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Published in: Literature and beyond: Festschrift for Willem G. Weststeijn: on the occasion of his 65th birthday

Citation for published version (APA):

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VAN HET REVE ON
“LITERATURWISSENSCHAFT”

Johan Weststeijn

In his lecture ‘The Enigma of Illegibility’ of 1977, the Dutch Slavist Karel van het Reve launched an all-out attack on literary studies. He renounced this field of scholarship in its entirety because, in his view, it does not contribute to the appreciation of quality in literary works. His argument was essentially two-pronged: 1) to enjoy and appreciate good books we do not need the analysis literary studies provide of these works; 2) literary studies fail to explain why some books are better than others. As Van het Reve (1979: 129) stated, good “books, plays, stories and poems, were written to be read by the public without explanation”. Apparently, the author supposes that good books possess ‘universal’ qualities that are immediately appreciated by readers from different times and different cultures. Great art must be a-historical: it compresses the distance in time and place between author and reader. A work of literature that can only be appreciated if placed in its historical context lacks this universal appeal.

Van het Reve’s provocative lecture also pointed out that when literary studies determine certain structural elements in texts, these elements are not helpful for distinguishing between great and not-so-great works. The same structural principles can be found in good as well as in bad literature. Indeed, “one of the key questions of literary studies” should be, the author stated, “how to make a description of a good book [...] without this description also being perfectly applicable to a worthless book” (Van het Reve 1979: 135). Van het Reve himself did not provide any criteria for good literature, yet he implied that he was able to recognise it whenever he saw it. To illustrate the alleged universal qualities of good literature, he cited a wide array of authors, whom he had read and appreciated, from different cultures and ages ranging from almost
three thousand years ago up to his own time (Van het Reve 1979: 131):

I have read quite a few writers with great pleasure and great emotion, Dutchmen, Russians, Frenchmen, Englishmen, Germans, Greeks and Romans. I like authors as different as Catullus, Herodotus, Heine, Homer, Schopenhauer, Chamfort, Mandelstam, Nabokov, Pushkin, Lermontov, Turgenev, Brodski, Tolstoy, Elsschot, Multatuli, Dashiell Hammett.

Significantly, all authors in this list are part of the Western tradition, that is, classical Greco-Roman and European literature. The inclusion of Dashiell Hammett (author of the detective novel *The Maltese Falcon*) implies that Van het Reve indeed did cast his net wide, even outside the official literary canon: apparently, good writing is not what the canon dictates; it is simply so that a large number of works found in the canon share qualities that are independent of place, time, and culture. But no one from outside the Western world was listed: Van het Reve’s search for universal qualities was, in this respect, not so universal.

Many Westerners, however, will recognize the appeal of the “Homer to Hammett” list. Some literary works from foreign cultures are so strange to a reader raised in the European tradition that immediate recognition is impossible. These works are so alien that they appear to lack the universal qualities that Van het Reve was looking for. This is the case, for example, with the majority of literary texts from the classical Arabic written heritage. Besides the telling exception of the *Arabian Nights*, a work in form and content alien to the mainstream of classical literature in Arabic, no text from the sizeable body of writings of this period has yet been admitted by a Western audience as part of the “canon of truly great books”.

One conclusion to be drawn from the lack of immediately recognizable and therefore “universal” qualities in any of the works of classical Arabic culture, would be to dismiss this literature in its entirety as worthless. Not responsive to the standards of great art, it should be seen as essentially inferior to the products of Greco-Roman and European civilization. In theory, this conclusion is possible. However, to renounce an entire literary tradition as valueless and to put it aside on the “trash heap of history” because it fails to meet one’s literary
standards at first glance, is intellectually unsatisfactory. Apparently, to understand works from outside the European canon, readers raised in that tradition do need the scholarly explanation that Van het Reve scorned.

