

the allied forces on the border of Kuwait to liberate the country. The last line reads: 'God is Greater than the aggressor.'²⁰ The entire set of recollections is closed with the note 'Risāla ilā 'ummī' (A Letter to Mother)²¹ It is written by a man who desires to express everything - maybe just in case he dies in the last days. Expressions of love and hope intertwine with despair and requests that she won't pray for him for God knows no mercy for the arrogant. The diary ends on 26th February 1991 - the day Kuwait is liberated. We do not know what happened to the author. We have, however, a valuable document of experience in which the author often condemns himself along with those who forced him to take part in the conflict. He considers that not only is his life in danger but also closer interaction with God, hence in various words he condemns himself because he is aware of non-righteousness of the state in which he remains the only one of those who attacked.

The Iraqi soldier's diary is all the more valuable because it answers many questions raised in the face of the invasion, in the face of the Arab question of unity, allegiance and behaviour of adherents. We have become acquainted thanks to it with the main answer - God has no mercy for the arrogant. Man waits until God speaks to him but at the same time he himself knows what has happened and is happening.

The diary constitutes an addition to the problem undertaken by the Kuwaiti side which execrated because nobody was able to identify with the wrong experienced, the assault and threat.

²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 24.

²¹ *ibid.*, p. 25-26.

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THE MYSTICAL DIMENSION OF ṢALĀḤ 'ABD AṢ-ṢABŪR'S POETRY

Mysticism is the common core of all religious traditions. Mysticism is a belief in direct contact with the absolute. The Greek word "mystiká" denotes 'secret rites'. Mysticism feeds on mystery, on something that cannot be attained by intellectual effort. Man can hope to touch the mystery only through the wisdom of the heart, i.e. through gnosis and spiritual exercises.

The origins of Sufism, i.e. Muslim mysticism, date back to the 8th century. The Sufis' activities began in Kufa and Basra in the 10th century. The word "Sufism" itself is probably derived from the name of a woollen garment (*ṣūf*) which was worn, following the example of the Nestorians, by Muslim ascetics and then mystics. Sufism, which was built on an Islamic foundation, owes its form among others to Neoplatonist philosophy, in particular the philosophy of Plotinus. Other major influences came from the Christian, Iranian and Buddhist religions. The main doctrinal differences between Sufism and orthodox Islam concern a few basic truths:

- for the Sufis, God is immanent, while orthodox Islam proclaims his transcendence;
- the mystics oppose free will to the orthodox faith, which appears to favour predestination;
- the Sufis reject Islamic ritual practices, viewing them as a hindrance to contact with God;
- the Sufis, unlike orthodox Muslims, recognize the need for spiritual growth;
- according to the mystics, the reward/grace from God is closely connected with man's own work and effort, and does not depend solely on God's plan and His will;
- with the Sufis, the mystery of salvation bears clear marks of salvation through one's own effort.

We can hardly hope to give an exact definition of Sufism now, when the Muslims themselves have not managed to work one out in the more than a millennium long history of the movement. The first ideas concerning mystical knowledge of God appeared during the early phase of Sufism (8th-11th c.). It was also that period that saw the formation of the most crucial concepts of Sufi ideology and of practices leading to the acquisition of Sufi knowledge.

One of the main points of Sufi ideology is the principle which says that there exists only one path leading to true knowledge (*ma'rifa*). That is the path of inner experience, intuition and love, rather than reason or scientific knowledge (*'ilm*). It is essential, too, that man should be aware of God's love; this enables him to endure and even to derive satisfaction from the suffering with which God tests him to purge his soul. Man's quest for God is symbolised as a threefold mystical path: *šarī'a*, *ṭarīqa*, *ḥaqīqa*. The most important of these, *šarī'a*, is God's law, whose first and basic sources were the Koran and the Sunna. Etymologically, *šarī'a* means 'approach to a waterhole'. No mystical experience will be possible without obedience to the commandments and injunctions of the *šarī'a*; no mystical path can appear without *šarī'a* as the main road. The Sufis obeyed the Muslim law and the traditions of the Prophet, although they appear to have been strongly internalised. *Ṭarīqa* is the spiritual path, arduous and narrow, which is followed by the seeker of Truth. He goes through a succession of states (*ḥāl*, pl. *aḥwāl*) and stations (*maqām*, pl. *-āt*). The attainment of successive stations of moral discipline depends on man's personal effort, while the states are a kind of gift from God. The ultimate goal of the journey, union with God, is tantamount to arrival at the Truth (*ḥaqīqa*).

