICISM.

Abu'l-Atāhiya's poetry was poignant for the people of those troubled times, who could often find contemporary references in it. The qualities of his style were lucidity and simplicity - because he had no academic education, and because he joined the movement to make the Koran rather than pre-Islamic poetry the model of poetic diction; and spontaneity (طبع); brevity.

1.

In this chapter we shall try to bring out the qualities in Abu'l-Atāhiya's poetry which drew such generous comments from poets and critics alike in his own times. To some of them, he was the best poet of all Mankind and[1] Jinn; others looked on his poetry as a kind of magic.[2] The reason for this admiration is to be sought both in his theme and style.

For the people of his own time, Abu'l-Atāhiya's poetry was at its most poignant when he spoke about the misery of this world and its mishaps, about people in high positions and the pitfalls by which they were suddenly destroyed. The treacherous murder of the Barmekides, the imprisonment of their supporters, the annihilation earlier on of the Ummayads, the execution of the Alids - only the long time between these events and the present enables us to read about them coolly. They were terrible deeds, and must have made life very ugly.

The Muslim empire at that time was ruled by an oligarchy

---

1. Aghānī p 131 (top)
2. Aghānī p 132 (top)

of tyrants, with the Caliph Hārūn at their head. These oppressed the masses, among whom were the Alids, while they enjoyed the wealth of the country and the splendour of the Court.

In these circumstances there was bound to be an enthusiastic and widespread welcome for poetry that echoed the pained cries of the humbler classes, while it cherished the coming of quick and inevitable ruin to the rich aristo-cracy through the great leveller, Death.

To us now, most of Abu'l-Tāhiya's talk about life and Death in general terms, is so vague that it means little at all. But in his own time, the very events that inspired him to compose would be fresh in the memories of the audience too. So his poetry, even when his ideas were expressed in general terms, corresponded with what the people felt as a result of their own experiences; and therefore with every verse he aroused their sympathies. Furthermore, as soon as they heard his stanzas they would realize, more often than not, what was the very event the poet was bearing in mind, having been there themselves. Such hints are all too often wasted on us; but these concrete references formed powerful associations of ideas between Abu'l-Atāhiya's poetry and the simpler-minded of his listeners.

Let us consider, as an example, the stanzas[1] admired[2]

1. dīwān page 252
2. ibid p. 253.

and regarded as unsurpassed by Salm al-Khāsir. Indeed it was greatly admired by many people - among them the Caliph Ma'mūn who ordered[1] that it should be written down for him. The attraction above all others was that they could apply its remarks word by word to a variety of events that they were still recent. For instance, they could see in it a judgment on the Caliph Mansūr, especially in the second half of it which would speak about the harm Mansūr had done himself; he had built the round city of Baghdād, but had little time to enjoy it; that it was left to others. In it a reference could be seen to the quarrel that Mansūr forced with his uncle Abdullah, with Abu Muslim and the ʿAlid brothers Muhammed and Ibrāhīm:[2]: all of them had gone from this world at the end of the great struggle, taking nothing but thin shrouds. Or this verse could turn people's thoughts to the Barmekides and their sumptuous palaces, and their sad end: the audience could look around them in the city and see these palaces as well as the humble graves of the former owners. Yet to us, at first sight, this poem is as lacking in particular significance as many verses by Abu'l-Atāhiya seem to be.

II

As for Abu'l-Atāhiya's style, it combined the qualities

---

1. Ibn Tairfur MS. p.116.
2. To this could be added his strive to replace 'Isa b. Mūsā by his son Mahdī as an heir-apparent to the throne.

needed to make poetry that was widely popular while remaining highly artistic. That is to say it was lucid, simple and always gave the impression of 'spontaneity' 'tab' طبع

Of these qualities the first two follow one from the other, since simple ideas cast in simple words and constructions are bound to produce a lucid style. In point of fact it is rare to find a word in Abu'l-Atāhiya's poetry which sends one to the dictionary, just as few of his verses need long thought before one can understand their literal meaning. Nicholson regarded Abu'l-Atāhiya as unique in this respect, for he says:[1]

"Abu'l-Atāhiya showed for the first and last time in the history of Arabic literature that it was possible to use perfectly plain and ordinary language, without ceasing to be a poet."

There are various reasons why Abu'l-Atāhiya was so outstanding in this way. The most obvious is that he was never given a grounding in the classical language. In the first century of Islam, as in the pre-Islamic period, the art of composing poetry had not been so difficult, since the so-called 'classical' language was still the poet's natural tongue; but towards the end of the Ummayad Caliphate and the beginning of the Abbasids, the classical language ceased to be everyday speech in the towns. After this change the usual way for a poet to train was to study the classical language deliberately, either under the supervision of a

---

1. L.H.A. p. 299

philologist or by going to live among the few remaining pure Arab bedouins. Abu'l-Atāhiya's career was exceptional because, as we have said in an earlier chapter, he had no chance to give himself this training; he was too busy from an early age selling earthenware. The report[1] in the Aghānī of how he put his basket aside and began to compete with some other youths at composing verse, and likewise the similar story[2] that the youths used to visit him at his work and write down his stanzas on fragments of the earthenware, show that he had virtually begun his career as a poet while he was still engaged in his first trade. In other words, there was no intervening time between his selling earthenware and his emergence as a poet for us to suppose he spent it learning the classical language. Nor is there the least evidence that he ever went round with another poet or a philologist for tutoring.

The result was that Abu'l-Atāhiya naturally made the best of the only vocabulary he had - that of everyday speech. He also benefited by Koran, which was recited everywhere; he did not have to make any special effort to avoid obsolete words, when he knew so little about them. Thus his poetic diction comes closer than that of any other poet to the common language of Baghdād at that time. He was the opposite of

---

1. Aghānī Vol 3 p. 149 (middle)
2. " " p. 129 (near the bottom)

the better educated poets of the age, who were fond of using archaic words in order to show off their profound knowledge of "the language of the Arabs", without caring whether this made their work harder to understand. Abu Tammām's rivals had accused[1] him of this pedantry. One of Abu Nuwās's eulogy[2] on Hārūn al-Rashīd shows that he too could not resist the temptation: it is full of precious words that have to be looked up in the dictionary, and many of its phrases and metaphors are borrowed from older poems like the Mu'allaqa of Tarafa. In contrast to this, Abu'l-Atāhiya's panegyrics contain not a single difficult expression. (In modern times things are the same.) We may contrast on similar points two elegies on Egyptian pilots killed in an aircrash; the one[3] written by the late Ali al-Jarim, who was a great authority on Arabic literature; the other[4] by Al-Muhandis who was an engineer by profession.)

It seems also that Abu'l-Atāhiya never studied the science of versification invented by Khalīl b. Ahmad. He must have relied on his own good taste for choosing his metres, as the pre-Islamic poets used to do. This is what we suppose from his reply, as given in the Aghānī,[5] when he was asked: "Do you know prosody?" He retorted: "I am above prosody!"

---

1. Al-Muwazanah bain Ali Tamman Wa'l-Buhturī p. 11. Turkey
2. His dīwān v.60 F Egypt 1898
3. His dīwān Vol. 1. p.83. Egypt 1939.
4. His dīwān p.64. Egypt 1943
5. Vol. 3. p.131. (middle)

After the mishaps that befell our poet in 180 A.H., he had all the more reason to keep his style simple: he no longer had the elite of the Court for an audience, but had to rely entirely on the support of the common people. Since these masses had a strictly limited command of Arabic, he had to compose in the style that they could understand. A passage[1] in the Aghānī shows that Abu'l-Atāhiya was fully aware that poetic diction should vary according to the type of people to whom the poetry was addressed: poetry that was meant for the delight of Kings and philologists should be bombastic and lofty; but if it was meant for the common people it must be simple and lucid, or how else would they understand it and come to appreciate it?

Others besides Abu'l-Atāhiya had the same idea about fitness of style. For instance, someone quoted[2] two stanzas of Bashshōr b. Burd to his face and asked why they varied so much in quality, the one being lofty while the other was very simple and even trifling; to which Bashshār replied:

"Each verse had its occasion, which determined that it should be easy or hard. The first verse was said on a serious occasion; but the second was addressed to my slave-girl, Rabāba who has ten hens and a cock, and collects their eggs for me because I do not eat eggs bought in the market. And this simple verse means more to her than the Mu'allaqa of Imru'l-Qais does to you."

For similar reasons the poetry of Sālīh b. Abdu'l-Quddūs was very simple and clear; likewise a great deal of

---

1. Aghānī V.3 p.161 (middle)
2. Aghānī V.3 p. 31 (bottom)

the verses used as illustration by Ibn Abi'l-Hadīd in his commentary on the Nahj al-Balāgha. In any case few poets of any school gave themselves the trouble of composing bombastic and lofty verses on occasions that were not either great in themselves or holding the prospect of great reward; when they composed for their own amusement their style was easy and natural.

III

Another consequence of the events of 180 A.H. - and one of the utmost importance in preserving the simplicity of his style - was that in his so-called religious poetry Abu'l-Atāhiya allowed his style to be influenced more and more obviously by the Koran, the short chapters of which are indisputably lucid. Abu'l-Atāhiya knew that by associating himself with the Koran he would win the enthusiastic respect of the masses, to whom it was very dear, and who were always delighted to see literary men pay homage to it by taking it as their model. Of course Abu'l-Atāhiya was very interested in such respect and admiration: his main reason for composing religious poetry was to restore his self-respect and his dignity. (Even now-a-days there is applause for the lawyer or politician who can write the merest phrase from the Koran into his speeches).