There are two methods of making the Arabic tradition more approachable. First, one can point out that in other cultures, other conventions as to what is good and bad art exist and have existed. Of course, taking account of the existence of other conventions does not automatically lead to the embracing of these conventions. Moreover, stressing the “foreign” character of the values of other cultures will lead at most to an appreciation constrained by reservations. One will conclude, for instance, that “in light of the primitive circumstances under which they had to operate, these foreigners managed to do a fairly good job”. This train of thought also engenders a negative predisposition towards authors who were, apparently, incapable of surmounting the restrictive taboos of their age. Besides, in the case of historical periods, we often do not know exactly which conventions governed the production of works of art in these times. To find out what criteria mediaeval Arabic readers used to evaluate literature, we first have to go through a process of historical reconstruction, that is to a fair amount based on guesswork. Most conventions are sousentendu and never expressed in words.

A second method of approaching foreign texts, like those of classical Arabic civilization, tries to break down inaccessible works into smaller textual elements with which Westerners are familiar. This is where the structural approach of literary studies is of utmost importance. Whereas the first method analyses foreign traditions using the methods of historical reconstruction and can be labelled with the useful German term Literaturgeschichte, the second method deploys the terms, concepts and structures of Literaturwissenschaft.

As an example of the structuralist approach of Literaturwissenschaft, let us consider narratology. This method aims at charting the narrative artifice used in texts. From its inception, narratology derived its terms and concepts from the study of the modern European novel. However, the method ultimately aims at providing a terminology for the description and analysis of all narrative texts. It recognises that the same narrative strategies can be found in good as well as in
bad texts; supposedly, they can also be found in the writings of other cultures. A description according to narratology provides a common ground: a tool for discovering those aspects in a foreign work with which readers are familiar, without adding value judgements to this identification; indeed, the same aspects occur indiscriminately in both excellent and worthless literature from the Western tradition.

Van het Reve’s criticism of *Literaturwissenschaft* rests on the very fact that the artificial ploys it attaches so much value to can be found everywhere. Ultimately, their presence is no indication of a text’s literary qualities. Although Van het Reve himself did not recognize this, his censure contains the implicit basis for a revaluation of literary studies in the context of this specific problem: the appreciation of works from a foreign tradition. When coming to terms with alien works outside Van het Reve’s list of books that need ‘no explanation’ to Western readers, *Literaturwissenschaft* helps them to detect those aspects of a text which are, indeed, highly familiar.

Narratology helps a reader of a foreign text to focus first on building blocks that he knows from his own literature. Only at a subsequent stage can he gradually begin to appreciate how these textual elements have been used in a new and unfamiliar way. These building blocks are, for instance, the use of flashbacks, changes in narrative perspective, the reader knowing more than the characters, etcetera. If, as Van het Reve presupposed, the ultimate aim of literary studies should be to help us in our appreciation of a text’s qualities as great art, then *Literaturwissenschaft* is essential in enabling a Western audience to evaluate foreign texts.

How narratology proves the legitimacy of Van het Reve’s literary ideals, as well as the limitations of his conclusions, will be illustrated in the next section. It examines an artwork from a different time period – tenth century AD; from a foreign, non-European culture; and from a genre that has, traditionally, not been classified as "true literature": a passage from an Arabo-Islamic chronicle.

**The strangeness of Tabari’s ‘History’**

Tabari’s massive eight thousand page *History of Prophets and Kings*, while widely
recognised as the prime achievement of Arabic historiography, remains at the same time utterly strange to most readers steeped in the European tradition. Its author, Tabari, fails to comply with most of what modern western audiences expect from a historian or a prose narrator. Instead of a continuous narrative, this chronicle provides in fact a catalogue of eyewitness reports, classified by topic, i.e. by main event, into entries. These entries have been classified in chronological order, according to the year in which the main event took place. While the eyewitness reports repeat, overlap or contradict each other, the main narrator remains tantalizingly distant: he never offers his opinion on the course of events or on the reliability of his witnesses.

Even when Tabari’s medieval Arabic was recently translated into modern English, his History remained alien to some of the most seasoned of Arabists. Reviewers of the translation expressed this estrangement in no uncertain terms, admitting that they are “bewildered”, “exasperated”, even “infuriated” by Tabari’s style. One of them speaks of the “sometimes rather bewildering approach of al-Tabari’s work – quite different not only from modern historiography but from the narrative manner of Herodotus and Thucydides that sets the style for historical writing in the West” (Peterson 1999: 126). Another reviewer mentions Tabari’s “habit of meticulously, not to say obtrusively providing alternative versions of events at the apparent cost of destroying narrative clarity and undermining psychological plausibility” (Carter 1989: 140). A third (Daniel 1997: 288) takes offence with Tabari’s exasperating paratactical method. He strings together without comment or explanation anecdotal material ranging in quality from convincing comments about the socioeconomic considerations that went into selecting the site for Baghdad to ridiculous fables about the magic mirror that enabled al-Mansur to discern friend from foe. The reports are often so repetitive, so disjointed, so full of cryptic comments, so apparently pointless as to leave the most diligent reader utterly bewildered.

