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| **Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb** |
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| Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb is the unrivalled champion of the Arab Free Verse movement. One of the most well-known poets of the 20th century, he has revolutionized modern Arab poetry with his experiments in form, language, and content. Sayyāb has introduced political commitment (*iltizām*) as concept into his poetry, interweaving it with myths of martyrdom and self-sacrifice in search for a better society. Coupling political commitment with a new form, radically breaking with the traditional classical forms and tropes, Sayyāb succeeded in liberating Arab poetry from the restraints and restrictions of its literary conventions. Even though later on it turned out that Sayyāb’s *weltanschauung* had been too naïve, he is the undisputed master of a new lyrical diction and sensitivity that paved the way for the following generations. |
| Born in 1926 in the small village Jaykūr close to Basra in Southern Iraq, Sayyāb experienced the meaning of loss and deprivation at an early age when his mother died while still young. At the age of 17 he started studying English literature in Baghdad and began to get involved in politics, becoming a member of the then repressed Iraqi Communist Party. He was ostracized; no one would hire him, and he suffered from other repressions. He had started composing poetry while still at school, first following the traditional ways of romantic lyricism, as can be seen from his first collection 1947: *Azhār dhābila* (Withering flowers). His second collection *asāṭīr*“ (Myths, 1950) already testifies his will to get loose of the shackles of traditional prosody, experimenting with form and content and finally arriving at the so called Free Verse (*al-shiʿr al-ḥurr*). In the early 1950s Sayyāb started writing politically engaged and socially committed critical poems in which he criticized social injustice and corruption. These so called *muṭawwalāt* (long poems) have earned him wide recognition among Arab readers and literary critics alike. However, the summit of his poetical fame came with his collection *Unshūdat al-maṭar* (Hymn to the Rain), a compilation of poems written in the end 1950s and during his years of exile in Kuwait where he fled to after being persecuted politically in Iraq. In the turmoil of anti-colonial struggle and wars of ideologies, Sayyāb managed to construct a poetics of homeland through the creation of a social utopia by combining Arab and Western literary heritage with Babylonian myths and the anti-imperialist and socialist-communist ideals of his time. His political engagement deals with the entire Arab world and the fragmentation of the colonized self, blending myths with a political message and his optimism that self-sacrifice can contribute to the rise of a new spirit and a new nation. In this politically committed poetry, he never turns to a loud and shrill, declamatory style but rather develops a new diction with a new metaphorical imagery. While in the beginning full of hope, in the aftermath of the 1958 revolution this vision faltered, utopia seemed unattainable, and a better future impossible. His illness may also have contributed to this resignation. After his return to Iraq at the end of the 1950s, he had fallen ill with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis and had to struggle to survive. At this period, he had an enormous literary output, issuing three collections, one after the other. The tone of his poetry changed: now he turned introspective, leaving aside more or less the political message for rather personal notions. He spent his last years under very bad conditions: faltering health, changing jobs in different organisations. In winter 1964 he died in a hospital in Kuwait and was buried in Basra.  Sayyāb’s work is outstanding for his fine tone, his sensitive and subtle use of poetic techniques, rhythm and rhyme, and his message. His genius is obvious already from his very beginnings. In his romantic collections of the late 1940s, nature, which later on became so famous in the framework of the myths, played a huge role, the idyllic place not only setting the stage for romantic love, but also becoming the carrier of his longing. In his famous poem *Fi layālī l-kharīf* (In the Autumn Nights, 1948) he blends the description of nature skilfully with his emotions:  In the sad autumn nights  when longing overcomes me  like heavy fog  in the corners of the street  in the corners of the long street  when I’m alone with this deep silence  then the memories  of your pale smile  light all the lanterns in this distant street  …  In the autumn nights  I listen – nothing’s there but a rustle  faint as the sobs of a prisoner  who fears to wake the others  and turns around in the dark  to watch the