Yet although Abu'l-Atāhiya imitated the Koran more and more in the latter part of his life as a poet, we have ample reason to believe that he was enchanted by its style from a

much earlier date. In two of his panegyric poems he quotes the Koran unmistakably: in the poem he recited in honour of Mahdī he said:

1 ولو رامها أحد غيره ؛ لزلزلت الأرض زلزالها
غض الوجوه محجبا ت قاصرات الطرف حورا [2]

In order to understand what first led Abu'l-Atāhiya to do this, we must consider one in particular of the various movements that affected poets just at that period. During the first century of Islam the Arab poets had continued to look back to the pre-Islamic poetry for their models; they even took credit for finding 'ancient' odes that were their own skilful inventions. This fashion went on until the start of the Abbasid era, when some poets began very cautiously to shake themselves free from the old, stereotyped conventions, and adapt their style to the requirements of their time. Various circumstances hastened this movement: the most important were the influence of non-Arab cultures, and the pietistic[3] theologising spirit fostered officially by the Abbasids. The pietists had no sympathy with the ideals of pre-Islamic society, and were therefore hostile to poets who proclaimed the poetry of that era to be the only good models of their art. They wanted these poets to take as their model the Koran, a more proper subject for study than heathen verses.

---

1. Chapter XCIX (the earth quake) The other verse is a panegyric for Hadi.
2. Chapter LV The merciful.
3. Nicholson 287

Abu'l-Atāhiya found it convenient and attractive to follow this new movement, if only because his knowledge of classical Arabic was so poor; while the language of the Koran, especially the short chapters, was very easy to understand. But a further advantage was that the Koran was often recited, discussed and studied everywhere and in public; whereas knowledge of the ancient poetry was the monopoly of a limited number of philologists and reciters, and to study it and master its difficulties took a long time.

To confirm that our poet undertook his imitation of Koranic style quite consciously, we would quote the passage in the Aghānī[1] where Abu'l-Atāhiya says:

"Last night I recited the chapter of the Koran called "Information" (surat al-Naba') and composed a poem more excellent than it," There is a contrasting parallel in another anecdote in the Aghānī[2], where Bashshar b. Burd states that ever since he heard a certain verse of Umyu'l-Qais containing a double simile, he made it his first concern to compose one like it, until he succeeded. The point of both these stories is to show which styles these poets admired most, and how they set out to imitate them.

Abu'l-Atāhiya's effort is quite clear, apart from the remark we have now quoted, from the seemingly limitless

---

1. V 3 p. 143 (middle)
2. V 3 p. 47

number of quotations from the Koran, and allusions to ideas in it, which bestrew his dīwān itself. He could not possibly have put in all these unless he was very familiar with the Koran. It seems that he spent a long time reciting it and reading it through. But almost all his quotations are from the short suras; which shows that he took these chapters in particular as his model - a preference that was bound to influence him towards simplicity and lucidity in his own style, since these chapters are very simple as we said before.

Besides these qualities, there are two other figures of rhetoric the value of which Abu'l-Atāhiya probably learnt from reading the Koran: repetition and contrast. Of course repetition is made use of in pre-Islamic literature, but on a very limited scale compared with that of the Koran. Here is a list to show that repetition is every bit as conspicuous in Abu'l-Atāhiya's poetry as it was in his model: We will not mention any repetition less than five times in either Koran or the poetry of Abu'l-Atāhiya although both have many examples of such repetition.

Name of Sura	Number of Sura	Word(s) repeated	Number of repetition
الناس	114	الناس	5
التكوير	81	اذا	12
المرسلات	77	ويل يومئذ للمكذبين	10
الجن	72	أنا	15
الرحمن	55	فبأي آلاء ربكما تكذبان	31
النجم	53	أنه	15
الطور	52	أم	10
الروم	30	ومن آياته	6
النمل	27	أم من	5
ابراهيم	14	رب	8

The page in Diwan	Word(s) repeated	Number of repetition
22	سبحان ربّك	5
76	أنّى يوم	8
123	بمن	5
145	ألم تر	11
179	أيا نفس	5
229	ومن كنّا	14
235	لنأكل	6
243	من	17
258	سبحان	6
286	ولربّما	5
300	كأنّ	5
303	لربّك	5
303	يا	9

The themes and aims of both the Koran and Abu'l-Atāhiya's poetry made such repetition natural and desirable: they were meant to convert people to particular beliefs, and the simplest way of convincing people is to repeat again and again (in propaganda then as now).

One may challenge this theory we have elaborated, by alleging that the repetition in Abu'l-Atāhiya's poetry had nothing to do with the Koran but was a mere coincidence. In answer we would first refer again to the poet's own plain statement, quoted in the Aghānī and above.[1] Secondly we would draw attention to the repetition of the word الناس Apparently the "Chapter of the men" in the Koran was very admired because within its short space the word الناس was repeated five times. In the hope of becoming equally admired Abu'l-Atāhiya repeated the same word five times in a single line of poetry. The similarity of the word and the number of repetitions makes it beyond doubt that the imitation was deliberate. Here is the Sūra and verse:

قل أعوذ برب الناس، ملك الناس، إله الناس، من شر الوسواس الخناس
الذي يوسوس في صدور الناس من الجنة والناس.

خذ الناس أودع إنما الناس بالناس .: ولا بد في الدنيا من الناس في الناس

---

1. Supra p.153.
2. his dīwān p. 131 (

Like the Koran, Abu'l-Atāhiya's poetry is full of contrasts. No doubt it was the religious and universal themes of the Koran that gave a wide scope for antithesis: there Paradise is opposed to Hell, day to night, the well-guided to the erring, male to female, poverty to wealth - but this is not the place to detail examples of a feature the reader cannot miss noticing. It was natural for Abu'l-Atāhiya too, who was poor in such figures on the whole, to make[1] the greatest use of contrast in his religious poetry, the theme of which is often pointed by contrasts between Good and Evil, Life and Death, etc.

At this stage, however, there are two points that should be made clear. First, when Abu'l-Atāhiya imitated some features of the style of the Koran, it was certainly not his aim to compete with it in excellence. He was merely responding to the wish of those pious people who preferred that the Koran rather than heathen poetry, should be taken as the model for literature. As we have said, Abu'l-Atāhiya's ignorance of the old poetry, and his passing for an ascetic, and advocating piety, disposed him to this response.

Secondly, there was a great difference between Abu'l-Atāhiya's method and that of al-Ma'arri, who tried to imitate the Koran at a later date. Al-Ma'arri put his imitation in prose, and so was able to follow the style of his model far more closely than Abu'l-Atāhiya, whose imitation was in any

---

1. To balance the scarcity of other figures.

case[1] limited to the minor characteristics like repetition and contrast. Even Ma'arri, in his book "الفصول والغايات" was not necessarily trying to compete with the genius of the Koran itself, as some people have thought; nor expressing his piety, as others have suggested; but, in our opinion was merely concerned to write in a style that was generally greatly admired.

IV

It is well known that lucid poetry, such as Abu'l-Atāhiya' which looks the most simple when finished, is by no means the easiest for a writer conscious of his art to compose. A short anecdote will illustrate with what envy this apparent ease of style was looked on by one of our poet's contemporaries

"Bashshār[2] b. Burd grew angry with his pupil Salm al-Khāsir. The latter asked some of Bashshār's friends to effect a reconciliation between himself and his tutor. When they approached Bashshār he at first refused to forgive Salm but after a while he asked, "Where is the rascal?" They replied, "He is here." Whereupon Salm got up and kissed Bashshār's head and stood before him humbly. Then Bashshār asked him, "Who said the verse

من راقب الناس لم يظفر بحاجته   وفاز بالطيبات الفاتك اللهج

Salm replied, "It was you who said it, may God bless you." Then Bashshār asked, "And who said this line:

من راقب الناس مات غما   وفاز باللذة الجسور

Salm answered, "It was your pupil who said it" (meaning himself)

---

1. Apart from lucidity and simplicity
2. Aghānī V 3 p. 49 (middle)

So Bashshār said, "Do you take my ideas, which I conceived with very painful effort, and put them in words easier and simpler than mine, so that your verses become popular and mine neglected. I shall never forgive you."
But after much trying, Salm was forgiven.

This effortless composition, this elusive air of spontaneity, is what the Arab critics call Tab طبع They did not discuss this quality anything like exhaustively; but Ibn Qutaiba raised some important aspects of it in his book A-Shi'r Wal-Shu'arā, and it is on him we rely in what follows.

There are two essential conditions, failing which no poetry will turn out to be matbū'. In the first place the poet must work under a powerful emotion, anger, love, fear, hatred, greed or the like. And then in expressing that emotion he must be natural and simple, giving most of his attention to the idea and letting the language take care of itself. The verses should flow on the poet's tongue like water gushing from a powerful spring; as Ibn Qutaiba says: "Such a poet shows you the end of his verse from the beginning." (meaning, because his expression is natural and logical.)

For practical illustration, let us take a couple of examples from the Mu'allaqa of Amr b. Kulthūm, and consider how 'the ends of his lines follow from their beginnings'. When Amr says:

ونشرب إن وردنا الماء صفوا

"When we come to the drinking place, we drink the pure part of the water...." the natural extension of the verse is to compare other people with them, and refer to the impure water, after the pure and this is what he did by saying:

∴ ونشرب غيرنا كدرا وطينا

".....but other people drink the impure part," which gives a quite unstrained but suggestive emphasise. Or again, when he begins:

∴ ملأنا البر حتى ضاق عنا

"We have spread all over the land until it is overpopulated..." the logical way to extend the image is to refer to the sea after the land, which he does:

∴ ونحن البحر نملؤه سفينا

"... With our fleet we covered the sea."

We would add that the reason the poet must be under powerful emotions, is that composing poetry is a creative process needing great mental energy. This demand could not be met were it not that in the mind of the genius the emotions are accompanied by extraordinary instinctive energy, which puts the poet's faculties in a state of the utmost awareness and sensitivity.