The novelist and historian Roger Irwin counts himself among “those who have read al-Tabari and have been infuriated by the man’s noncommittal presentation of variant accounts of past events” (Irwin 1993: 631). Here, in an attempt to
show that Tabari’s History can be made intelligible to an audience raised in the European literary tradition, we will analyse a small portion of the text with the tools provided by narratology.

The caliph Harun al-Rashid dreams of a handful of red earth

Exactly twelve hundred years ago, in the course of the year 193 Hijra, which corresponds to the year 808-809 of the Christian era, the Muslim caliph Harun al-Rashid died. Harun had been the sovereign ruler over an empire stretching from the borders of France to the borders of China, and medieval Muslims later came to conceive of his reign as a period of ideal rule. During his lifetime, the caliph had decreed that his empire should be divided among two of his sons, Amin and Ma‘mun. After Harun’s death, the conditions of this testament led to a civil war between the two brothers which ended in a cruel example of fratricide: Ma‘mun decapitated Amin and usurped the caliphate.

Understandably, in Tabari’s History of Prophets and Kings, an entry has been devoted to the momentous event of the death of Harun. This obituary entry would be the ideal place for the historian Tabari to explain the causes of the caliph’s greatness and of his death, and to pronounce judgement on Harun’s actions and his political legacy. However, Tabari confines himself to the statement: “In the year 193, the caliph Harun al-Rashid died” and then quotes an apparently haphazard collection of some thirty anecdotes put in the mouth of various eyewitnesses. The first of such anecdotes is reported by Jibril ibn Bukhtishu, the caliph’s court physician (Tabari 1985: XXX, 299-301).

Jibril relates the following: One morning, when he is with Harun al-Rashid at his residence al-Raqqa, the caliph tells him about a terrifying dream he has had: He was sitting on his sofa, when from under it appeared a hand and a forearm which he recognised, although he did not know the name of the owner. The hand was filled with red earth. Then a voice spoke: “This is the earth in which you will be buried”. “Where is this earth?” the caliph asked. “In Tus” (a city in Khurasan, close to Afghanistan). Then the voice fell silent, the hand disappeared, and Harun awoke. Jibril declares he attaches no importance to dreams, and advises the caliph to do the same. As the days go by, both the
caliph and his physician forget about the dream. Harun decides to travel to Khurasan to deal with the rebellion there of a man called Rafi. On the way, however, he falls ill and they have to halt at Tus. Lying sick there, Harun suddenly remembers the dream. He asks his eunuch to fetch some earth from the garden. The servant comes back with a handful of earth, having pulled his sleeve back from his forearm. Harun shouts: “By God, this is the forearm which I saw in my dream; by God, this is the very same hand; and by God, this is the red earth, you haven’t omitted anything!” Within three days, the caliph dies and is buried in the garden.

The dream as a flashback
Jibril’s report of the caliph’s dream is located at an important structural junction in Tabari’s History. It is embedded in the entry on Harun’s death, which is the final and concluding entry on Harun’s life and reign. This entry is also Harun’s “obituary entry”, which could be said to be the most important of all the entries dealing with a caliph and his reign. It is also the last entry before a new cycle or reign begins, in Harun’s case the caliphate of Harun’s son Amin, which will end with Amin being murdered by his brother.