Awakening allows a man to embrace the mystical path. The seeker (*murīd* - one who desires /to follow the path/) needs a master, someone to lead him. The master was commonly likened to a prophet, for prophets always strove to show the perfection, justice and power of God as opposed to the imperfection and weakness of man. Characteristic of the Sufis is their patience, contentment in poverty and suffering, hope, and absolute obedience to God and trust in Him. All that brings a perfect inner peace.

The seeker of Truth is led by an interior light; the light is the brighter, the freer the seeker is of the material world. This is a period of purification, which the Sufis usually called the time of polishing the mirror of one's heart. Only then can the disciple reach a state of illumination; in it he receives the gifts of love (*maḥabba*) and gnosis (*ma'rifa*), while also experiencing the presence of God and a real vision of the world. Love and gnosis are not learned, but are due to God's grace. The Sufi strives to grasp and experience the presence of God through contemplation. Contemplation is the practice of

gaining insight into some truth, into the reality, through love; it leads to ecstasy (*wağd*), a state which makes one happy and gives one inner satisfaction. Throughout this, God marks His presence in a special way, while man seems to be inactive, passively receiving God's action.

The Islamic mystics used two concepts, *fanā'* and *baqā'*, to describe the state in which man is when he attains the ultimate goal. *Fanā'* denotes 'departure', 'destruction', 'self-annihilation'. Man is separated from God by many veils; as he progresses spiritually, they fall away and he acquires divine attributes; he ceases to exist as a "self". The veil of ignorance, which covers the identity of God and his creation is thrown off. The Sufi is immersed in God's existence. *Baqā'* is eternal self-subsistence in God. Sufi sees through the eyes of God and acts entirely through Him. Man's aim, union with God (*tawḥīd*), has been achieved. The Sufis teach that man achieves this true and perfect union after his death, because death means total destruction of the self, which stands between the lover and the beloved. The "self" is a mere illusion, a bundle of impressions, which is not identical with man's true nature. It is necessary to identify and extract from the plethora of spiritual exercises the most important truth, which is, that love is the basis of all action. The mystics know that God's motive in creating the first man was love. It is only in the same way, through love, that man is capable of returning to his source.

*The journey of a Sufi is victory over himself
if a Sufi conquers himself, he arrives*¹.

It was not without reason that Ṣalāḥ 'Abd aṣ-Ṣabūr² put this sentence in a

¹ Ṣalāḥ 'Abd aṣ-Ṣabūr, *Ḥayātī fī āš-ši'r* [in:] *Dīwān Ṣalāḥ 'Abd aṣ-Ṣabūr*, vol. III, pp.24.

² Ṣalāḥ 'Abd aṣ-Ṣabūr (1931-1981) is among the leading 20th century Egyptian poets. He graduated from the Faculty of Arabic Literature at the University of Cairo. He collaborated with the literary weekly *Rūz al-Yūsuf* and the newspaper *Al-Ahrām*. He was also a co-editor of the literary monthly *Al-Kātib*. From 1978 he held the post of director of the Publishing Institute of the Ministry of Culture and the National Library in Cairo. Ṣalāḥ 'Abd aṣ-Ṣabūr was the author of six poetic collections: *People in My Country* (*An-Nās fī bilādī*, 1959), *I Say Unto You* (*Aqūl lakum*, 1961), *Dreams of the Ancient Knight* (*Aḥlām al-fāris al-qadīm*, 1964), *Meditations on a Wounded Time* (*Ta'ammulāt fī zaman ġarīḥ*, 1970), *Night Tree* (*Šaḡar al-layl*, 1972), *Sailing Into Memory* (*Al-Ibḥār fī āq-dākira*, 1979); five plays, the autobiography *My Life in Poetry* (*Ḥayātī fī āš-ši'r*, 1969); many articles in the area of broadly conceived cul-

chapter of his autobiography, *My Life in Poetry* (*Ḥayātī fī āš-ši'r*). This modern Egyptian poet, whose work grew out of a fascination with man and was wholly devoted to man, came under strong influence of Sufi thought; his third poetic collection, *Dreams of the Ancient Knight* (*Aḥlām al-fāris al-qadīm*)³ is the fruit of that influence. I want to dwell on a few chosen pieces in the collection to point out their special sense, their means of expression and the sources of the author's inspiration⁴.

