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REVIEWS

IBRAHIM M. ABU-HASHHASH, Tod und Trauer in der Poesie des Palästinensers Mahmūd Darwīsh. Islamkundliche Untersuchungen, Band 164. Berlin, Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 1994. 325 pp.¹

In his recent dissertation on death and mourning in the poetry of Mahmūd Darwīsh, the Palestinian Abu Hashhash introduces his compatriot as the “personified voice of his suffering people,” and demonstrates from the beginning his profound admiration for the man whom he considers to be “the intellectual and inspired mouthpiece” of the Palestinian community and even “the incarnation of the poetic ideal.” Abu Hashhash intends to analyse the motif of death and mourning and its evolution in the lyrical works of Darwīsh. He demonstrates his concern with the intertextual framework that marks the poetry of Darwīsh. To convince his western readership that Darwīsh deserves the wide appreciation that he has received in the Arab world, he adds to his analysis a selection of Darwīsh’s elegies in German translation.

The research itself concentrates on poems published between 1960 and 1986, a period longer than that covered by his often printed Diwan (1964-1977). A description of the cultural and literary background of Darwīsh’s poetry (pp. 7-44) is followed by an analysis of images of death and martyrdom in the poet’s “Denken” (pp. 45-175), and subsequently by a more systematic analysis of the “Dichterische Gestaltung” of the death theme. The book concludes with an extended bibliography and a sometimes puzzling index of persons and poems.

Abu Hashhash stresses in the first part the importance of martyrdom in traditional Islam. Because of the belief that the warrior who falls in the struggle for Islam is a martyr who gains free entrance into Paradise, it became easier in early Islamic times than in the Jāhiliyya period to accept death and even welcome it. Passing on to modern times, Abu Hashhash concludes that with modern Palestinian martyrdom this religious idea still prevails, but what is striking is that not only the warrior but everyone who dies as a victim for the Palestinian cause is considered to be a shahīd, a martyr, whose blood enriches the earth. Poems on “martyrs” became common in Palestinian poetry of the thirties and forties, when people revolted against the colonizing powers. The martyr motif is thus conspicuous in the poetry of Ibrāhīm Tūqān, ‘Abd al-Rahīm Maḥmūd and Abū Salmā. In their poetry these poets follow closely the historical events of the thirties and the tradition of nahḍa poetry for commenting on the political and social events of the time. The martyr is a concrete, historical figure, a victim of the bitter struggle for independence and justice in the thirties. An example of this poetry is Tūqān’s poem “al-thulāthā al-ḥamrā‘,” referring to the execution by the British Mandatory Power, on the 17th of June 1930, of three young Arabs from Hebron and Safad who had participated in a revolt in al-Buraq in 1929. Other examples show a tendency to idealize the figures both of the martyr and of the fidā‘ī. This idea is elaborated at a personal level in the work and life of ‘Abd al-Rahīm Maḥmūd, who died himself in 1948 in the battle of

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al-Shajara. After this poet’s martyrdom Palestinian poetry acquired more symbolic, even mythical dimensions. Individual martyrdom became fused with the tragedy of the loss of the Fatherland. The martyr thus became an exemplary figure who has to inspire the whole people to struggle for the reconquest of the land. This mythification has been furthered by the new poetry of the fifties in Iraq and Lebanon, inspired by the myths of Tammûz (Adûnîs), involving the theme of death and resurrection, alluded to in T.S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land.”

