

“The Myths of the Earth”

Nevfel Cumart’s Poetry

Nevfel Cumart began already at the age of seventeen to write and publish poems, partially out of love for his adopted language and partially out of necessity. As a member of the second generation of Turks living in Germany, he tried by means of writing to come to grips with the various problems engulfing him: the cultural tug-of-war between the totally different worlds of his parents and his German peers, the loss of sense of self arising from the identity crisis, the stereotyping of his ethnic group, the galling and crippling effect of being socially marginalized. Accordingly, the first of his many poetry volumes (meanwhile ten in number) has a “primal scream” quality about it: it is a disturbing chronicle of the pathological effects of discrimination and isolation, sometimes highlighted in clear autobiographical detail, sometimes circumscribed in abstract terms.

As time goes on, however, a diachronic reading of his œuvre hitherto presents a voyage of discovery that is simultaneously a healing process and an artistic odyssey that leads away from the tortured and torn confessional poetry of the earlier years to a hard-won synthesis of the very divergent cultures. The unique potential of biculturality eventually makes itself felt: the “I” no longer stands between the two worlds but rather draws from both. The profound culture of Islam has a deeply enriching effect on Cumart’s thought processes.

His love poetry, too, profits much from the encounter with ancient Asiatic cultures. It displays a very winning authenticity and a divanic tone which differs greatly from the frequently cerebral and ironizing new German love poetry. It is already evident in the early works as a counterweight to the psychodrama of the isolated self and constitutes an initial overcoming of the dividing line between "I" and "you".

The "you" of the early poetry is a redeeming angel who transforms the night – otherwise usually a cipher for dreadful anxieties and solitary confinement that comes close to the metaphor of breakdown – into a sphere of fulfilled and serene twosomeness. In the later poetry, through the agency of love, night becomes a sphere of protectedness and of soothing instead of exposure.

Cumart's deepening awareness of the centuries-old cultures of his ancestors, reinforced by journeys to Turkey and North Africa as well as by his Arabic Studies, plays on new registers in his poetry. By absorbing oriental elements of style he reintroduces the venerable craft of hyperbole into modern poetry. In addition, a feeling for image and space is engendered which evokes more southern climes than the temperate, bright grey, overcast Northern German one: roving wolves, snakes, ants, pomegranates, dusty and scorching winds, desert sands, mirages, huge mountain ranges and again and again the elemental images of rock, sea, sun, moon and stars. Despite the economy of expression, not only spatial but also temporal

dimensions extend into the epic. The metaphors and similes quote the Arabic world, the protagonists grow into fabulous mythic figures. Primeval events, “the myths of the earth”, become part of the “I” as a prenatal experience: the deluge, earthquakes, mountain foldings and the Ice Age are felt to be a personal prehistory, as if the lyrical narrator had become the bearer of his people’s collective consciousness.

And yet Cumart’s rediscovery of his parents’ culture never succumbs to the temptation of glossing over the actual realities of that world. The poems that deal with Turkey “do not polish up the sense of nationality that has been tarnished in the foreign country”, to quote Franco Biondi and Rafik Schami. On the contrary: Cumart’s political poems take a very critical look at the conditions prevailing in Turkey since the military coup of 1980, which, despite undoubted improvements, are still characterized by severe violations of human rights. Cumart indicts every form of inhumanity, whether in Turkey or Germany. Moreover, his poetic achievement of bridging the gap between the highly industrialized world of his childhood in Lower Saxony and the ancient agrarian world of Anatolia, from which his parents emigrated, as well as the brighter and more serene mood of his later poetry do not blind him to the ecological disasters which we seem to be steering towards. In this respect the general tendency of his poetic development from dark to light is inverted: the poetic expansion of time and space towards cosmic vastness results in a critical view of the future in contrast to the past. In the first-

person poetry of his youth the past embodied the catastrophic while the future contained the principle of hope. In his later works this is reversed: in Cumart's increasingly ecological vision the future manifests itself as highly endangered. While the world of his ancestors is described in lyrical tones, the prospect of our post-industrial future assumes apocalyptic dimensions.

Meanwhile, Nevfel Cumart has become a highly esteemed poet in Germany and Turkey and a recipient of several very prestigious literary awards. May this small bilingual collection make his works known and give pleasure to readers in the English-speaking world.

Eoin Bourke, Galway, July 1998