The poem *Exodus* (*Al-Ḥurūḡ*) is a poem of many layers and much complexity. It is based on the historical fact of the prophet Muhammad's journey from Mecca to Yaṭrib (later Medina) in the year 622. Muhammad and the first Muslims of Mecca found themselves in a difficult situation. They were few, they came from the poorest strata of society and they were persecuted by members of the Koreish tribe. The teachings of Muhammad threatened the interests of the tribe of Koreish, who feared loss of prestige, loss of importance for Mecca and the upheaval that Muhammad's activity might cause. That is why the Prophet had to leave Mecca, a step he decided to take when he had found some following at Yaṭrib. Muhammad set out at dawn, in the company of his best friend Abū Bakr. On the day of his departure the Prophet left his cousin 'Alī in his own bed. Covered with Muhammad's coat, 'Alī pretended that the Prophet was still there. During his journey through the desert Muhammad was pursued by a man called Surāqa ibn Mālik, who wanted to win the reward offered by the Koreish tribe for the capture of the Prophet. But during the pursuit the legs of Surāqa ibn Mālik's horse sank in the sand and he was unable to go on. This miraculous event became evidence of divine protection over the Prophet. There ends the story. The poem, which has the form of the lyrical subject's internal monologue, harks back to those events:

I leave my city, my ancient homeland

ture and art, and a number of valuable critical studies on chosen topics in Arabic literature. He was a translator of T. S. Eliot, F. G. Lorca, C. Baudelaire and H. Ibsen, a bibliophile, a man of immense erudition, considered to be eminently well versed in both Arabic and Western literatures.

³ The artist's interest in Sufism could be seen already in his retrospective collection *I Say Unto You* (*Aqūl lakum*).

⁴ Let us point out that Ṣalāḥ 'Abd aṣ-Ṣabūr generally considers poetry to be identical with a spiritual journey much like the journey of the Sufi; it is a journey as important for the reader as it is for the author; cf. Ṣalāḥ 'Abd aṣ-Ṣabūr, *Ḥayātī fī āš-ši'r* [in:] *Dīwān Ṣalāḥ 'Abd aṣ-Ṣabūr*, vol. III, pp. 24-25.

*here shedding the burden of a painful life
I carried my secret beneath my garments
and having put them on the ground by the city gates
I wrapped myself in the sky and the stars
I stole out in the night.
I trust no guide, even if the form of the desert
and its silent landscape are mist
I leave like an orphan
I have chosen no friend
no one to put himself between me and the danger*

I left no friend in my bed to mislead my pursuers

*so, my contrition, sink deep in the sea of sand,
do not follow my steps to my shelter, for hell's sake I beseech you*

The reference to historical facts and their deliberate distortion is to stress the mystical sense of the poem, which is revealed in the subsequent part of the wayfarer's account. The Prophet Muhammad is regarded by the Sufis as a perfect man (*al-insān al-kāmil*), and his passage from Mecca to Medina is the prototype of the mystical path. Ṣalāḥ 'Abd aṣ-Ṣabūr's lyrical subject treads on the path, which in the poem ends in a city identical with light, for the mystics, represents the real existence, absolute reality, God himself:

*even if I died I will live as I desire, in the luminous city
the bright city filled with lights
where the sun is ceaselessly at its zenith
oh my luminous city!*

In *Exodus*, the symbolic act of burying one's clothes before setting out signifies resignation and abandonment of all things of this world. A life of poverty is the mystics' fundamental rule. In the poem, it is accompanied by the sole desire, fulfilled on the mystical path:

all I want is to kill my heavy soul

The concept of soul (*nafs*) has a slightly different meaning here than in Christianity. According to the Islamic mystics, man exists as a soul/*nafs*, which can be compared to the Biblical "carnal man", consisting of the soma and the psyche, and as a spirit/*rūḥ*, Christian *pneuma*, who has his seat in the heart/

qalb. The soul is thus exposed to all kinds of temptations; it can destroy a man's inner balance and it can succumb to evil instincts. A Sufi's main task is to struggle against his soul, which is the cause of his separation from God. There is something in man that is deeper than his "self" and his experience may be deeper than the experience of his own mind. That which is deepest in man is a part of God himself. Man's spiritual identity is created in the image and likeness of God. The mystics follow their path in search of the spiritual dimension of their nature. The mystic's path is long and arduous and demands constant struggle with himself:

for no one seeks me, but my former Self

Everything that comprises a man's "self" must be rejected; one has to abandon one's own thoughts, desires, leanings and habits. Šalāh 'Abd aṣ-Šabūr shows this internal struggle in a very poetical way. He draws on the motif of looking back, common to the Greek myth of Orpheus and the story of the prophet Lot:

*if I were to look back I would turn into stone
I would become stone, or else would be damned*

Orpheus, the Greek poet and singer, was the husband of the hamadryad Eurydice. Once during his absence Eurydice was bitten by an asp and died. Orpheus went to the country of the dead. Hades agreed to give him back Eurydice on condition that Orpheus would lead the way and not look back until he reached the gates of the underworld. His wife was to follow him. But impatience and failure to remember the divine injunction were Orpheus' undoing. He looked back and Eurydice was lost for ever. Lot (*Lūt*), frequently mentioned in the Koran, was warned at God's behest of the imminent destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah⁵. God sent down on the cities a hail of stones. Lot, who was led out of the city with his family, was ordered not to look back. But during their flight, Lot's wife looked back and was stricken dead⁶. The two stories typify the punishment of disobedience. Looking back can be understood as looking back to one's "former Self", to a past which ought to be totally renounced.