The relationship between the poetry of Darwish and the Tammuzists, esp. al-Sayyâb, is dealt with in the following part of the book, entitled “Tod und Märtyrertum im Denken Mahmûd Darîfî.” Here, Abu Hashhash tries to develop a chronological picture of Darîfî’s elaboration of a dominant theme, “death as a door to life.” There is no question here of a personal passage from death to life; rather, this theme concerns a political rebirth of the Palestinian fatherland in the blood of the martyrs. This theme prevails in most of Darîfî’s poetry. In the early sixties, death is seen as a means to fertilize life. Martyrs die, but their blood enriches the earth and gives birth to new life. The Cross as a symbol of death and sacrifice is already present in Darîfî’s early poetry. Abu Hashhash refers to Sayyâb’s poem “al-Masîh ba’d al-šalb” in which the historical figure of Jesus and the mythical figure of Tammûz are brought together. The sacrifice of Christ opens the way to life. It is not surprising that Darîfî gives the symbol of the Cross a political meaning. After June 1967, Darîfî applies the Tammuzian resurrection theme to the Palestinian resistance movement, symbol of new life after the sufferings and death of the people. In his poetry the Cross becomes a symbol of resistance, with Christ figuring as the bard of Palestinian freedom and the one who leaves his cross to fight together with the people for the fatherland. But this optimistic symbolism becomes threatened when all Palestinian resistance seems to be in vain. In 1970 Darîfî has to leave his country. This influences his attitude towards the object of his anger and struggle; his discourse becomes less personal and more symbolic and complex. The Tammuzian symbols are abandoned and new ones are invented, like alienation, ghurba, the dream of Palestine itself, and the Mediterranean Sea. In this amalgam of symbolism A. also draws attention to the mythicizing of persons, places and events, a phenomenon that will be recognizable to anyone with a first-hand knowledge of Arab peoples and their attitudes towards politics.

In the next section death is considered in relationship to earth, the dominating motif in the Palestinian dream, the idea of sumûd is worked out concisely, while the motif of the grave also offers a possibility for patriotic poetry. This is followed by a treatment of the 1948 exodus as being equivalent to death, the re-entrance of the resistance movement in the country and the martyrs who fell. A recurrent motif is the forbidden passage to the fatherland, as at the Mandelbaum Gate and the Allenby bridge. Death is the gateway to entry into Palestine and an alternative to exile, and here again we find the motif of the martyr, the fiddî, who challenges the Palestinians’ fate of being refugees and, by shedding his blood, opens the gateway to the country. Again the Tammuzian myth of love between the dying god and the earth is celebrated in Darîfî’s description of the relationship between the Palestinian and the earth of Palestine (“Ashîq min Filâstîn”) ending finally in a self-chosen martyrdom and a dialectic of love, life and death. In this part of the analysis the author switches continuously from one motif to another, without making very clear how his argument develops.

Having treated in the second part the motifs of death and martyrdom in relation to Palestinian reality—what this has to do with Darîfî’s “Denken” is not worked
out—Abu Hashhash analyses a number of elegies more specifically and formally on the textual level. He organizes his analysis according to content: the poems on massacres like Kafr Qasim, and on friends fallen in the resistance movement, but also on symbolic motifs like the city of Jaffa, the Wedding, the colour green (earth). There is a dichotomy between the poet and the martyr in this poetry. Whereas the martyr appears as an active prophet, Messiah and mystic, the poet becomes the symbol of inability and selfishness, like the opportunistic politicians who profit from the martyr’s sacrifice. But when the poet becomes a bard of resistance, he identifies with the martyr and here, of course, Darwish places his own activity as a poet, as the voice of Palestine itself, although the legitimization for this has to be founded on the artistic and aesthetic quality of his work. Here the text offers information which is too often lacking in this book in the form of biographical references concerning Darwish and the Palestinian poets of resistance. The massacre of Kafr Qasim on the 29th of October 1956 inspired Darwish, as well as other Palestinian poets, to write a number of poems. These poems are analysed in a descriptive manner, although some attention is paid to discursive elements like pronouns (markers), thematic organization, and other structural devices. The Palestinian wedding (like the death of a martyr) is also a favourite theme of Palestinian poetry, which Darwish worked out in his poem “Wedding Party,” a beautiful poem evoking the form of the popular songs, used earlier by Zayyād.

In his conclusions the author tries to distinguish common features in Darwish’s elegiac poetry: the narrative character of his presentation, the use of dialogue, the rhetorical question. After the long enumeration in the second and third part of the themes and motifs, one has the feeling that Abu Hashhash’s discourse ends in a “sudden death.” Here we proceed to an appreciation of this extended study that may offer non-Arabic readers interesting insights into modern Palestinian poetry. We are well aware of the onerous task the author has imposed upon himself in undertaking this investigation. Nevertheless some criticism is called for. In his introduction Abu Hashhash explains his intention to analyse the motif of death and mourning in the work of Darwish. It would be appropriate for the analysis to be preceded by a biographical sketch, especially in the case of Darwish, whose poetry is so closely identified with the Palestinian cause itself. The lack of such biographical data in connexion with the poems is a serious omission, certainly if the author intended to make this poetry more accessible to the non-Arab reader.