Conversely, if the poet is under no compelling emotion his mind will be in a comparatively low state of awareness, and the poetry he produces will be the very opposite of Matbū' i.e. Mutakallaf. It is not difficult to recognize Mutakallaf poetry when one reads it: straining his natural

expression, the poet will do violence to grammar and prosody, will leave out necessary ideas and add ones not called for, until he sounds like an actor who appears on the stage without having learnt his part. The result of this continual straining is that the reader is only too aware of the hard labour it cost the poet to fulfil his professional obligation. It happens when the poet is asked to praise a person for whom he has no real admiration and from whom he expects no great reward; it happens also when the poet tries to compose while he is not in the mood, as when he is tired or ill. Yet another cause is that the poet may ponder too long over his words at the expense of the freshness of his ideas: thus there were many poets who were regarded as Mutakallifs like Abu Tammām, because they were over-fond of figures of speech and stuffed their poetry with them.

In the light of these comments it is clear that Abu'l-Atāhiya par excellence combined the characteristics of the matbū' poet, while the devices he lacked were the very ones that most commonly betray their users into becoming mutakallif. He was very emotional: his touchiness on the matter of his humble lineage, his sense of inferiority and his hatred for his superiors in society, his pessimistic outlook on life - all these psychological reasons made him a highly-strung, ill-tempered man, who would fly into a temper at the slightest provocation. In point of fact his most brilliant poems

were all composed while he suffered extremes of anguish and despair; these works flow with tab', with no word out of its natural place, with logic of imagery and language governing the structure of each line.[1]

His hasty and forthright temperament did not dispose Abu'l-Atāhiya to spend too much time putting one word in place of another just for the sake of poetical decoration. He did not care for ostentatious figures of speedh (badi'), and wisely enough he rarely forced himself to use a style that was not true to his own nature. Consequently, when he did try to compete at using badi', in the contest with Muslim b. al-Walīd, he failed.

[2]This attempt was almost certainly the outcome of an argument between Muslim and Abu'l-Atāhiya, in the course of which the latter was challenged to compose verses like Muslim's verses in honour of Yazīd b. Mizgad: the first of which is:

سوف تلقى مهجج واليوم ذو رهج ∴ كأنه أجل يسعى إلى أمل

Although Abu'l-Atāhiya did not take up the challenge immediately, there is every reason to suggest that his poem beginning:

[3] الدهر ذو دول والموت ذو علل ∴ والمرء ذو أمل والناس أشباه

ولم تزل عبر فيه معتبر ∴ تجري بما قدر الله أجراه

1. good examples are the poems p.7 F, 13 F, 23 F, 194 F and 199 f (dīwān)
2. Aghānī Vol. 3 p. 139
3. dīwān p. 292

was intended as his answer: the metre is the same as Muslim's, and the first verse has the same internal rhyme (ترصيع) on the same letter (لام). Moreover Abu'l-Atāhiya took quite unusual pain to fill his poem with striking contrast and with word-play (jinās). In the whole poem the best example of this is his verse:-

لا تحقرنه سد المعروف أصغره ∴ أحسن فعاقبة الإحسان حسناه

this intensive punning looks more than unusual - it is the only instance of its kind in all Abu'l-Atāhiya's poetry. It is something of a wonder to see our poet, who does not normally care even for simple and natural-sounding word-play abuse the device by using it three times in one hemistich. However, wonder ceases with the discovery that there is a line in Muslim's poem which likewise contains three puns:

أغر أبيض فيض البيض أبيضه ∴ لا يرض لموله يوم الروع بالفشل

In these affectations Abu'l-Atāhiya was out of his province, and was bound to fail in competition with the master of the art of them at that time. Our poet showed his weakness from the start: his first verse scarcely bears comparison with Muslim's

صوف على صلح . . . . .

He committed again the error he made when he tried to imitate the Surat al-Nās; that is to say, he acted as though he thought that the beauty of that Sura, or of Muslim's verse, lay in the mere repetition of a word, or in rhyming whereas the true excellence lay in something deeper. In Muslim's verse it lay in a clear, compact expression of a forceful image: the general is creeping upon the souls of his enemies like an irresistible Fate; and the image was appropriate to the way Muslim was always describing Yazīd, as in the following line,[1] as an inevitable disaster befalling the enemies of the government. Now no-one can read Abu'l-Atāhiya's first line and feel happy about it, especially about the sentence with which it ends. In what respect are people similar to one another? Is it not in continuing to hope while Death awaits them? If so, why did he not say that plainly? In short, the words of the line do not convey the whole sense.

As for the use of internal rhyme (ترصيع), Muslim's poem only has it in one line; but because this line is the first one, Abu'l-Atāhiya took it as a special challenge and

---

1. Muslim's dīwān p. 51 Egypt 1907
FOOTNOTE: Muslim, in his turn, was here inspired by Al'A sha's verse: وقرعدوت إلى الحانوت يتبعني ∴ شنا و مشل شلول شلشل شول
Ibn Qutāiba[1] and Al'Āmidi[2], who criticised Al-A'shas verse, seem to have ignored on this occasion the important function of repetition and tautology in Arabic. They also failed to appreciate the personal background to this stanza: grilled meat was eaten along with the drinking of wine - and al-A'sha was a confirmed drunkard.

1 Al-Shi'r wa Shu'ra p-12 Leyden 1902
2 Muwāzana p-116. Istanbūl 1287.

answered with two of the kind. He seems not to have been satisfied even with that, for he also put the figure in a verse in another poem when he said:

1 يا نأي منتجعي باطول مطلبي ∴ يا صنو مطلبي باطول كربتيه

In conclusion we would mention one other appealing quality of Abu'l-Atāhiya's poetry: brevity. He gave his own opinion on this point in one of his verses[2].

"There is no need for redundant speech if you can put your finger on the essence of it."

His conciseness is particularly noticeable in his verses that deal with proverbs or maxims; but elsewhere too. When we discuss his panegyrics we shall see that in that kind of poetry no less he deserved the flattering comment of Uma b. al-Ata, who said: "It seems that thoughts are gathered and pressed together for Abu'l-Atāhiya."

In a recent[3] work on literary criticism there occurs the passage in which the author sums up his research.

"It seems that the ultimate end of the canons drawn from the pre-Islamic poetry was to ensure the production of melodious work. Lucidity, simple metaphors, and brevity were essential requisites of good style."

We hope it is now clear how, judged by these canons, Abu'l-Atāhiya's poetry justifies the praises quoted at the head of this chapter.

---

1. diwan p. 303 v. 8
2. ibid p. 282 V. 5
3. the thesis of Dr. Kutt 1950 (Arab conception of poetry) p. 210

th p.

THE THEMES OF ABU'L-ATĀHIYA'S POETRY.

I. SATIRE.

A new style of satire: against Abdullah b. Ma'n: against Waliba b. al-Hubāb.
The ascetic's compromise: used against Salm al-Khāsir.

In the last part of this chapter we discussed the main features of Abu'l-Atāhiya's style: now we shall speak briefly about the various themes on which he composed poetry. We begin with satire, because it occupied our poet earlier in his life than other themes. Indeed, had it not been for the very sarcastic poetry in which he attacked Abdullah b. Ma'n, and which first made his reputation, he might never have risen to greatness and renown.

"When (another great poet) al-'Ajjaj was asked,[1] 'Why do you not compose satires?' he replied, 'We are too tolerant to do other people injustice, and too noble to be attacked by others.'" This statement makes it obvious how well Abu'l-Atāhiya, on the contrary, was fitted for just that sort of poetry. The latter's case was the very opposite to that of al-'Ajjaj: instead of being tolerant, he was ill-tempered and touchy. This made him always ready to pick a quarrel for the slightest reason and develop it into prolonged antagonism with satire as his weapon. Moreover, far from being too noble to be attacked, he began as a quite insignificant

---

1. Al-Shi'r Wa-l-sha'urā p. 28 (1902)

personage, and so was continually subject to slights.

Abu'l-Atāhiya's satires can be divided into two types: one kind was composed before 180 A.H. and the other after that date. The best examples of the earlier type are his satires on Abdullah b. Ma'n b. Za'ida at Kufa, and Waliba b. al-Hubāb in Baghdād. On both occasions Abu'l-Atāhiya cast aside all moral principles and poetical conventions, making it his single aim to humble his enemies down to the ground. For instance, it was the practice up till his time to insult people mainly for lack of generosity, courage, wisdom and like virtues; pointing a comparison between the glorious traditions and noble ancestors of the attacking poet, and the shameful past and humble lineage of the attacked. Notable examples of these conventional satires are the exchanges between Jarīr and Farazdaq. Even al Hutai'a, who was a notoriously bitter satirist, did not depart from this principle, however keen he was to wound his unfortunate victim. The critics of Arabic literature upheld this principle strictly; and some of them, like Qudama[1] b. Ja'far, went so far as to put in details of what a satirist should say and what he should not.

Abu'l-Atāhiya, who had no ancestors that did him credit, no tribe of his own, no old glory, found it extremely unwise to insult other people when they were lacking some of these advantages. He had to find a style that was more wounding and at the same time that could not be a boomerang against

---

1. Naqd al-Shi'r p. 20.

himself. His new way was to invent a very embarrassing accusation against his enemy, and publish it regardless of the lies involved.

It is almost certain that this kind of satire was an unhealthy result of his companionship with the effeminates (ghilmān) of Baghdād. In self-defence these unfortunate people cultivated the most artful ways of hurting and defaming any one who ventured to hurt them. Abu'l-Atāhiya himself tells us in plain[1] words that he was eager to acquire their language and artful devices. To prevent any suspicion on their part and to make them feel at ease in his company, he carried a type of basket[2] that was one of their characteristics.

