THE ETHICS OF NAZĪH ABŪ ‘AFASH, A SELF-STYLED “CHRISTIAN ATHEIST”

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Introduction

The connection between ethics and literature is not difficult to grasp, formal distinctions between the two areas of cultural activity notwithstanding. Literature can participate in reshaping human experiences and fill the gaps between the abstract delineation of ethical rules and the concrete circumstances of reality. In fact, the connections between literature, ethics, aesthetics, and philosophy are deep, and many studies have explored the links between them. Mendelson-Maoz states:

The subject is rich in themes and methodologies. A variety of philosophical and literary texts is considered. The spectrum is wide: examining moral themes in literature, assuming that the character’s behavior can be understood on the basis of its similarity to what we have known and thus can be interpreted by our own terms, formulating the relationships between the two disciplines, understanding the differences between them and the opportunities for their intersection […]; articulating the relationships between readers, narrators, and authors, as ethical relationships […]; building new procedures for reading in the light of humanism […]; examining the power of literary texts in educating young people, assuming that texts can shape beliefs and behaviors, and can help in understanding ethical dilemmas […]; illustrating ethical reasoning and theories through reading of literary texts, considering the text to be a moral laboratory […]; examining literary texts, articulating rhetoric devices and their power in creating ethical judgments, and suggesting close readings and interpretations of specific texts […]; revealing a way of ethical reading of text, which involves an awareness to social, political, and ethical streams that often go beneath the texts.¹

Thus, the connection is most evident in the effect that “ethically critical” works of literature have upon the reader. The very act of reading is transformative, making the reader into a new person, ethically speaking.²

Talking about ethics and literature means, in a way, talking about limits. Limits are a cultural phenomenon that find expression in many spheres: science, politics, art, and literature. The present inquiry presumes the existence of a limit, as well as the obligation to respect limits, and proposes to investigate, in one particular instance, the status of limits in poetry that pushes to the limit, and may go beyond the limit, of accepted socio-religious norms in a given society.

The question, Where is the limit? leads us to look at the dynamics of placing limits. More than this: it leads us to examine the extent to which the limit determines the identity of the individual or the group. In a way, we are inspecting how a limit can become so real as to become the pivot of political and social relations.

We must also differentiate between the various types of limits, especially between the limit whose transgression leads to expulsion from one’s society, as contrasted with the limit that can be gingerly extended or delicately crossed. The answer to the question, Where is the limit? is decisive for many social relations. Limits are keys to openness and fruitful mutual relations, be they considered moral or immoral, but they may also form realities that are marked by closure and total separation.3

In this paper, I will deal the issue of limitedness and unlimitedness in the poetry of the Syrian poet Nazīh ’Abū ‘Afash. I will concentrate on the relationship between the contents of his poems, or what I prefer to call his poetic self, on the one hand, and, on the other, some of the most sensitive issues in Arabic culture, namely, those issues that bear upon attitudes towards religious authority and the deity itself. I am concerned with the way that these considerations may place limits upon the poet’s moral perspective, but also how he can cleverly cross the limits without exposing himself to necessary danger. Judicial or religious sanctions (much the same in the Islamic world, applying as well to the Christian minorities who live there) that are placed upon those who transgress limits are not

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