**‘Abd al-Sabour, Salah**

**By Mahmoud AA Ibrahim**



Muhammad Salah El-Din `Abd al-Sabour (1931–1981), a renowned Egyptian poet and dramatist, was born in al-Sharqia County of the Delta region in Egypt. `Abd Al-Sabour started writing poetry at the age of thirteen and developed his skill at university. As a secondary school student, he showed a noticeable interest in languages, literature and politics. He also took part in demonstrations against British occupation, and in 1949 he was arrested at the age of eighteen. After earning a degree in Arabic from Cairo University in 1951, ‘Abd al-Sabour worked in journalism and co-edited *Al-Thaqafa* (*Culture*) magazine, in which he published several poems and short stories, until January 1953, He later served as the director of the General Egyptian Book Organization. During his study at Cairo University he enthusiastically joined ‘The Literary Society’ and became one of its active members. Though he wrote short stories and philosophical fragments, he soon realized that poetry was the literary genre in which he excelled.

`Abd al-Sabour started to use this poetic talent in writing drama in the early 1960s, but his plays have enjoyed little attention from modern Arabic drama critics, which could be attributed to the fact that critics have paid greater attention to poetry. Consequentnly, `Abd al-Sabour focused on writing poetry, with the result that he is better known in modern Arabic literature as a poet than as a dramatist. `Abd al-Sabour’s ability to smoothly shift from one literary genre to another was one of his most distinguishing characteristics as a multi-talented writer. Supported by his ability to lend his creative poetic talents to the genre of drama, `Abd al-Sabour wrote five verse plays in less than a decade between 1964 and 1973.

Among other Arab poets, `Abd al-Sabour was particulary influenced by the prominent Abu al-Tayyib al-Mutanabbi (915-965 AD), and Abu al-`Ala' al-Ma'arri (973- 1057 AD). In addition, despite being faithful to his Arab tradition, he had a strong interest in Western culture and literature, and was particularly influenced by the works of the T. S. Eliot. He adopted Eliot’s approach of “free verse” (*al-Shi`r al-Hurr*), wrote critical essays on Eliot and translated two of his plays. `Abd al-Sabour’s style of free verse was regarded as a revolution against the long tradition and history of rhymed verse in Arabic; he is considered one of the pioneers of free verse in Egypt.

`Abd al-Sabour was also influenced by German playwrights and critic, and Antonin Artaud’s theatre of the Absurd. These influences marked his search for new forms of drama to fit both the new language he wrote in and the new conditions of the society. He experimented with the dramatic form, wrote of the poor class, presented themes of persecution and injustice, and documented the need to relieve humans from tyranny. He also touched on issues related to the audience and their awareness and participation in shaping things around them.

*Ma’sat al-Hallaj* (*The tragedy of al-Hallaj*, 1964) (translated under the title: *Murder in Baghdad*) represents `Abd al-Sabour’s dramatic masterpiece, for which he was granted the State Incentive Award for Theatre in 1966. The play is an adaptation of the story of the murder of al-Hallaj who lived in Baghdad in the ninth century, as a punishment for his public critique of the evils of the ruling regime. The play covertly unveils the assumed democracy of the contemporary ruling regime of Egypt, using an old story from Islamic history to cover the author’s criticism of the regime. Thus, although `Abd al-Sabour is referred to primarily as a poet, he was also a committed playwright.

In addition to his masterpiece *Ma’sat al-Hallaj*, `Abd al-Sabourwrote other four plays: *Musafiru Lail* (*Night Traveler*) (1968), *Al-Amira Tantazir* (*The Princess Awaits*), *Laila wa’l-Majnoun* (*Laila and the Madman*) (1971), and *Ba’d an Yamut al-Malik* (*After the King Dies*) (1975). His plays are often dramatically well-constructed and have the same strong attentiveness as his poetry. In his drama, he brings out in a highly philosophical manner the different attitudes to resisting evil in life, and shows the conflict people face to fulfil this duty: action or non-action, sword or word. This philosophical concept of the opposition between the word and the action runs through all his plays and it is a central guiding thread that is systematically developed in his later plays.

As a poet, he published six collections of verse: *al-Nas fi Biladi* (*People in my Country*, 1957); *Aqulu Lakum* (*I Say to You*, 1961); *Ahlam al-Faris al-Qadim* (*Dreams of an Ancient Knight*, 1964); *Taʾammulat fi Zaman Jarih* (*Reflections on a Wounded Age*, 1969); *Shajar al-layl* (*Night Trees*, 1974); and *al-Ibhar fi al-Dhakira* (*Sailing in Memory*, 1979). His works admirably combine attention to technical considerations with a commitment to social justice.

In addition to poetry and poetic drama, `Abd al-Sabouralso produced several critical writings and literary studies where he tackled intellectual and artistic issues in a broad human context. He paid special attention to contemporary Egyptian thought. He also wrote critical essays for *Roza al-Yousif* and *Sabah al-Khair* magazines and *Al-Ahram* newspaper. For example, he wrote his own biography, *Hayati fī l-shiʿr* (*My life in Poetry*, 1969) and numerous works of criticism, including *Qira’a Jadida li Shiʿrina al-Qadim* (*A new Reading of our Old Poetry*, 1968), in which he reflects on themes and imagery in the ancient Arabic poetic heritage.

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