⁵ Sodom and Gomorrah appear in the Koran as "hypocrites" and "sinful women" (*al-munāfiqāt*), and the story as a whole largely agrees with the Genesis account.

⁶ Cf. *Koran*, transl. by J. Bielawski, XI, 82; XXXVII, 134-135; LIV, 34-38; LXVI, 10.

The motif of desert turning into stone is another mystical motif:

turn to stone, desert, as your hidden heart

At a semiotic level, the Arabs identify the desert with the sea. A petrified sea can be crossed easily; it affords an escape from one's past, from one's "self". The above verse, taken together with the title of the poem, suggests yet another association: the crossing of the Red Sea by Moses and the chosen people. The Sufis were fond of drawing the comparison between man's soul/*nafs* and the pharaoh, who, learning of the Jews' escape, readied his chariots and followed in pursuit. The grace and power of God led the Israelites safely across the sea, and the pharaoh was defeated.

As we follow the lyrical subject, we can hear him say:

*the agony of the journey is my cleansing
death in the desert is lasting resurrection*

Suffering was not something alien to the Sufis, who believed that man achieved spiritual fulfilment on the path of suffering. Death did not mean death in the physical sense. Death denotes the shedding of one's individual qualities, which hinder the attainment of Truth. From this perspective, it is necessary to "die" in order to be born again.

There is a different mood in the poem *A Song from Vienna* (*Uğniyya min Viyennā*). This piece has an erotic colouring, and its successive verses reveal the drama of man, until his final defeat. In this apparently quite unequivocal poem man's drama acquires a mystical dimension. The poem starts with a subtle description of the naked body of a woman, watched by the lyrical subject in the reflexes of morning light. The woman, met in Vienna, has no name and does not say a single word. For the lyrical subject, her body evokes memories of the time he spent with her. The morning marks the irrevocable end of the brief idyll. The heroes, uncertain of their fate, must leave this oasis of peace and happiness. They mingle with the rushing crowd, become separated and lose each other in the *mêlée*.

The woman, her body in fact, takes no part in the lyrical subject's "dialogue". The man asks questions to which he gets no answers. This leads one to suspect that hers is not a physical, but merely a figurative presence, even though the man has an impression of prior intimacy with her:

*I ask her body ... are you the voice?
We conversed much last night.*

*I ask her body ... are you the brilliant green?
How happy I was wandering in your gardens.
I ask her body ... are you the wine?
I touched the alabaster rim of your cup
and drank the foamy, sparkling drink.*

The experience can be compared to the Sufic ecstasy. It is the moment of "finding", as the word *wağd* is derived from the verb *wağada*, which means 'to find'. At the moment he finds God, a man usually experiences a kind of ecstasy. The recognition of the mystical element in *A Song from Vienna* is possible once we project the hero's sensory impressions into the sphere of spiritual impressions. God reveals himself to man. That is a kind of grace, without which man is unable to attain "knowledge" of God. Again, notice the highly mystical quality of this passage, and especially its second verse, which signals a desire to "return to the source":

*I speak to myself, God saw that I was thirsty
and he quenched my loneliness so far from home
that I was hungry, so he fed me
lost, so he stretched
the shiny strip of a star along the road.*

Şalāḥ 'Abd aṣ-Şabūr's youthful interest in dialectic and his later turning towards spirituality are the leading motif of the autobiographic poem *The Saint (Al-Qiddīs)*⁷. Its mystical sense transpires from the poet's adoption of the way of the heart, which he chose as the uniquely proper way, the way that brings internal harmony and enables one properly to apprehend reality. For the mystics, reason is a veil which separates a man from the Truth. Intellectual knowledge provides information only about the outer world. The young man was propelled into the realm of reason by his inexperience and youthful dreams. He confesses that he persisted for many long years in a belief in the cognitive role of books, learned discussions and rational investigations:

*A wanderer, I travelled the distances of inscribed pages,
my pen fell silent, the frightened horse would not carry me, while
illusions
and imprudence held me prisoner for many long years*

⁷ The poem comes from the author's second collection, *I Say Unto You (Aqūl lakum)*.