Nothing can illustrate this theory more conclusively than his satires against Abdullah b. Ma'n The very accusation that he made against Abdullah, namely that Abdullah was effeminate, is typical of the Ghilmān, whose stock-in-trade was to question the manliness of others. The details of the verses are no less in keeping with the effeminates' frame of mind: in particular the verse[3] in which the poet alleges that Abdullah put a dot of collyrium on his cheek to ward off the evil eye; or another verse[4], in which the poet alleges that he shook hands with Abdullah in a secluded place, then the luckless Abdullah asked him to leave his hand and take hold of his leg. A further example is to be found in

---

1. Aghānī vol-3 p. 128 (bottom)
2. ibid
3. Aghānī vol-3 p. 136 (middle)
4. Ibid.

his verse about Abdullah's sword:

"Make what you decorated your sword with into
a woman's bangles;
For what will you do with your sword since you
cannot slay?"

This idea would not readily occur to minds of an ordinary way of thinking. It is no wonder that Abdullah, ever after he heard these lines, was ashamed to carry his sword. He said:[2] "I never put on my sword and saw some one looking at me, without thinking that he was staring because he knew the sarcastic verse of Abu'l-Atāhiya. This made me blush."

It may be as well here to give the reason for the prolonged quarrel between the poet and Abdullah. The Aghānī gives[3] as the cause the rivalry of the two over a pretty girl called Salma, who was a protege of Abdullah's family. However, in view of the fact that Salma was a mourning woman, it is unlikely that the son of a great man such as Ma'n b. Za'ida would have dared show any love for her, let alone been so jealous as to quarrel with someone else on her account.

The best explanation we can offer is that Abdullah regarded Salma, by virtue of her clientship, as one of his household women, and so felt slighted at Abu'l-Atāhiya's playing on her name in his poetry. Thus Abdullah's position in this would be like that of the Caliph Mahdī later on, who was offended when the same poet mentioned a palace slave-girl

---

1. Aghānī Vol-3 p. 137
2. Ibid p. 138 (bottom)
3. Ibid p. 137 (top)

called 'Utba in his verses. People of honour were not pleased to hear poetry about their household women.

There is, however, another side of the picture which ought to be clarified. It seems that the quarrel was not wholly over Salma: it may also have been a matter of money. There is a record that Abu'l-Atāhiya had asked[1] Abdullah for some money, and the latter refused. Can it be that the poet thought to avenge himself as al-Hutai'a did - and the easiest way was to pester Abdullah's protegee. This suggestion may be confirmed by the poet's reference in one of his satires to Abdullah's miserliness:

> [2]"It is not fitting that people should attribute miserliness to one who has been generous:
>
> He gives what people of (conventional) liberality with-hold - and that, by my life, is the limit of generosity!"

(He means by the second verse that Abdullah was too free with his own person, as the effeminates were). And after all, the very disgraceful accusation the poet made against Salma, and put in a short stanza, namely that she was a lesbian,[3] hardly indicates that he was really in love with her: rather it can be regarded as another device to ridicule her master.

In his satirical verses on Wāliba b. al-Hubāb, Abu'l-Atāhiya chose another field for attack, since he could not accuse all his enemies of being effeminates. At the same

---

1. Barāniq - 173. Egypt 1947.
2. Aghānī vol-3 p. 136 (the end of his satire)
3. ibid p.137 (top)

time, he still kept away from the old style of speaking about generosity, courage, etc. An idea came to him when he saw that Wāliba was fair in complexion, while al-Hubāb was dark. So he thought it brilliant to suggest Wāliba was the fruit of adulterous intercourse. The difference in colour between Walība and his father gave Abu'l-Atāhiya wide scope for some bold sarcasm.

> [1]"They declare that he is the true son of al-Hubāb,
> but is it possible that a true son of al-Hubāb
> should be fair in colouring?
>
> What ails him, whose fore-fathers had Arab complexion,
> that he looks like the descendants of the Byzantines?
>
> Do you think that the bedouins have been transformed
> into fair people? Is that not queer?"

In another satire he asked Wāliba why his father looked dark as a starling, while Wāliba's own head looked[2] like a yellow bird. The disgrace and shame that Abu'l-Atāhiya caused, was so great that a blameless man like Wāliba could not stand it and fled[3] from Baghdād to keep out of his tormentor's way.

One may ask how Abu'l-Atāhiya's satires could be so effective in wounding his opponents. The answer is that first his poetry was so simple, anyone could memorise it effortlessly. Secondly, his satires were full of amusing sarcasm, and so people were willing to recite them to amuse themselves. Hārūn al-Rashīd himself did not resist the temptation of repeating[4]

---

1. Aghānī Vol-16 p. 149 (bottom) and 150 (top)
2. ibid p. 150 (top)
3. ibid (middle)
4. Vol. 3 p. 135 (bottom)

some of our poet's verses about Abdullah. Alas, people even as noble as al-Rashīd did not always observe moral principles in their search for amusement.

The change in the poet's life in 180 A.H. did not cause him to cease ridiculing people and defaming them. He changed his methods but not his principles. He could no longer, after assuming the woollen clothing of a righteous ascetic, accuse people of being effeminates or such preposterous things; but he nevertheless had to go on intimidating rival poets and reluctant patrons. To reconcile these two contradictory attitudes he found a new method, which consisted of mixing satirical verses with sermons. A good example of this later type, which proved to be quite as workable and injurious as the old one, is his stanza[1] on Salm al-Khasīr: one of its lines is still proverbial:

> "By God who is most high, O Salm b. Amr, greed
> has bowed low the necks of men!"

This verse irritated Salm very much, especially when it was recited and commented[2] on by the Caliph Ma'mūn. It is obvious from the satire, and from the words[3] of Salm, recorded in the Aghānī, that once again the cause of the rivalry was money.

---

1. dīwān p. 206
2. Aghānī vol-3 p. 163 (bottom)
3 ibid p. 164 (top)

II - PANEGYRICS.

Abu'l-Atāhiya or Abū Nuwās as founder of the new school?

Abu'l-Atāhiya must have given panegyric poetry much of his thought, because he had not only to earn his bare living by it, but more than that, he had to satisfy his great passion for accumulating wealth. Although we do not possess a single complete panegyric of his, we can form an idea of his way of composing such poetry, from the fragments that have come down to us and the comments of his contemporaries.

As usual, Abu'l-Atāhiya did not follow slavishly in the steps of the old poets. The panegyric poem, as Ibn Qutaiba described[1] it, had a fixed arrangement. It began with the poet weeping over the deserted camp-place of his beloved. Then it spoke about the suffering inflicted on him through love - the poet's aim being to make his patron tender-hearted and so more liberal. After that he would describe the wild deserts he had crossed on his way to the patron, intending by that to put the latter under the obligation not to disappoint the poet or render his effort vain.

Abu'l-Atāhiya's keen mind found some features of this conventional opening painfully obsolete: indeed it was ridiculous to speak about desert when he was only a few

---

1. Al-Shi'r Wa'l-Shu'drā p. 15 Leiden 1902

minutes' walk from his patron's door. Consequently he did away with much of this introduction. He was satisfied with a few lines of love-poetry, and cut his description of the riding-beasts to the absolute minimum or omitted it altogether. A favourable judgment came quickly from a great patron of panegyric poetry, 'Omar b. al-'Ala, who was exceedingly flattered by Abu'l-Atāhiya's verses in his honour and gave him 70,000 dirhams. When this great reward aroused the jealousy of other poets, Omar gathered them together and made the following important comment:-

> [1]"O Assembly of poets, it is wondrous how much you envy one another! If one of you comes to me to praise me with an ode in which he devotes fifty lines to describing his beloved, then by the time he starts speaking about me the sweetness of his eulogy and lustre of his poetry is fled. But when Abu'l-Atāhiya came to me he confined his erotic prelude to a few lines, and then went on: 'the riding beasts have a complaint against you....' What cause have you then to be jealous?"

[2]Nasr b. Sayyar, the governor of Khurāsān during the omayyade period said the same to a "rājiz" who devoted 100 lines to his beloved girl and 10 for the patron, that is Nasr b. Sayyar.

Abu'l-Atāhiya's boldness of innovation was due not only to the fact that he knew more about human nature and what appealed[3] to people than the other poets, but also to the favourable circumstance that his taste had not been prejudiced

---

1. Ibn Khallikān Vol. 2 p. 192
2. Al-Shi'r Wa Shu'ara p. 15 (Leidin 1902)
3. Patrons are more anxious to listen to their own praise than to the stories of the poet's journey.

in favour of the antique poetry by stilted education. In fairness to Abu'l-Atāhiya he should be put before Abū Nuwās at the head of those who revolted against the conventional introduction to panegyrics; indeed when Abū Nuwās showed contempt for apostrophising deserted encampments, he was probably influenced by Abu'l-Atāhiya. This stands to reason because Abū Nuwās made his name only in Hārūn's time and after, whereas Abu'l-Atāhiya composed some of his best panegyrics, including the one we have mentioned, in Mahdī's reign, at least ten years earlier. Abū Nuwās's panegyric in honour of Hārūn[1] consists of about thirty verses: twenty of them are prelude, and ten only are to the main point, which is to celebrate Hārūn; while that prelude, about hunting, is in a style very reminiscent of the prelude to Zuhair's[2] panegyric in honour of Harim b. Sinan.[3] In view of this fact it is strange that even Nicholson[4] gave only Abu Nuwās as an example of the new school. We believe that Abu'l-Atāhiya's contribution has not been given its due because his panegyrics were overshadowed by his so-called religious poetry.

The other quality that made Abu'l-Atāhiya an excellent eulogist was his unsurpassed conciseness, to which we referred before. This conciseness made people repeat his verses like

---

1. His dīwān p. 60. Egypt 1898.
2. His diwan p. 24. Egypt 1323 A.H.
3. Footnote: The only difference between Abu Nuwās and Zuhair is that one of them speaks about his horse and the other about his hawk.
4. L.H.A. p. 286.

proverbs - to the further delight of his patrons. 'Omar b. al-'Ala was expressing[1] his admiration for this property when he said: "It seems that ideas are collected and pressed together for Abu'l-Atāhiya."

