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The Poetry of Qāsim Ḥaddād from the Collection *ʿIlāğ al-masāfa* (“The Cure of Space”) as an Attempt at Understanding the World

Martin Heidegger has written in his literary considerations that the poet’s task is “the establishment of existence through the word”¹. Yet the interpretation of artistic creation is often one that constitutes a difficult calling. For the poet sees the world in relation to his own perspective of events, a perspective that is not always understandable for us. He presents a literary reality which often for us remains ambiguous. The poet in addition has the right to create a reality that is often far removed from our own reality. Therefore the real interpretation of his words can be extremely difficult for the reader and requires a great deal of sensitivity to the most minute nuances of artistic perception.

In the volume *ʿIlāğ al-masāfa* (“The Cure of Space”) Qāsim Ḥaddād does not create new worlds – ‘happy islands’ and does not depart *from the at times* painful truth of everydayness. He rather attempts to explain this with ordinariness. He searches for meaning within an apparently grey existence. ‘Space’ in his considerations is not necessarily a desert. Rather it is the distance that divides us from others people, from ourselves and our various matters. However why the ‘cure of space’? Can there really exist on the horizon that the artist’s imagination draws before our eyes some flaw or blemish?

The world presented in his collection is far from being the ideal one. It is the world with a lot of greyness, blood and eclipses of the sun. The cure of this reality is in fact a search for a remedy, an attempt to seize hold of certain phenomena and understand them. It is this understanding, awareness of the truth that takes on a curative dimension. Equally, it is the meaning and the search for it that constitutes salvation for the poet. Ḥaddād equally interprets the world through the word. The word is to a certain degree the key to understanding oneself and constitutes a way out from one’s closed, internal world. Therefore the word becomes in a more distant perspective a way towards a cure for the space perceived in a way specific for the poet. We can speculate, however, as to whether a word that is at times so ambiguous and imperfect can in fact describe the

¹ Cited after: Z. Chojnowski, *Metafizyka bycia*, „Twórczość”, No 2, Warszawa 1999, p. 53.

unacquainted reality of the human soul? As to whether there exist meanings that fully reflect our thoughts and feelings?

Qāsim Ḥaddād identifies himself with rock, with something that is permanent, hard, unchanging. With something that does not undergo a process of destruction over the centuries. In the poem *Aḥbār al-ḥaḡar* ("The Rock's Words") he writes:

For you
I wrote this old rock in the oblivion of a passing lightening bolt
I wrote with it the letter missing in the word of night
I built with it nature and her yoke².

The word 'rock' is a certain strength, energy. We can identify the poet with a new demiurge³. His creation is more perfect, it complements the existing world, making concrete certain phenomena. On the other hand the term 'old rock' shows that this is something that has existed for a long time. The 'old rock' is written into nature, as if saying that it has existed always. However from the perspective of the lyrical 'I' it takes on new values.

The 'word-rock' is also salvation from the hell of loneliness, consciousness that man is never left to his own devices.

The rock accompanies you
As if it were your old companion
With the rock alone you are not⁴.

Often when we think about 'a word' we perceive it as the material of one's contact with another person. However within the literary construction of a poem there is an absence of clear references to the situation of dialogue. Ḥaddād's 'word' appears to us as something that is experienced at a much deeper level. It touches upon the very nature of things. The ambiguity of this designation in the work results in it being everything, but everything that has a meaning for us. The 'word' has been uttered and therefore something has come into existence. Yet in Ḥaddād there exists within the context of the 'word-stone' only the essential content. The man described in the poem equally requires such a content. His critical situation results from a desire of living words, true words.

I experience fear when I see someone swallowing a red rock
From a hunger for words

² Qāsim Ḥaddād, *Aḥbār al-ḥaḡar* in: *Ṭalāḡ al-masāfa*, Beirut 2002, p. 67.

³ Demiurge (Gr. *Demiourgós*) 1. the name applied in ancient Greece to handicraftsmen, e.g. poets and architects. 2. Philosophy a) in Plato – the divine constructor of the world bestowing a definite shape to eternal though shapeless matter. b) in Hegel – the thought process understood as an independent force.

3. Fig. Creative strength, force, power, creator., after *Słownik wyrazów obcych PWN*, Warsaw 1979, p. 142.

⁴ Qāsim Ḥaddād, *Aḥbār al-ḥaḡar*, op. cit., p. 68.

How to take care of someone who gazes into their glass
 Brimming with red rock
 And the thick mist of silence⁵.

What is the 'red rock' of the poem that feeds the man? I feel that one can acknowledge it as a copy of 'a word', as its substitute, the one that fails to satisfy our expectations. This is the reason, among other things, of the unhappiness of the figure presented in the poem. The 'mist of silence' is the reality that the lost individual lives in. The lyrical 'I' accuses the world that it has sold the 'word-rock'.

If they had cast the rock into the blue of the gulf (...)
 But they chose to trade in it⁶.

