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| Bayḏūn, ʿAbbās (1945– ) |
| Beydoun, Abbas |
| Abbas Beydoun is one of Lebanon’s most famous poets and intellectuals with impact far beyond Lebanon: apart from journalistic essays, literary criticism, and poetry which made him a well-known name, he has made a late in life debut as a novelist. Within the last 10 years, he has published four novels, although only one of them has since been translated (into French). A committed and outspoken intellectual, Beydoun has also become an outstanding voice in criticizing both Arab and Western politics, the narrowness of Islamist mentality and other urgent topics. He has been vocal in the dialogue of civilizations, e.g. participating in the early 2000s in the German cultural exchange program ‘West-East Divan’. In the course of the exchange between Beydoun and the German writer Michael Kleeberg, a personal friendship developed, culminating in a considerable literary output on both sides. |
| Abbas Beydoun is one of Lebanon’s most famous poets and intellectuals with impact far beyond Lebanon: apart from journalistic essays, literary criticism, and poetry which made him a well-known name, he has made a late in life debut as a novelist. Within the last 10 years, he has published four novels, although only one of them has since been translated (into French). A committed and outspoken intellectual, Beydoun has also become an outstanding voice in criticizing both Arab and Western politics, the narrowness of Islamist mentality and other urgent topics. He has been vocal in the dialogue of civilizations, e.g. participating in the early 2000s in the German cultural exchange program ‘West-East Divan’. In the course of the exchange between Beydoun and the German writer Michael Kleeberg, a personal friendship developed, culminating in a considerable literary output on both sides.  Beydoun was born in Tyre, Lebanon, in 1945. He attended secondary school there before moving to Beirut to study Arabic Literature at the Arab University. Politically active since 1968, he worked for extremist-leftist papers in Beirut and was arrested and put in prison several times for his political activities. During the Lebanese Civil War 1975–1990, he started working as a school teacher in Tyre and Sidon, and then had to flee the country because of his Communist connections. He migrated to France where in the 1970s he studied at the Sorbonne and received his diploma (DEA). After his return to Beirut he joined the Lebanese daily As-Safir, then moved on to the other dailies al-Hayat and al-Nahar before returning permanently to As-Safir in 1997 as editor in chief for the cultural section, a position he still holds. Beydoun’s attitude towards writing is expressed best by himself (2004):  ‘Was I born a poet? We are all born poets. Poetry does not need a writer. We speak poetry when we love or grieve or are enthusiastic or brave or when we lament. And that does not happen out of suppression, cowardice or betrayal. Poetry starts from ‘I love you’ and not from ‘I betray you’. When it starts, it finds and becomes the word and no other. When you say it, it becomes a message to the loved one and to the lover both. Words are one thing and the self another. It is not easy for poetry to dress up in the lover’s dress. I have never had a lover’s heart and words don’t come easy to me. It was only when I grew older after a lonely childhood that I understood the difficulty of permissible language. My head was always larger than my words since talking is flat and thinking is concave and definite. Whenever I tried to direct my words towards those grooves and curves and underlying structures, I didn’t find it. It seems as if my whole life stayed within those grooves and that I didn’t find anything to say except things too subtle for my words. I think alone and do not find the word for myself. (…) I was not born a poet but I found myself writing*’.* (autobiography 2004)  His experiments with variations of the prose poem show this struggle for the word and the expression. Beydoun’s innovative style has contributed greatly to the renewal of modern Arabic poetry, to the point where he has become a role model for many writers and poets of the younger generation. His poetry is rooted in the classical Arab tradition but also nurtured by European literature. He claims that just as any other national literature(s), the Arab art and literature is part of world heritage.  In his 1997-anthology *Li-maridin huwa l-amal*, Beydoun mixes several styles; there are short poems with broken up lines without rhyme and without metre (often quite minimalistic:‘I am sitting surrounded / by all those / who make me feel / lonely’; (‘Those’, p. 93), but he has also written poems resembling a prose piece:  ‘He has done this for 40 years. He sits with his hands on the armrest of his couch. He breathes in deeply and puffs the air towards the wall. When he sees a hole he knows that in his skin, there is a similar hole, thinking that it is not only him growing old. For a long time it’s been enough for him to just sit like this and empty himself. He has put down his despair here, and from that moment he knew that happiness doesn’t require more than a square’. (‘Forty’, p. 87)  Identity and the search for the real Self constitute one of the main topics of his poetry; and the lyricism of his writing renders him unique and distinct from other prose poets. When asked about his different formats of prose poems, Beydoun replied that according to the subject he wants to write about, the form comes differently to him (personal interview, Oct. 20, 2015, in Beirut). However, it is all ‘shi’r manthur’ (prose poetry).  In his first novel *Taḥlīl dam* (2004), written in a deep poetic language, he concentrates on a young man’s wish to belong somewhere, echoing his own story. Through his novels, Beydoun manages to arrange bits and pieces of his own biography while trimming it with reflections and meditations with universal claim. He has developed a smooth style, leaping in chronology and place, trying to approach his subject from various angles. One of his main topics that he repeatedly comes back to is belonging and identity, and the elusiveness of memory. In his last novels, he deliberately mixes fictional elements with autobiographical scenes and tableaux, constituting semi-self-portraits. He has passages where the reader recognizes himself and past experiences:  ‘At the age of 13 I heard for the first time my own voice on tape. I hadn’t thought of this possibility before. This voice was not the one which came to my ears when I spoke, the one I found sweet, resembling me and my talking. But on the tape, I heard another voice resembling more the tape than me. It was a forged voice, dissonant, and spurious as if it didn’t belong to anyone.’ (*Marāyā Frānkinshtayn,* 2011, p. 13)  Alternating with scenes like these, Beydoun evokes reflections of universal eternal value:  ‘We yearn for our Self but we find it full of strangers, and we can’t help but throw them out. This is the normal madness which rarely appears. It rarely appears because it is serial, ordered and technical. We visit our memory mostly with scissors, with the aim that our life be our property and shouldn’t shelter strangers; with the aim to abolish this companionship on which it is built. Normal madness is more or less the mind of despotism. We cut out a picture or more at each visit, and in the end we remain alone with our madness. We remain alone over flooded from side to side by this devilish gush. We remain alone enflamed by a pain not understood. (…) The pain that makes life just the fear of death. That makes the fear of death an entire life. That makes us think that our memories will take revenge on us after we leave, that they will cling to us like voracious dogs, that they will witness and mock us. That’s why we don’t have to leave behind anything.’ (*Albūm al-khasāra,* 2012, p. 254–255)  Regrettably, Beydoun has been translated into only a few languages. Both his poetry and prose however, deserve much wider international recognition and attention than they have received. It remains to be hoped for a timely translation of his masterpieces in the near future. List of Works *صور Ṣūr* (Tyros), Beirut, Mu’assasat al-Abhath al-‘Arabiyah, 1985. Poetry. French translation, *Le poème de Tyr*, by Kadhim Jihad, Paris, Actes Sud, 2002.  الوقت بجرعة كبيرة *al-Waqt bi-jurʿa kabīra* (*Time in Big Gulps*), Beirut, Dār al-Farabi, 1982. 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| Further reading:  (Aʿlām al-adab al-ʿarabīy al-muʿāṣir – siyar wa-siyar dhātīyah (Dictionary of Modern Arab Authors – Biographies and Autobiographies)) |