Let us now examine some lines from his panegyrics in detail, and see how within their brief space they are loaded with ideas. It is fitting here to begin with the verses that moved 'Omar b. al-'Alā to the above comment; in proportion as the stanza was admired by Omar, it was envied bitterly by Marwān b. Abi Ḥafṣa, Abu'l-Atāhiya's rival. It goes:

> "The riding beasts have a complaint against you, because they cross rocky and sandy deserts to reach you.
> When they bring us they do so with a light burden;
> but when they take us away they are heavily loaded."

Its supremacy in its class lies in the way it covers a wider field of imagery than the verse of Nuṣaib:[2]

> "So when they return they praise you according to what they know (of your generosity); but had they stayed silent, their sacks would have cried forth your praise."

which was considered the best up till then in picturing this thought and was greatly admired by all patrons of panegyric poetry. The point is that Nuṣaib's verse refers to a limited group; but our poet, by using a general term (كلهم), means that people from all over the world visited Omar for

---

1. Aghāni Vol-3 p. 144 (middle)
2. Aghāni Vol-3. p. 144 (bottom)

his bounty; no desert or plateau could dishearten them. The use of the words وارده and صادره, which mean respectively 'coming to a drinking place' and 'leaving it', is flattering because it likens Omar to a river of sweet water. The words مخفّة and ثقال, although literally they mean simply 'unloaded' and 'heavily loaded', can connote that because of the care and comfort they receive from him they are fast on their way coming and slow with reluctance when they leave.

A further comparison can be made, this time between a line in this poem and one by Abu Nuwāwas. Abu'l-Atāhiya said:-

> "Truly I became immune to Time and its vicissitudes when I grasped the bonds that join me to the Prince."

Abu Nuwās, who must have borrowed the idea from Abu'l-Atāhiya since the former composed his line in the reign of the Caliph Amīn, said:

> [1]"A Sovereign who, if your hands grasp the bond (that can attach you) to him - neither misery nor poverty will befall you."

Abu'l-Atāhiya regarded himself as protected against all evils and against time itself, whereas Abu Nuwās was protected only against poverty and misery. The former was attached to his patron by more than one bond (حبل), while the latter was

---

1. dīwān Abu Nuwās p. 64 V. 8 Egypt 1898

connected with his patron by one bond only. Lastly, the former makes a statement of fact - he had been linked with the prince and had been given the guarantee against time; but the latter is speaking hypothetically.

The same brief sententiousness appears also in Abu'l-Atāhiya's panegyric on the Caliph Mahdi. The highest compliment that anyone paid Abu'l-Atāhiya on account of this poem, came from Bashshār b. Burd, who was sitting at its recital; being highly astonished[1] at its elegance, the blind poet asked his companion, "Has not the Caliph soared into the air with delight?"

The stanza that overwhelmed Bashshār, and pleased the Caliph so much that no poet except Abu'l-Atāhiya was rewarded that day, goes like this:-

> [2]"The Caliphate came to him willingly, dragging her train:
> It suited none but him, and he suited nothing if not that;
> And if anyone but him had wanted it, the earth would have quaked.
> If people's innermost thoughts are not of obedience to him, surely God will not accept their good deeds.
> And such is the Commander-of-the-Faithful's hatred for the word 'no', he even hates others who say it."

The first three lines expound a very elegant argument in Mahdī's favour. The Caliphate ought to have been given to Isa b. Mūsā according to the arrangement between the leaders of the Abbasid family; by intimidation Mansūr managed to

---

1. Aghānī vol 3 p. 142 (middle)
2. ibid.

make Isa give priority to Mahdi (Mansūr's son). In his verses our poet has sweetened history: the Caliphate, according to him, had not been transferred to Mahdi by intimidation but came to him of its own free will, and so on till the end of the argument. How briefly these three lines summarize it all! " تجر رأذيالها " deserves special attention, for this short sentence means a lot: the Caliphate is like a maid who approaches her bridegroom with delight, pride, affection and good will, walking at her ease and so leaving the train of her garment to drag on the floor. In " إذا زلزلت الأرض زلزالها [1] ", the poet clearly has in mind the Koran where it says[2]" They say, 'the Merciful has taken to himself a son', - you have brought a monstrous thing: The heavens well-nigh burst asunder thereat, and the earth is river, and the mountains fall down broken, that they attribute to the Merciful a son!" meaning: that for anyone else even to think of doing so is preposterous enough to make the earth shake violently. It could also mean that the empire would have revolted against him; or that Heaven itself might have intervened and brought a disaster on the inhabitants of the earth. (That statement could bear more than one interpretation, and that all the senses were appropriate, brought extra credit for poet or speaker). Nor are the last two

1. The beginning of Chapter No. 99 of Koran called "the earthquake"
2. The Chapter of Mary verse 87

lines in any way inferior, since in the penultimate line he links the authority of the Caliph with that of God - a claim which the Abbasids had always made. In the final verse he was not satisfied to follow in the footsteps of Farazdaq, who claimed that his prince ([1]Ali Zain al-Abidin) never said no: our poet has pictured Malhdi as an extremely liberal Caliph, who hated the word 'no' so fanatically that he was disgusted even when others uttered it.

---

1. the grandson of Ali b. Abi Tabli the verse is

ABU'L-ATĀHIYA'S POETRY ON LIFE AND MORALS.

In the poetry of Abu'l-Atāhiya composed after 180 A.H. we come across a great many verses in which he advocates moral virtues such as patience, faithfulness to friends, contentment, piety and so on. He also shows an acute awareness of the realities of life, such as could only be possessed by a deep thinker.

The obvious aim our poet had in composing such verses was to establish himself as an admonisher and sage who sets the standard of morality for the people of his age. It looks a very bold claim - which makes one wonder why he was so anxious to make it. The background of the poet's life gives the answer clearly: his sense of inferiority, his failure in love, left a vacuum in his life; he wanted to feel important and to attain genuine prestige; he wanted to be flattered and applauded by the common people and the other classes to which such poetry appealed. Such flattery would be a handsome compensation for the disdain with which he was looked down on by some people. We have seen earlier on how he tried to get himself looked upon as an 'alim by discussing theology and similar matters and that his aim in that was likewise to gain some prestige. Indeed he had a better claim to the position of admonisher or sage than to that of 'alim, since he had the eloquence that was the essential equipment for the former.

---

1. Supra p. 154

As it turned out, he proved to be successful in his attempt. People as great as Al'Umari recited[1] his verses on morality and praised him; others as important as the Caliph Hārūn and Ma'Mun asked him to admonish them. [2]Common people used to stand humbly in front of him as he rode his donkey, and ask him kindly to give a verse or two on life and people.

At the same time he had another aim in composing such poetry, namely, to contradict those who used to say that his mind was unbalanced - a charge which stuck to him through the nickname 'Abu'l-Atāhiya' given to him by the Caliph. The following verses may confirm that this was his idea;

> [3]"The humble man may be raised up by his own action;
> and the lofty may fall,
> There is many a dull-witted fellow whose talent has been augmented by the proverbs he has memorised and borne in mind."

In connection with our suggestion that he hoped to win fame as a sage, we would like to draw attention to his direct emulation of Zuhair b. Abi Sulmā. Zuhair was highly admired for the several verses scattered in his poetry which vividly and compactly expressed a moral or an axiom in the style of a proverb. In particular he was highly esteemed for the few proverbial verses with which he ended his Mu'allaqa; on account of such verses he was called Hakim al-'Arab. It is this ending of the Mu'allaqa that Abu'l-Atāhiya tried to com-

---

1. Aghānī Vol-3 p. 131
2. Aghānī Vol-3 p. 148 (middle)
3. diwān p. 201 (1909)

pete with. His corresponding verses[1] are similar to those of Zuhair in their theme, their rhyme, their conciseness and the feature that they begin with the protasis introduced by مَنْ ; the number of verses (nine) is the same in both. All these similarities could not have been mere coincidences; we have seen before how the number of repetitions, as in his verse that contains the word الناس ", could be significant. There is another thing here which is worth mentioning: that is Abu'l-Atāhiya's attempt to replace the violent pre-Islamic spirit of his model by a more just one. This attempt reminds us that the poet was supposed to be propagating a pietistic spirit, which, as Nicholson put[2] it, "did not agree with those who exalted chivalry above religion." Thus, while we find Zuhair thundering with such aggressive verses:

> "If a man fails to guard his water-cistern by force or arms, it will be ruined."
>
> - and if you don't wrong people (first) they will (be encouraged to) wrong you."

we find Abu'l-Atāhiya answering him in a more humanitarian spirit:

> [3]"Whosoever wrongs people does evil; whosoever is kind to people, (God) will be kind to him."

Indeed, Abu'l-Atāhiya's verse is in direct contradiction to the second hemistich of Zuhair's line. Finally, one may wonder why the conditional pronoun ' مَنْ ' was looked upon

---

1. Dīwān p. 243.
2. L.H.A. p. 287 (bottom)
3. verse No two in the stanza.

with particular regard; but we think that this is due to the sense of generality it implies, a sense that agreed with the absolute and unruly spirit of bedouins. In the second line of Zohair it means that anyone, regardless of his rank in society, could be brought to his senses by force if he refused to come of his own free will.

Zuhair's verses are far better than those of Abu'l-Atāhiya, because the first sums up in forceful language the essential virtue of the desert life (a virtue that is admired to this day). But Abu'l-Atāhiya failed, as he always did when he tried to compete with others. His failure is obvious from the mild and even trifling quality of his ideas: for instance what sense is there in: [1]"Whosoever keeps his promise fulfils it?" There is no great difference between keeping one's promise and fulfilling it. As a spontaneous poet, his best axioms and verses came to him only when he was excited, or in agony, or distressed. Some of his most admirable verses, which were composed under such conditions, are the following:

[2]"We ask the world for riches, but it increases our poverty: and we ask to be healthy, but we grow sick."