distant stars,  overcast by shredded clouds,  who is ruled by memories  the far away singing  in the harvest nights  the faces of the hungry women  But then a metal echo rises  robbing the sleep  In the autumn nights  when I listen but even the rustle has died away  and the wind  This poem anticipates the techniques which he brought to perfection in his later poetry: the sequential repetition of comparisons, the shattered syntax, and the overflow-sequences of images extending over more than sixteen lines. All this is a conscious search for the adequate expression from different angles, a deliberate attempt to capture and concentrate the meaning in exact and precise images. The traditional patterns of classical prosody are shattered (the verse length and the monorhyme), and Sayyāb freely makes allusions to world literature (here to T.S. Eliot specifically). Here, his political commitment is expressed in a very subtle way: The lonely lover’s silence in the first verses switches to the fearful silence of a prison cell. Nature, e.g. harvesting and singing, forms a semantically diametrical opposed world to the socio-political grievances and the country’s feudal system whose exploitation the poet criticizes (the farmers in hunger and misery although they harvested).  Sayyāb’s growing political commitment became increasingly vocal. While in his “long poems” he had started tackling problems of urban modernity, the alienation and the raw brutality governing the life of many outcasts in the city, he now, in the new phase, uses Babylonian and other myths to express his hope for a new society. This usage became very influential: the figure of Tammūz, the God of life, death and rebirth in the ancient Near East, soon became the beacon of a new poetical movement (the *Tammūz-*poets), and the sublime yearning for death for the sake of a better future, one of the characteristics of the movement. Within the framework of the mythical cycle of life and death and the mystical union of self and nature, Sayyāb managed to develop his vision of a bright future. The poetry of this time breathes an overwhelming optimism, anticipating the dawn of a new era. However, with the ongoing British influence on Iraqi politics and the growing dissatisfaction in large segments of society, doubts and scepticism increasingly overtook the poet. Like many intellectuals, Sayyāb put a lot of hope into the 1958 revolution which swept away the Hashemite monarchy and the remaining British colonial influence. But the socio-political situation did not improve: a former Communist turned pan-Arab nationalist, in the first year after the revolution Sayyāb suffered from the influence of the Communists in power. In the turmoil of the post-revolution era, after the crackdown on opponents and the massacre of Kirkuk in mid-1959, the poet starts to seriously doubt his utopia and the validity of his poetical concept. Increasingly, Sayyāb’s scepticism after the dashed hopes and ideals of the 1958-revolution turns into despair. In the poems of this period, Sayyāb concedes that although the political reality may still be altered, his personal destiny is detached from the political future of Iraqi society. He uses his native village Jaykūr as symbol for the new hoped for society which he may not live to see: “  Jaykūr … Jaykūr will be born  Blossoms will sprout, and light  Jaykūr will be born out of my wounds  from my agonies, my fire  The barns will overflow with wheat (…)  and the palm trees will whisper my secret (…)  Jaykūr will be born, but I  won’t be able to get out of my prison  in the clay’s long drawn night  My heart won’t pulse like a melody  on the strings  Nothing but the worms will move in it  O woe, will Jaykūr only be born  out of my wounds?  O woe, will light burst forward  while my blood darkens in the valley? (1960).  In his disillusionment, Sayyāb deconstructs both the concept of self-sacrifice and his hopes for a better future. The mystical union with the soil of his native land reveals a destructive power instead of the positive, life-giving effects it has had for Sayyāb’s poetical universe until then.  From that point on – and with the increasing sickness of the poet which ultimately led to his premature death in 1964 – Sayyāb leaves behind the claim of changing the world through poetry and rather turns to an introspection of his inner self, giving us poems of lasting beauty:  I never deny my past  but all those I loved before you  never loved me back  nor did they ever have pity on me:  sometimes I loved seven women at the same time –  their hair fluttered over me  and the fragrance of their breasts  carried me instantly like a ship to China.  I dived into a sea full of fancy and ecstasy  collecting seashells  searching in vain for pearls  only to find a palm tree’s long braids  shading me (tr. Mustapha Kamal and Ralph Savarese). |
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