THE TRANSFORMATION OF GHALWA

Ilyās Abū Shabaka’s narrative poem, Ghālwa,1 was written, according to the poet’s evidence,2 between the years 1926-1932, but was published in book form only in 1945, shortly before the author’s death.3 Ever since its publication—and in fact many years before that—it has been viewed as an epoch-making work; and, together with the poet’s earlier book of poetry, Afḍ̱ ʿī al-Firdaws (“Serpents of Paradise”, 1938), it is regarded as one of the best accomplishments of romantic poetry in modern Arabic literature.4 A number of critical studies have been devoted to it,5 and the influence of this and other works of Abū Shabaka on further developments in modern Arabic poetry is far from negligible.

Several factors account for the success of Ghālwa, not the least among them being the novelty of its concept and its very length. The fact that Abū Shabaka set out to produce a sizable and ambitious narrative poem is significant, bearing in mind that classical Arabic literature has little, if any, epic poetry, and that this genre, though known in modern Arabic literature before Abū Shabaka, did not produce any generally-acclaimed masterpieces.6

However, Ghālwa’s value rests mainly with its own artistic merits. Its theme embodies a juxtaposition of extreme emotional and moral situations—sin and

---

2 Ibid., p. 7.
3 He was born in 1903 in the U.S.A. during a trip which his parents took; however, he was raised in Lebanon, in the village of Zāq Mikhā’il, where he resided until his death in January, 1947.
4 Abū Shabaka’s other published works include four books of poetry: al-Qithāra (“The Lyre”), 1926; al-Albān (“Melodies”), 1941; Niḍa’ al-qalb (“The Heart’s Evocation”), 1944; Hāl al-abād (“Eternally”), 1945. He translated many novels and other works from French, and published a great number of journalistic articles on a variety of topics. Of some interest is the discussion of literature included in his book entitled Rawāḥat al-sharq wal-rūḥ bain al-ʿArab wal-Faranja (“Intellectual and Spiritual Links between the Arabs and the West”), Beirut 1943.
5 Razzaq Faraj Razzaq’s book, Ilyās Abū Shabaka wa-thiqānah, Beirut, 2nd ed., 1970 (hereafter referred to as “Razzaq”) includes a discussion of the poem (pp. 154-178); also noteworthy are the following books and articles:
6 Mahjarite poets who produced long poems seldom engaged in a poem with a clear narrative plot. Neither Jubrān’s al-Mawākib (1918), nor Fawzi al-Malik’s ʿĀla biṣṣāt al-rīh (1929) have a plot in the strict sense of the word. Muṭrān’s narrative poems are short, and so are most of the poems written in this genre by Abū Shādī and his “disciples” in the 1930’s and 1940’s.
remorse, repulsion and love, alienation and reconciliation. The severe emotional storms that engulf the two protagonists (Ghalwā and Shafiq, henceforth referred to as G. and S. respectively) are at times masterfully conveyed by mobilizing nature as an active participant in the drama and as a vehicle for reflecting the characters’ emotions. Lebanon, its mountains, its seaboard, its villages, are all brought into play. The changing seasons are often employed as background for the shifting moods of S. and G.

Critics who have discussed Ghalwā have dwelt upon many of its thematic aspects. However, too much of their attention has been given to personal matters, namely, the connection between Abu Shabaka’s real life and the events in Ghalwā. The fact that the female protagonist’s name is composed of the same consonants as that of Abu Shabaka’s beloved Olga, whom he eventually married, was often cited as evidence for the “autobiographic” nature of the poem. Moreover, there are other elements in Ghalwā which are reminiscent of the poet’s own life, e.g.: the setting of the poem being Zoq Mikha’il, his native village; the death of the father while the protagonist was a boy; the fact that S. is often referred to as “the poet”.

In his short introductory note to Ghalwā (as well as in an article published many years before the publication of the book), Abu Shabaka makes a point of asserting that the poem reflects his life only marginally, and that in its totality it is the product of his imagination. He goes on to emphasize that its subject is the life of a community, not that of an individual; that it is Life, not a single life; and, echoing Aristotle’s famous distinction, he concludes, that it is “a poem, not history.”

Nevertheless Abu Shabaka’s friends, in their articles and reminiscences, and, more significantly, some critics in their comments on this work, insist on identifying the story of S. with that of the poet, a practice which betrays a lamentable naivety in the treatment of a literary text, occasionally stooping to sheer gossip.