This leads us to another suggestion concerning the author’s attitude towards his object of study. Abu Hashhash, for good reasons, does not conceal his admiration for Darwish’s poetry. Like the great poet himself, he is a Palestinian in exile and this explains a certain lack of critical understanding. Abu Hashhash’s approach to the text is not very systematic; it is guided more by intuition, empathy and thematic association than by a clear-cut method of analysis. Although a great number of poems concerning death and martyrdom are presented and commented on in a paraphrastic way, there is no methodical introduction to help the reader understand Darwish’s poetry as a whole.

In the second part poems are quoted only in part, to demonstrate the way in which Darwish treats the different themes and symbols that inspired his poetical writing. Unfortunately no strict chronological order is followed here, despite what is suggested in the introduction, neither is there any consistent indication of when a poem was written or published for the first time. Elementary data are missing. When a poem is quoted, often only a German title is mentioned and not the Arabic one, which, with the different editions of Darwish’s Diwān, makes it rather difficult to
trace the original. In this respect the bibliography is also confusing: most poems are not quoted from the well-known edition from Dār al-‘Awda, but from other less available sources.

On the other hand, in the third part complete poems are quoted in translation for the purpose of analysis. This part is certainly better structured, and takes into consideration poetical attitude and the function of language, providing the beginning of a discourse analysis. Nevertheless, one has the feeling that a theoretical consideration of the poetical analysis is still lacking. We do not think this is the fault of Dr Abu Hashhash. Thorough and systematic analysis of poetical discourse is painfully lacking in most studies of modern Arabic poetry, whereas it is well established for prose studies. Poetry seems to be regarded as the domain of poets, thus leaving the door open to highly individual interpretation. After all, how should one interpret poetry, that is the question. Our author certainly has ideas about poetry. In his last chapter he declares that poetry has not much to do with the logic of chronology (“... denn die poetische Darstellung durchbricht hier die Logik der Chronologie. Wenn das nicht der Fall wäre, würde es sich tatsächlich um eine gewöhnliche Zeitungsmeldung, nicht um Poesie handeln,” p. 261), that poetry is presented in symbolic images whereas narrative prose concerns reality (p. 262), that poetry is characterized by its lyrical content (p. 263), and that poetry exists in its own world (p. 267). There is no doubt that Abu Hashhash considers poetry to exist in its own world, independently, an abstraction of the reality of everyday life, a transcendent world, evoked by symbols, similes and metaphors. Consequently, this must have influenced the author’s choice and selection of poems serving for the purpose of analysis. In an academic study, one might expect that a theory of poetics would precede the demonstration, which is, unfortunately, not the case.

The author intends to reach a wider reading public, but he does not seem to be aware always of rhetorical and even bombastic expressions which make the reading of Darwish’s poetry sometimes difficult for non-Arab readers. Symbols are used ad nauseam, metaphors are often indigestible, like the melting down of the nails of Jesus’ Cross to become weapons in the Palestinian struggle.

The simple translation of shahid “Märtyrer” (martyr) is confusing for the western reader who has a very strict idea of what it means to be a martyr and cannot recognize in the Palestinian fighter a martyr for the good cause.

The beautiful elegiac poems in the appendix seem to demonstrate Abu Hashhash’s personal preference rather than being representative for the whole of Darwish’s poetry. The extended bibliography could have been improved by a better selection. After all, what purpose is served by a title like: Brüder Grimm, Die schönsten Kinder- und Hausmärchen, in a bibliography on Maḥmūd Darwish, other than to demonstrate the eclectic reading of the author, when fundamental studies like Badawi’s A Critical Introduction to Modern Arabic Poetry are lacking?

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ED DE MOOR & VIC SCHEPENS

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