Everything therefore has been put up for sale in today's world. Even things holy and extremely personal. Ultimately the lyrical 'I' directly addresses the poem's recipient. This recipient is, as I consider, every reader *in order for that reader to become for him a 'word-stone'* and therefore essence and purpose.

The work *Raqṣat ad-di'b* ("The Wolf's Dance") is an attempt at a self-definition of spatial contacts with others people. The poem is a bitter analysis of the situation in which the recipient of the poem finds himself in. We can conjecture that the poet is directing his words to himself or to one of his literary colleagues. Totally lost in a circle of friends who have abandoned their own ideals for easy conformism, he still searches for some meaning, believing that the future could change everything. He says:

Wait!
 Don't leave a full glass⁷

The lyrical 'I' is unable to understand the existing situation. It does not find justification for those who have deviated from an earlier chosen route. We find a lot of irony and sharp criticism in the words with which he describes his former companions.

They select words for commentary
 Saying that old wine burdens their glasses.
 They are drunk with revenge upon news of us.
 They defend themselves. They erase our tracks out of fear (...)
 Hiding themselves in their rags⁸.

⁵ Ibid., p. 70.

⁶ Ibid., p. 73.

⁷ Ibid., p. 64.

⁸ Ibid., p. 64.

The poem may be read as its own form of a war song, encouraging one to fight to maintain one's own artistic identity. The poet reveals the conflict endemic in his circles yet he does not search for an understanding with his opponents nor does he propose easy solutions. The lyrical 'I', as the creator, and at the same time the porte-parole of all the disturbing phenomena in the society, clearly calls one to be loyal to one's mission. He says:

Let your despair be an explosion (...)
 When they boast of their annihilation
 You explode⁹.

The words repeated as a refrain 'Wait! Don't leave a full glass' express the poet's hope for some kind of change or decisive occurrence. Therefore everything can happen. The world, after all, will not remain such for ever.

Individual artistic independence is of enormous importance to the poet, something emphasized by a poem from the collection 'Uzlat al-malikāt ("The Loneliness of Queens"):

I stand naked in the icy wind
 Alone like the letter A I do not bow down
 (...) I believe in the meeting of adversities and do not bow down
 I mix with the dust and do not bow down
 As I bow down before you¹⁰

This deep sense of one's own dignity as well as duties require the artist to remain to the end true to himself and other people. Yet in the poem *Raṣat ad-dī'b* there appears a certain element of uncertainty which means that the whole work is not a totally harmonious construction. The poet, through interception or the commentary of the recipient's attitude, writes:

He doubts and questions whether gold is real¹¹.

This sentence aids us in the correct interpretation of the work, *Šakk aš-šams* ("An Uncertain Sun") written in poetic prose. A work that constitutes the poet's reconciliation with his life to date. Here, among other things, appears the doubt whether the poet's creativity has been correctly interpreted and also whether anyone has really paid it any attention. I feel that the poem *Raṣat ad-dī'b* contains a similar think. Even though the poet does not openly demand accolades for his labour, he does not want his mission to turn out empty and purposeless.

⁹ Ibid., p. 66.

¹⁰ www.jehat.com.

¹¹ Qāsim Ḥaddād, *Raṣat ad-dī'b*, p. 66.

The image of the expanse of man's life is constantly stained with certain flaws. Possibly pure and unblemished space does not exist whatsoever, or exists merely as an unattainable ideal. The lyrical 'I' of *Raqṣat ad-dī'b* says:

On the turn of disgrace
You lose friends
As the wolf loses its good lair¹²

Man remains alone. Abandoned, deceived. Suddenly it appears that the people close to us, our place in this world are merely an illusion. Everything we have worked for all those years can, at any given moment, cease to exist. Where therefore does the truth about us lie? About our friends? About our 'space' that becomes alien?

When a knight falls from the back of a journey (...)
Warriors do not stop on his account
Or turn their horses round to face him¹³.

The poem *Turāt as-safar* ("Journey"), which begins with the above quote, is a depiction of our lifelong wanderings. Wanderings constantly plagued by disappointments and lows. However, the hero of the work is not left alone. There appears someone who looks after him. In the poem this someone are women – 'wet nurses'.

Wet nurses alone pay him attention, dress his wounds (...)
Slipping breasts full of life experiencing milk
Under his parched lips¹⁴.

The figure of a woman occupies an extremely significant place in the collection *ʾIlāḡ al-masāfa*. Here she is the personification of wisdom, reason and care. In this she possesses a range of supernatural features which mean that everything she does is filled with magic. The world of women – sorceresses remains for men an unfathomable mystery. Their secrets, looks, whispers, passing gestures are an expression of a reality bordering on the fabulous. One that continually intrigues men.

We can interpret the work *Ḥikmat an-nisā'* ("The Wisdom of Women") as a tribute to the fairer sex:

Sobbing women betrayed by husbands
And so sad were they that they almost cast rings in their faces

¹² Ibid., p. 66.

