



EBN ṬABĀṬABĀ, ABU'L-ḤASAN MOḤAMMAD

EBN ṬABĀṬABĀ, ABU'L-ḤASAN MOḤAMMAD b. Aḥmad b. Moḥammad b. Aḥmad b. Ebrāhīm Eṣfahānī (d. 322/933), poet and critic. An 'Alawid from the Hasanid line, he was born, brought up, and educated in Isfahan, which, in his days, was a great center of learning. Very little is known about him. It seems that he did not travel abroad to meet learned shaikhs but was content with the local masters he met. The remaining fragments of his poetry contain some information about his activities in his native town. His *dīvān* was known to Ebn Ḳallekān (d. 681/282), who quotes it, acknowledging that he knows nothing about the poet himself. Ḥosayn Rāḡeb Eṣfāhanī (d. 502/1108) cites much of his poetry in his *Moḥāẓarāt al-odabā' wa moḥāwarāt al-šo'arā'*; but later sources should be considered with caution because they confuse him with another Ebn Ṭabāṭabā (Aḥmad b. Moḥammad b. Esmā'īl, an Egyptian poet mentioned in Abū Manṣūr Ṭa'ālebī's *Yatīma* I, Cairo, 1934, p. 369).

As a poet, Ebn Ṭabāṭabā is in line with the school of poetry represented by Ebn Mo'tazz, Abu'l-Faṭḥ Maḥmūd Košājem, Abū Bakr Aḥmad Ṣanawbarī, and many others, a school that chose the pleasures of life as a theme and novel imagery as a mark of excellence. Most of Abu'l-Ḥasan's extant fragments deal with sumptuous dishes, wine, love, and the description of animals, birds, and stars. He competes with Ebn Mo'tazz in using strange images and with a contemporary poet, Moḥammad b. Yazīd, in describing the celestial bodies. In spite of a humorous strain in his satires, he displays bitter irony and a



tendency toward abusive language. All his poetical and critical works, of which only the *ʿEyār al-šeʿr* has survived, deal with topics related to poetry. In any case, he stands as an original critic who tries to deduce his critical rules for Arabic poetry from within that poetry itself, without much foreign influence. His *ʿEyār* contains a full-fledged literary theory, not mere scattered comments. Poetry to Ebn Ṭabāṭabā is a fully conscious work, and the poem does not differ from any literary piece of prose except in meter. The poem has to be thought out in prose form and then composed in verse. After the work of composition is done, the poet may improve on the order of lines as they first occurred to him. The unity of a poem depends not on having one theme (though this might be possible) but on being a balanced structure. The poem is like an ingot made up of different metals when perceived in its final shape. Beauty means the all-powerful harmony that subdues the different elements to its rule. Harmony and disharmony are easily discerned by “mental” judgment, a faculty that receives pleasure or displeasure instantaneously and without much effort. Both pleasure and displeasure have a magical influence upon morality. To acquire a positive moral influence, poetry should adhere to various kinds of truthfulness. Not only has the *qaṣīda* to reflect harmony in order to be true to its *raison d’être*, but the poet himself should be truthful in expressing his feelings, true to experience. Moral truthfulness is also indispensable in order to avoid representing virtues as vices and vice versa. Philosophically speaking, so Ebn Ṭabāṭabā says, the poem should be wholly true as an independent entity, not in the metaphorical but in the literal sense of the word. Whether this theory is based on contradictory assumptions and whether it is applicable are questions that do not affect Ebn Ṭabāṭabā’s historical importance as a critic. Such a formulation is a sign of a lively and creative interest in poetry, an interest that had not been so vigorously expressed in Arabic literary criticism before Ebn Ṭabāṭabā.

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