3

"Certainly is the cure for all worry: nothing gives rise to all sorts of worries as much as uncertainty does."

---

1. verse No. four in the stanza.
2. dīwān p. 138
3. ibid p. 262.

The poet must have suffered a great deal of uncertainty, not only over the question of 'Utba, who kept him in the dark for so long; but also the behaviour of some of his patrons must have given him good reason for worry. For instance he must have been anxious to know the exact intentions of Mahdī or Hārūn when they sent him to prison from time to time: were they in earnest, or were they just intimidating him? Again, he was uncertain sometimes about the degree of influence which Zubaida and Fadl b. Rabi' could exert on Hārūn in his favour. Thus he must have spent a great deal of his time in darkness and insecurity, and the times when clear-cut possibilities faced him must have been few - as the following verse suggests:-

[1]"When the right course is clear, do not abandon it;
for rare are the occasions on which you have tasted truth:
You have felt its coolness in your throat, like the coolness of water when it is fresh and sweet."

To return to his most admirable verses, we would like to add:

[2]"When a man's troubles are in the past they are done with: the worst disasters are the freshest."

---

[3]"Be on your guard against utter rascals who don't care how much they impose on you."

---

[4]"Truly I have wondered whether those who work hard to increase their wealth have forgotten the dignity of poverty."

---

1. dīwān p. 13
2. " 60
3. " 17
4. " 197

[1] "Nothing benefits the soul - (of one who manages his affairs well) - so much as a change of conditions."

These are by no means all his verses which show the depth of his thought and his greatability to grasp the basic facts that dominate our life. No doubt the bitter and varied experiences through which the poet passed, perceived through his sensitive nature and keen insight, made it inevitable that he should come to such right conclusions about life. His great ability to express himself clearly made it possible for him to put these ideas in the most appealing language. In fact he is one of the few Arabic poets whose proverbial verses were for centuries and are still, widely circulated in educated conversation. This influence is confirmed by the frequent verses mentioned in al-Maidāni's 'Book of Proverbs': a large proportion of the proverbs attributed vaguely in al-Maidāni's collection to the 'muwalladin', are in fact Abu'l-Atāhiya's verses in their original form or with little change. A few examples of these are:

"Maidāni, Vol.2, P.138" "ليس الحريص بزائد في رزقه ...."

ليس الحريص بزائد في رزقه ∴ الله يقسمه له ويسببه [2]

"Maidāni, Vol.I. P.241" "سبحانه الجامع بين النار والثلج" ←

[3] تبارك من لم يشف الا الثقيه ∴ ولم يأتلف الا به النار والثلج

---

1. dīwān p. 223
2. dīwān p. 33
3. ibid 63

"رب مزح في غوره جد" ← "Midani, vol. 2. P. 99"

إستفاد ضده الصحيح ∴ ورب جد جره المزاح[1]

He has also many other verses which are quoted occasionally in the present-day Arab world.

"طبيب يداوي الناس وهو عليل" ∗ "Midani, vol. I. P. 155"

تحث على التقوى وأنت مقصر ∴ أيا من يداوي الناس وهو سقيم 2

1 - Aghani vol - 3 - p - 143

---

1. dīwān p. 242

Turning the Famous Sayings of Great and Holy Men into Verse.

Abu'l-Atāhiya's desire to establish himself as a great admonisher and sage, inspired him to mould into verses some of the famous sayings on themes similar to his. Since his aim was to associate himself with the great and holy people who gave these sayings, we find him sticking to the original words as closely as possible, as can be seen in the following verses:

1. عجبت للنار نام الدهر طالبها .. وجنة الخلد نام الدهر راغبها

This is taken from a saying attributed to Ali b. Abi Tālib, mentioned in the[2] Nahj al Balāgha, which goes like this: الدنيا لم أر كالجنة نام طالبها ، والنار نام هاربها

3. ما بال من أوله نطفة .. وجيفة آخره يفخر

From the words of Ali b. Abi Tālib:
ما لابن آدم والفخر ، أوله نطفة وآخره جيفة

4. وكانت وفي حياتك لي عظة .. وأنت اليوم أوعظ منك حيا

---

1. diwān p. 35. V. 4.
2. ——— p. 67 Vol 1
3. diwān p. 103 Vol. 5
4. Al-Mubarrid (Kamil Vol. 1. p. 238)

[2] Taken from the words of the mourner of Al-Iskandar:

كان الملك أمس أنطق منه اليوم وهو اليوم أوعظ منه أمس

3 قد لعمري حكيت لي غصص الموت ∴ وحركتني لها وسكنتا

[4] From the words of the mourner of Al-Iskandar:

حركنا بسكونه

5 وعبروا الدنيا إلى غيرها ∴ فإنما الدنيا لهم معبر

6 is taken from the saying of Al-Hassan al-Basri:

اجعل الدنيا كالمعبرة تجوز عليها ولا تعمرها

This class of Abu'l-Atāhiya's poetry was admired by Mubarrid, who went so far as to put a whole poem[7] of Abu'l-Atāhiya's into this group, showing the resemblance between each line and the saying from which it was taken. Mobarrid's admiration may be taken as an evidence of the general respect and enthusiasm with which such poetry was received. A person who admired these famous sayings in prose would be doubly glad

---

1. Aghānī Vol. 3 p. 147 (bottom)
2. ibid
3. ibid
4. ibid
5. Kamil Vol. 1 p. 238
6. ibid
7. ibid

to receive them in verse, which made them more elegant and melodious and easier to memorise: we can see the great difference that the metre and rhyme made in the third example given above. But, before concluding, we must express here our disagreement with Mubarrid about his allegation that Abu'l-Atāhiya used to conceal the origin from which he borrowed the ideas in such verses; this allegation can not be justified in view of the above-mentioned examples in which the poet showed great care to keep to the original words as much as possible.

With our great respect for Mubarrid, we cannot escape the fact that he confused quotation[1] with plagiarism. In plagiarism, poets try to conceal the source from which they borrow their ideas, in order to appear original; and this they do by modifying and altering the forms of the borrowed ideas. But Abu'l-Atāhiya's aim was quite different; indeed the poet would have been very disappointed if his audience could NOT see through his verses to the sayings of the Prophet or some dearly respected sage. He wanted to tell the people of his time that he was not alone in condemning the world and speaking about its unworthiness, but that great and holy men were on his side. He wanted to show the people how he, in his sermons, was but echoing the words of their Prophet (and their saints. Consequently he had to stick to the words

---

1. We can call the action of our poet (turning the famous sayings into verses) quotation

of his authority as closely as possible. In point of fact he was challenged on some occasions to show that authority, since his words in themselves could not command great respect: for instance when he said:[1]

إنما مالي الذي أنا منفقه ... وليس لي المال الذي أنا تاركه

Thumāmā b. Ashras asked him, "What is your authority for saying such words?" To that the poet replied: "I have taken this from the saying of the Prophet:

إنما لك من مالك ما أكلت فأفنيت أو لبست فأبليت أو تصدقت فأمضيت

2

1. Aghānī Vol. 3. p.
2. Lisān al-Arab. Vol. 13 p. 464 (bottom)

Abu'l-Atāhiya's 'urjuza.

Another expression of Abu'l-Atāhiya's desire to establish himself as a great admonisher and a man of wisdom was his great poem in the rajaz metre (رجز). We are told that it contained 4000 maxims, most of which have been lost. Fortunately the remaining part is long enough for us to have from it a good idea of the whole.

First of all, we would like to clarify the statement that it contained 4000 proverbs (مثل), and was therefore called: ذات الأمثال . It must be remembered that there are two different meanings for ' مثل '. The first refers to famous sayings that were invented on a particular occasion, and continued to be used ever afterwards on similar occasions without changing their form. A good example is the famous saying: " سبق السيف العذل " ("My sword was swifter than your reproach.") It was used first by al-Harith[1] b. Zalim, when he killed a person and was told too late that the unfortunate man had an excuse; since then this proverb has been used whenever some one is blamed too late for him to undo his action. But the word ' مثل ' is also used for any concise line[2] of poetry that vividly expresses a moral or axiom. It is obvious that the latter meaning is what is meant when they say that the 'urjuza of Abu'l-Atāhiya contained 4000 proverbs.

---

1. Lisān al-arab. Vol. 13. p. 464 (bottom)

2- Tāj al-'arūs - vol - 8 - p - 110 (bottom) Egypt 1307-A-H.

An important problem is the question: why did Abu'l-Atāhiya choose the type of versification called 'Muzdawij' for the composition of his vast number of proverbial verses? His choice is particularly worth noticing in view of the fact that this kind of versification was hardly[1] known before his time. The composition of 'Muzdawij' consists in rhyming only two short lines of the metre called 'rajaz' together. Thus his 'urjuza consists of a great number of strophes, each of them of two lines only.

It is not very difficult to see the various reasons that led our poet to his choice.

First, he wanted to ease his task in composition. Rajāz is half way[2] between rhymed prose and poetry. The fact that pre-Islamic Arabs used it usually when they were in need of improvising a few lines for an urgent occasion - for instance in war-songs and battle cries - indicates that it is an easy[3] metre. It has another advantage: as al-Zajjaj put it, "it is pleasant to the ear and acceptable to the soul." Such a metre is most suitable to embellish dry[4] themes of proverbs.

Mazdawij was even more easy, because it was free from the shackle of unchangeable rhyme. Up to the time of our poet the practice was to keep the same rhyme from start to

---

1. Encyclopaedia of Islam. Supplement p.181.
2. Al-Khalil does not admit that some forms of Rajāz are poetry (Lisān al-Arab Vol. 7 p. 217)
3. Lisān al-Arab Vol. 7 p. 218 (middle)
4. A schaade Encyclopaedia of Islam - supplement p. 181.

finish of a poem. Obviously this discipline needed a great effort from the poet, if at the end of each line he was to find a word with the required idea and the right rhyme without straining natural language.