¹³ Qāsim Ḥaddād, *Turāt as-safar*, p. 47.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 47.

But they put all to right and restrained from separation.

(...)

They lit lamps with the saffron of evening

Went to confess before the mirror

Uttering in their hearts the names of their lovers

And in this there was wisdom¹⁵.

The poet describes with sorrow and compassion the women mistreated by men. He emphasizes their devotion and sacrifice for their family. On the other hand they are presented as goddesses who appear in the smoke of incense "surrounded by a choir of angels". One can identify them in the work with gentleness, sensitivity floating through all the nooks and crannies of the flat:

A woman would allow the sun to keep watch at night in the lounge

And for the stars to guard the entrance

So no creation would feel sad in the darkness¹⁶.

The goodness and calm that emanate from women results in everything around them being of the purest harmony and as the poem's lyrical 'I' says: "in this there is wisdom". The said wisdom is an endemic feature of the female sex. The world of sorceresses is not totally lucid for the poet, therefore he understands their reality as a veiled mystery of incomprehensible gestures and spells. He is, however, convinced of their uniqueness, hence he writes that even if they betray their men then they do so in such a way that in the betrayal wisdom manifests itself.

A similar tone pervades the work *Ad-Dahā'ir* ("Treasures") the heroes of which are equally women. It appears as if the treasures mentioned constitute an extremely significant part of the poet's spatial existence. Possibly Ḥaddād, in bestowing upon them such particular considerations within his work, attempts to reimburse them for the lack of gratitude and respect in everyday life. The sorceresses who "divide water with a knife" achieve extraordinary acts. They leave men in the shadows, and in fact it is they who stoke the hearth:

They divide water with a knife

And with tiger-like dexterity they share it among the guard

In order to subdue their courage, and so perform their duty

Not carried away by bravado

They forge their tin mugs

With the butts of their guns

¹⁵ Qāsim Ḥaddād, *Ḥikmat an-nisā'*, op. cit., p. 21.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 22.

Just like the knight who releases the melody of march entombed in the notes
 (...)

The enchantress's desires

Rest at night

The sorceresses divide water with a knife there where

People and trees die from an excess of love

There is no excuse for those who do not feel hate

For that a man who has forgotten about women¹⁷.

Although there is a constant resonance of feelings and despite reading that: "people and trees die of love", what there is about women says too little. The lyrical 'I' does not find justification for those who forget about women. This does not involve simply forgetting in the ordinary sense of the word but disrespect. We can see that on the one hand women are the object of the sighs and dreams of men, yet on the other hand they are ignored by them. It is this very situation that Qāsim Ḥaddād protests against in the poem *adh-Dhakhā'ir*.

The volume *ʾIlāġ al-masāfa* is an attempt to comprehend the world of the artist and to understand it. An explanation of reality which is to lead finally to its cure is no easy matter. Consequently reading Qāsim Ḥaddād is no easy venture, and is one that requires concentration upon certain tropes, key words which allow one to pass through the world of the poet's feelings. Hence the symbols of: a rock, word, journey and glass. They bring with them a certain meaning, one which we are not totally able to decipher. Often the symbols are ambiguous. Their interpretation depends upon our viewpoint. That said the presence of 'key words' substantially enrich the works and allows the reader the possibility of perceiving within them a constant spiral of new meanings.

Qāsim Ḥaddād, in presenting his poetic vision of the world, makes use chiefly of blank verse and poetic prose. He resigns from the use of rhythm and rhyme and resorts to an apparently random verse division, one which is not always semantically a whole. The poet's most often used figure of speech is metaphor. The poem *Aḥbār al-ḥaġar* is particularly figuratively rich. The most interesting of which are: 'the alphabet of oblivion', 'the chessboard of memory', 'the mist of oblivion' and 'the night of loneliness'. Besides Qāsim Ḥaddād significantly makes use of animation including personification, such as: 'the wind praises words' in *Ḥikmat an-nisā'*, 'the rock stops' in *Aḥbār al-ḥaġar*, 'the awakening of the sacrificial water' in *Ad-Dahā'ir* as well as animatism e.g. 'the back of the journey' in *Turāt as-safar*. There is no lack in the volume of epithets: 'tiger-like dexterity', 'debauched care' in *Ad-Dahā'ir*. The volume also contains many comparisons: 'words as sweet as juice' in *Aḥbār al-ḥaġar* or 'the wind started to praise words like someone who arouses attraction' in *Ḥikmat an-nisā'*. In the poems one can also find stylistic methods such as

¹⁷ Qāsim Ḥaddād, *Ad-Dahā'ir*, op. cit., pp. 40–41.

the oxymoron 'correct mistakes' in *Raqṣat ad-dī'b* or periphrasis 'green wings' in *Aḥbār al-ḥaḡar*.

All the figures of speech used by Qāsim Ḥaddād result in his 'space' becoming more colourful and exceptionally vivid. Thanks to the richness of the linguistic devices employed the poet's lyrical world draws the reader's attention and arouses individual reflection.