*in the fire of discussion,
the darkness of logic.*

According to the mystics, the heart alone can throw open to man the inner world and give him true, intuitive knowledge (*ma'rifa*). In accordance with the mystical tradition, the heart is not identical with the physical heart, but represents a kind of self-awareness. The Sufis often sing of how God is found in the heart and how there He reveals himself to man. Şalāḥ 'Abd aṣ-Şabūr records such a rapturous moment of mystical revelation:

*and one day at dawn
I saw the Truth of the world
I heard the music of grass, water and flowers,
I saw God in my heart.*

The Sufis call this revelation *at-tağallī*. It denotes the appearance of divine light, i.e. knowledge of his true nature, in the seeker's heart.

Hymn to God (Uğniyya ilā Allāh) is one of the poet's most beautiful pieces, moving by its depth, and suffused with sadness which has its source in the contemplation of man's image. As he looks for the causes of the success of evil, the author draws on the Koranic narrative of how the first man picked the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil⁸. In the eyes of the poet, the fragility, uncertainty and hardships of life are the consequences of that choice. The poem expresses a yearning for God, for the state of fulfilment and harmony in which all desires, needs and imaginings cease. If the lyrical subject thinks of his physical death, it becomes a synonym of birth and life:

*I stand before the closed gate of my Loneliness,
before You I stand, o God
if you would give me your purity, o God
if you would let me rest in your deep spreading shadow, o God
I would spend all my day twisting boredom and fear into a rope
and I would use it to hang the world discarded outside my walls
and I would lie down on the deep waters of sleep, where
dream's visions will not reach me...*

It is worthwhile before we conclude to look at the poem *More Precious than the Eyes (Ağlā min al-'uyūn)*, which is interesting for its unusual com-

⁸ Cf. *Koran*, transl. by J. Bielawski, VII, 19-25; XX, 120-123.

position. The reader is not confronted with an experience of the esoteric world of mysticism, but has a chance to see instead how the poet uses mystical representations in his poetic imagery. This three-part poem is a great apotheosis of love and is one of Ṣalāḥ 'Abd aṣ-Ṣabūr's few poems to radiate joy and optimism. The sense of the poem is that all psychological states that cause suffering can be overcome by love. The poem is a confession by a happy man who has found fulfilment in love, who sings his love and dances his most beautiful dance.

To express the moment when love was found, Ṣalāḥ 'Abd aṣ-Ṣabūr uses the mystical image of the attainment of Truth. Like a Sufi, the lyrical subject wanders alone, filled with yearning for the fulfilment of his desire. The following verses call to mind the darkness which engulfs the Sufi's heart, without the slightest trace of the presence of God:

*A hungry wanderer in the lonely desert
saw a drop of pure water in a handful of sand,
a luminous flag
luminous peace*

The seeker is enclosed within his loneliness till he suddenly glimpses a light on his mystical path; the light portends the end of the journey. The kindness and goodness of the loved one of the poem *More Precious than the Eyes*, just like the kindness and goodness of the Beloved of the Sufis, cause the hero to "come into being", to be able to exist, to be reborn, to feel the value of life.

As in the case of the Sufi experience, the poet also describes an experience of utter peace, calm, the state of utmost happiness at the moment of union in love:

*Your eyes are my last shelter
In them I rest and I do not take wing
your eyes the refuge of your lashes
your eyes their immeasurable goodness
the wings of an unquiet heart came to rest here
and I knew
I had reached the end of my journey*

The poem is admirable in its subtle description of the intimacy of the two lovers and fascinating in its symbolic images of the world of nature. The poetry of Islamic mystics often drew on nature, especially in its springtime

dress, which the mystic experienced through his senses, to express beauty, adoration and love for the beloved. Ṣalāḥ 'Abd aṣ-Ṣabūr's poem contains the motif of a walk in the soothing shade of green trees and among fragrant flowers:

*I bow to come into your delicate shade, my love
I inhale the smell of flowers in your gardens
I sprinkle my heart
I refresh it with the shade, with the light wind.*

The poems presented here are only a modest part of Ṣalāḥ 'Abd aṣ-Ṣabūr's copious output. But they do present a clear if not very direct image of the author's personality, so full of dramatic tensions. The poet seeks the right shape, the clear tone, beauty and wisdom, and Love, the way of self-perfection, purification, even salvation, always remains the supreme and immutable value in his eyes. His poetry, which fuses religious, love and philosophical lyrical poetry, is not painted with the monotonous colours of a superficial order or thematic harmony. He creates it with whispers and shouts, pathos and simplicity, despair and hope.

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