Abu'l-Atāhiya was both compelled and encouraged to free himself from this convention by certain practical considerations. He had to compose a few thousand verses of morals and axioms, and it was impossible for him to keep the same rhyme throughout such a long composition. (We are told that his 'urjuza contained 4000 proverbs. These could not be put in less than two or three thousand lines.) Secondly, rhyme is one of the various devices of prosody that one needed to maintain the unity of a poem; a fact of which the Arab authors were aware, according to a recent work[1] on the art of versification. But if this sense of unity was needed in the poems that had a single subject, such as satirizing or eulogizing a certain person, there was not the same need in the 'urjuza of Abu'l-Atāhiya, which consists of a series of completely independent and different ideas, each of which was cast in a self-contained line or couplet: in such poetry the problem of linking the various parts of the poem does not arise.

However, we must not assume that the poet was only looking after his own interest and seeking the easiest way of

---

1. Thesis M.A. of Mahmod al-Sa'aran Farūq University 1947.

composition when he limited the rhyme to two lines. He might have been trying also to break the monotony caused by too frequent repetition of the same rhyme; a monotony that annoys the listener more than usual in the short lines of 'rajaz', where the rhymed words are bound to follow one another closely. It is a matter of taste, but we do not think many people can read the eulogy[1] of Abu Nuwās on Fadl b. Rabi without growing bored for this very reason.

Besides considering Abu'l-Atāhiya's choice of form with regard to practical necessities we ought to see it in the light of his character. He was fickle and impatient, and the sort of poetry that gave him more liberty must have appealed to him. This reminds us of his reluctance to use figures of speech in his poetry; after all, rhyming is one of the devices invented to decorate poetry, and in that sense it is a sort of figure.

As we have seen, he was also extremely revolutionary and unconventional. The disregard that he harboured for the conventions of his society is connected in his character with his disregard for conventional rhyming. Nor was this the only case in which he showed a tendency to break[2] the recognised rules of prosody. This revolutionary spirit, however, rendered a great service to Arabic literature, in that Abu'l-

---

1. dīwān p. 77 (Egypt 1898)
2. an account of that is given at the end of this chapter.

Atāhiya was the first poet to raise Muzdawij from its primitive use to the status of a mature and generally recognised art. This art played an important role in mnemonic poetry: manuals of grammar and other branches of knowledge were written in it, with a view to making it easier for the students to learn by heart; it was very easy for the shholarly authors of such books to use without needing great poetic skill.

As to the origins of Muzdawij poetry, we have no reason to reject the two records in the Aghānī. One[1] account tells us that al-Walīd b. Yazīd used it while he was drunk; the other[2] tells us that Hammād Ajrad used to compose some verses in Muzdawij in his prayers with his heretic friends. Certainly these two reports seem to be in accord with the earlier development of that type of verse. We have said before that the rajaz metre was used in early times whenever the Arabs were too hasty or too excited to concentrate on composing poetry in more elaborate metre. It seems that this continued to be its function until the time of al-Walīd b. Yazīd and Hammād, who used it for a slightly different reason: they were not too hasty, but too drunk. The fact that al-Walīd was drunk is stated in the account; and it is almost certain that Hammād and his friends were also drunk during their jesting, unconventional prayers. In such a

---

1. Aghānī Vol 6. p. 128 (middle)
2. Aghānī vol. 3 p. 74 (middle)

state of mind neither of them was able to keep the same rhyme throughout the whole stanza; such action needs a degree of vigilance that is out of the reach of an intoxicated man. Moreover, these were verses that they composed for their own amusement, not for the public and therefore they saw no need to take much trouble. But it was the genius, courage, or revolutionary spirit of our poet which made him see the artistic merits of Muzdawiji and use it for serious subjects. From then on it took its place on an equal footing with other kinds of poetry.

It is interesting and rather surprising to see how Musdawiji-poetry which had been unknown, or at least unpopular up to the time of Abu'l-Atāhiya, jumped suddenly to the front. It was not Abu'l-Atāhiya only who used it, but also another contemporary, though younger, poet. We are told that this poet, Abān b. Abdu'l-Hamīd, versified "Kalila[1] wa-Dimna" a book full of wisdom and instruction in pleasant form; he also composed a long 'urjuza about the beginning[2] of the world; and furthermore he composed a great amount of poetry connected with Islamic[3] rites, such as prayers. In all of these works he used "Muzdawij". One is bound to wonder what was the relationship between these two parallel experiments of Abu'l-Atāhiya and Abān. Was it a mere coincidence that these two poets awakened to the new art at the

---

1. Suli al-Amroq p 2
2. " "
3. " " 1

same time? Or was there a deeper reason for what looks to have been a competition between them? If such competition actually existed to which of them belongs the credit of having made 'Muzdawij' a popular art, and so opened the eyes of his rival to it?

Writers on Arabic literature, so far as we know, have had nothing to say about this important point. In his article on 'rajaz' and the occurrence of 'Muzdawij' in Arabic literature, A. Schaade[1] does not refer to Abān at all: in his opinion the 'urjuza of Abu'l-Atāhiya is the oldest example of 'Muzdawij' that has come down to us. Can we understand from this that he had evidence that Abān began his work after the appearance of Abu'l-Atāhiya's 'urjuz'? Indeed, history alone does not help, since no reference is made in the sources to the year in which either of the poets completed his work; it is mentioned only that Aban was working for the Barmekides. We know that at that time Abu'l-Atāhiya was engaged in composing his so-called religious poetry, which included his 'urjuza.

Beyond this, however, we have to rely once more on what we know of the background of that era, in our search for a satisfactory explanation of this obscure point. It was proved before[2] that Abān was sponsered in his work by the

---

1. The Encyclopaedia of Islam, the supplement, p. 180
2. Supra p. 89

Barmakides for political reasons. And that he was trying in his poetry to ward off the danger what might befall his patrons as a result of Abu'l-Atāhiya's poetry. With that idea in mind it is only natural to suggest that Abu'l-Atāhiya had used al-Muzdawij before Abān.

Abu'l-Atāhiya's prosody.

We have said that Abu'l-Atāhiya's disregard of conventional rhyming was not the only way in which he showed his tendency to violate the generally accepted rules of prosody. We may recall that he showed complete freedom in cutting down the prelude of panegyric poems to the bare necessity. More important than that is his venture to introduce new metres into Arabic literature.

Abu'l-'Alā tells[1] us that the 'Mudhari' ' metre was never used by the Arabs, and it was Abu'l-Atāhiya who used it first in his poem:

أيا عتب ما يضر   ك أن تطلقي صفادي

Al-Mas'udī[2] informs us that the poet used another metre that was never employed by the Arabs, nor was it mentioned by al-Khalīl, the great prosodist. Here is an example of this metre, which is called 'striking the Nakūs' because it consists of long syllables:-

هم القاضي بيت يطرب   ∴   قال القاضي لما عوتب
ما في الدنيا إلا مذنب   ∴   هذا عذر القاضي واقلب

A third new metre was referred to by Ibn Qtaiba[3] who said

---

1. al-Fusūl Vol. I p. 131
2. Murūj Vol. 7. p. 87
3. Al Shi'r wa Shu'ara p. 497

that Abu'l-Atāhiya heard the sound of a hammer one day, then he imitated its sound in his poetry by saying:

للمنون دائرا ... ت يدرن صرفها
هن ينتقيننا ... واحدا فواحدا

It is to the credit of Abu'l-Atāhiya that the second metre of these three became common in later centuries.

One of Abu'l-Atāhiya's serious violations of the accepted rules of prosody can be seen in the following stanzas:-[1]

يا ذا الذي في الحب يلحى أما ... والله لو كلفت منه كما
كلفت من حب رخيم لما ... لمت على الحب فذرني وما
ألقى فإني لست أدري بما ... بليت إلا أنني بينما
أنا بباب القصر في بعض ما ... أطوف في قصرهم إذ رمى
قلبي غزال بسهام فما ... أخطا بها قلبي ولكنما
سهماه عيناه له كلما ... أراد قتلي بهما سلما

This running-on of all the lines is called: 'Taḍmīn', and is condemned by all critics, who required that each line of the poem should stand alone and independent of what comes before or after it. But Abu'l-Atāhiya, who wanted to show his disdain for such rigid rules, took pains to produce a stanza with excessive 'taḍmīn'.

Some of the reasons why he was always inclined to depart from the conventional rules, are to be found in the traits of his character to which we referred above. But on the top

1. Al-Marzubānī, al-Muwashshah 251

of that, it is known that he was treated arrogantly by his rival poets, who looked down on him for his poor background in Arabic literature. They challenged him to compose lofty and weighty poetry like theirs, as if he were inferior to them; they also sneered at him by asking him about his knowledge of prosody.[1] To prove to them that composing poetry was a matter of talent rather than education, and invention rather than convention, he tried to show the vigour of his poetical personality by violating the accepted rules of prosody whenever he could. Strangely enough, some of his inventions were universally accepted, like his use of Muzdawij to do away with prolonged rhyme. His new metre 'striking the Nakūs' was also admired.

However, in the case of the stanza we have just given, it is likely that he had yet another reason for such fantastic 'tadmin'. One of the outstanding characteristics of Abu'l-Atāhiya's poetry is the lack of coherence between the two hemistichs of the same line. The phenomenon is to be found everywhere in his poetry but it is particularly frequent in his 'urjoza. Apparently he was drawn to do so by the great admiration bestowed on the following verse of al-Nābigha and similar verses:

[2] ولست بمستبق أخا لا تلمّه ∴ على شعث ـ أى الرجال المهذب

1. Aghāni Vol-3 p. 131
2. Al-Marzabāni-al-Muwashshak p. 261

This verse is admired because some of it can stand alone, i.e. the last sentence: ' ' Unfortunately Abu'l-Atāhiya failed to see the difference between al-Nabigha's verse and his own lines:-

إن الفساد ضده الصلاح .·. ورب جد جره المزاح
الفقر فيما جاوز الكفافا .·. من اتقى الله رجا وخافا
أذل الحرص والطمع الرقابا .·. وقد يعفو الكريم إذا استرابا

Although some of al-Nabigha's verse can be quoted alone, the whole line is integrated, because the same idea runs throughout. But there is no relationship between the two hemistichs of Abu'l-Atāhiya's line, since each of them is devoted to a different idea. Such procedure is against the Arab conception of poetry, in which the very term ' بيت ' given to the line of poetry implies the unity of all parts of the line. It seems that contemporary critics and rival poets had met Abu'l-Atāhiya's 'urjuza with two main points of criticism: the lack of coherence between the different parts of the line, and the failure of the poet to keep the rhyme. They attributed these blemishes to the poet's inability to do otherwise. To prove to them that that which he had done in his 'urjaza was a deliberate new style in poetry which ought not to be taken as evidence of his inability to keep the rhyme or to integrate his poetry if he wanted to, he composed this stanza, in which all lines are interdependent and every hemistich is rhymed. No other satisfactory explanation can be offered.

Nevertheless, we do well in conclusion to admit that Abu'l-Atāhiya was conceited, a characteristic that was partly responsible for much of his strange behaviour, such as competing with Muslim b. al-Walīd and Zuhair and emulating the Koran. It was this conceit and his genuine belief in his talent that made him use all[1] the letters of the alphabet in rhyming his poetry. We suggest that this was the reason for such action, because with most of the letters unfavoured by the poets he composed only two or three lines, just to show that it was not beyond the reach of his power to do so. In the case of the letter[2] ع his verses rhymed with this letter were an answer to an actual challenge. Amongst other poets:

Abū Firās did not use: و . غ . ظ . ط . ص . ز . خ

'Omar b. Abi Rabī'a did not use: و . غ . ظ . ط . ش . ز . خ

Abu Tammām did not use: و . غ . ظ . ط . ص . ش . ز . ذ . خ

Apart from Abu'l-Atāhiya, only Abu al-'Alā' al Ma'arrī used all letters without exception; which is no wonder since he too was conceited.

---

1. except ح which he did not use at all
2. his dīwān p. 164 (1909)

CONCLUSION

We offer here a short summary of our conclusions regarding Abu'l-Atāhiya's life and work which we have elaborated in the preceding chapters.

We began by showing that the conditions under which our poet lived in his youth determined his unhappiness. They burdened him with a sense of inferiority and a bitter hatred for the aristocracy. His later experiences, particularly his failure in love, only served to intensify these traits: his belief that 'Utba refused him because of his base birth increased his sense of inferiority. Meanwhile the unjust and inconsiderate role that both Mahdī and Hārūn had played in his love-affair, had further embittered his feelings against the aristocracy.

Tired of Hārūn's indifference to his suffering, and the Caliph's failure to fulfil so many promises concerning the poet's marriage to 'Utba, Abu'l-Atāhiya decided to revenge himself on his master. He waited patiently until the chance was presented to him. This was in 180 A.H., when Fadl b. Rabi' was appointed Head-Chamberlain and, backed by Zubaida, began to put into effect his plans for bringing about the downfall of the Barmekides. Fadl's main weapon against his rivals was slanders; however the success of his calumny

was not certain, because of the close friendship that bound Hārūn and Ja'far the Barmekid. This amity was continually fostered at the highly spirited parties Caliph and favourite attended together. The first step towards ending these parties was to entice away Abu'l-Atāhiya, who gave them life and soul by his tender love-songs. Better still was to turn him into a poet whose only concern was to denounce and attack such parties and all the pleasures associated with them. As we have said, Abu'l-Atāhiya was long since prepared for embarking on such a career, on account of his childhood and his discontent with Hārūn. Indeed his discontent waxed to bitter hatred when the Caliph imprisoned him for a whole year, with the aim of compelling him to compose love-poetry after he had declared he would do so no more.

Zubaida too supported these intrigues zealously; not only because she disliked the Barmekides, but also because it was at their parties that Hārūn came into contact with singing and dancing-girls, of whom Zubaida was extremely jealous. She hoped that Abu'l-Atāhiya's religious poetry might bring the Caliph to his senses and damp his enthusiasm for frivolities.

Consequently a great number of Abu'l-Atāhiya's verses denounced pleasure, and advocated strict and restrained behaviour. A high proportion even of his verses on Death

were meant to lessen the Caliph's interest in this Life, and replace it in his heart by the Life to Come. Such a state of mind, if it could be induced, would oblige Hārūn to abandon his dissolute pastimes and those who abetted them, i.e. Ja'far the Barmekid and the singing and dancing-girls.

No less a proportion of his stanzas about Death formed a malicious attack on the aristocracy, for whom he wished the destruction and humiliation that Death would bring.

Another important factor has come to light: namely that in almost all his later composition the poet was urged on by his desire to establish himself as an admonisher. Thus, in calling on people to prepare themselves for Death by abstaining from frivolous pleasures, he was not only serving Zubaida and Fadl; simultaneously he was building up his own public prestige. This motive becomes more and more obvious when Abu'l-Atāhiya makes out to be the champion of morality, and begins to set forth standards of behaviour, urging people to be contented, generous, faithful to their friends, elegant in their behaviour, and so on

In attempting to establish himself as an admonisher, with the prestige and influence that position commanded, our poet was trying to recover his self-respect, which he had lost through his sense of inferiority. Therefore it is not so surprising that though he composed many verses on morals, he did not always practise what he preached. In his verses

he was, as he put it[1], concerned with what by rights ought to be, and saying what an admonisher was expected to say. But in his private life he was influenced for the worse by his own temperament and circumstances.

To sum it all up, we are now in a position to say with a fair amount of certainty that Abu'l-Atāhiya was inspired in his poetry after 180 A.H. by these motives: his hatred for the aristocracy in general and the Abbasids in particular; his sense of inferiority and his pessimistic outlook on life; and his desire to further the cause of Fadl and Zubaida. His desire to establish himself as an admonisher had left its stamp on all his verses after 180 A.H.

It should be equally plain that the poet's assumption of ascetic garb and habits was not the result of genuine religious feeling. Rather the poet was seeking refuge in religion from his failures in life. (He might also have been keeping up appearances as a religious admonisher). He took refuge in religion whenever the unhappy question of his base birth was[2] raised: he clung to the Koranic principle that piety, not birth, makes some men more honourable than others.

When it comes to estimating Abu'l-Atāhiya's success or failure in life, we cannot help but sympathise with him. Most of his shortcomings were, as he elegantly put it, imposed on

---

1. Aghānī Vol. 3 p. 133 (second line)
2. ibid p. 127 bottom and 128 top and many other verses in his diwān.

him by circumstances out of his control, which he called Predestination.[1] He tried nevertheless to make the best of a bad situation, and succeeded to a remarkable extent. Suffice it to recall that the recitation of some of his verses on Mortality was enough to move Hārūn to tears — to the satisfaction of both Zubaida and Fadl b. Rabi'. Or that some extremely great and pious people, like Abdullah b. 'Abd al-'azīz al-'Umarī, used to praise him and quote from his works. Or that such prestige did he acquire, an important member of the royal family was willing to marry his daughter and proposed to her.

Abu'l-Atāhiya's contribution to the development of Arabic literature was great indeed. He was the very poet that the age needed. The establishment of the Abbasid Caliphate increased the influence of Persian and other 'subject' cultures on Muslim civilisation. With this, fashions and ways of thinking began to change. Yet Arabic poetry remained conservative. It was revolutionary and unconventional Abu 'l-Atāhiya who began to destroy these shackles one after the other. He rid his panegyrics of the conventional prelude, hitherto indispensable; and strangely enough he was admired in spite of (or because of?) his iconoclasm. In satire too he followed a new line, the essence of which was to harass

---

1. Supra p. 156
2. Mansūr b. Mahalī

his victim with false, but extremely embarrassing, accusations, putting them in witty language to amuse the reader and so ensure that they would be widely circulated. The last word on prosody was thought to have been said by Khalīl b. Ahmed; but this did not prevent Abu'l-Atāhiya from adding some new metres to those already known, and - what is more remarkable - some of them passed into popular use.

His greatest contribution, however, was his boldness in popularising 'Muzdawij'. That sort of verse was to play an important part in Muslim culture; many concise yet important books in all branches of the Muslim sciences were composed in 'Muzdawij', for the purpose of helping students who wished to learn their contents by heart.

Whatever was the real quality of his 'piety', it was largely thanks to Abu'l-Atāhiya that poetry on Mortality, meant to exhort people to pious deeds, emerged and flourished in Arabic literature. His own compositions in this genre were known and imitated as far as Spain, as can be seen on one of the royal epitaphs of Gao:- Central Africa (2)

> "Twelve lines in Kufic characters similar to those of the preceding inscription... though it juxtaposes and paraphrases extracts from the Sacred Book, this mediocre poetry finds its real source of inspiration in a piece by Abu'l-Atāhiya written in the same metre and with the same rhyme, in which are found not only the same ideas, (or rather the same commonplaces), but even a few of the expressions used here. Such passages reminiscent of Abu'l-Atāhiya are no longer

---

1. dīwān p. 76 F.

(2) Encycl of Islam vol-II-p-172

> surprising since we have come to know bits of grave-shrouds of Buyid period on which verses of his are to be read. but at any rate they were unexpected at Gao."(1)

only a few days ago, a poem composed in the vein of Abu'l-Atāhiya's religious poetry and set to music, was broadcast over the Algarian radio. So that his influence is still alive and active in the popular literature of modern times.

---

(1) 'Al-Andalus: vol. CIV (Madrid-Granada, 1949) p. 126.