The dream report is introduced by the words “In this year, Harun al-Rashid died” and the heading About the Cause of al-Rashid’s Death and the Place Where He Died. Consequently, when starting to read this report, the reader already knows that Harun will die. This, however, is not the only announcement that prepares the reader of Tabari’s chronicle for Harun’s impending death. Events referred to in the dream report (the caliph’s stay at al-Raqqa, his decision to travel to Khurasan when Rafi starts a rebellion there, etc.) are presented to the reader in earlier entries. Harun’s decision to travel to Khurasan, for example, is presented in the second entry of the year 192 Hijra: “In this year, al-Rashid arrived from al-Raqqa by boat at the City of Peace, intending to set out for Khurasan and attack Rafi” (Tabari 1985: XXX, 291). The sequence in which these bits of information are presented to the reader allows him to reconstruct a sequence of events which took place in the world the text refers to:
(1) In Khurasan, a certain Rafi starts a rebellion against the caliph Harun al-Rashid;
(2) Harun decides to travel from al-Raqqa to Khurasan to deal with this rebellion;
(3) Ma’mun asks to accompany his father Harun because the latter is ill;
(4) On the way to Khurasan, Harun reveals by showing his bandaged abdomen to a servant that his condition is fatal;
(5) Al-Fadl, one of Harun’s advisers, dies five months before Harun’s death, predicting that his fate is linked to that of Harun;
(6) Harun halts at Tus because of his illness;
(7) Finally, in the entry that immediately precedes the entry on Harun’s death, the reader is told that during the caliph’s stay at Tus, a certain Bashir is captured, the brother of the rebelling Rafi. Harun orders this Bashir to be executed.

These events are presented to the reader in the same order as they happened in the world the text refers to. When we come to the dream report, however, the chronological sequence of events is abandoned. The narrator Jibril ibn Bukhtishu starts this report with the words: “I was with al-Rashid in al-Raqqa”, thereby taking the reader back at least a year, to the time before Harun decided to travel to Khurasan and probably before he knew he was ill. Jibril’s report can be divided into three parts:

(1) An account of the discussion between Jibril and the caliph which took place on the morning after Harun’s dream, when he was still in his residence al-Raqqa. Compared to the preceding entry which deals with Harun’s execution of Bashir at Tus, this is a flashback or retroversion which takes the reader back at least one year in time;
(2) A shortened account of the time that has passed since Harun’s dream at al-Raqqa until his halting at Tus;
(3) An account of Harun’s last days at Tus: the caliph remembers his dream and dies three days later. This third part is a chronological sequel to the event treated in the preceding entry, i.e. the execution of Bashir.

The flashback of the dream report has several dramatic effects. The very first hint which prepares the reader for Harun’s impending death is given in the second entry of the year 192, with the words of Ma’mun’s adviser: “You don’t know what is going to happen to al-Rashid whilst he is en route for Khurasan”
These words start an arch of suspense, which only ends when Harun’s death has been dealt with in all its details, in the middle of Harun’s obituary entry, the fifth entry of the year 193. Suspense is caused by the questions which are raised by the adviser’s remark. Will something happen to the caliph? If so, what? Does the caliph himself realise that he will die? Will he try to evade his destiny?

This arch of suspense provides a background of tension to all the entries which are dealt with in between its two ends. Every event or utterance of the characters treated in between might or might not be a new hint providing answers to these questions. And with every new hint (Harun showing his bandaged abdomen; al-Fadl’s prediction that his fate is linked to that of the caliph; Harun becoming too sick to travel) the tension is built up. At the same time, every hint fills in new details concerning the caliph’s demise. At the beginning of the entry dealing with Harun’s death, suspense is at its highest: the reader is now sure that Harun will die at Tus, but still doesn’t know the exact circumstances of his death.

At this very moment, the reader is confronted with a flashback to the time Harun was still at al-Raqqa. The fact that this flashback is placed at this specific point results in the following effects:

(1) The dénouement, the description of the exact circumstances of Harun’s death, is delayed (retardatio); tension is maintained a little longer;
(2) Suspense is heightened even more because the reader is given an extra hint in the form of a predictive dream;
(3) In sharp contrast to the characters Harun and Jibril, the reader understands that this dream is truthful and that Jibril’s advice to ignore it is the worst advice possible. The fact that the reader knows more than the characters adds a second layer of tension: dramatic irony.

The dismemberment of Bashir

As a rule, the primary narrator of Tabari’s chronicle never establishes a relation between events from different entries in an explicit way. Such a relation, however, can be established by the characters. In the entry on the capture of Bashir, for example, Harun explicitly links his own death to the death of Bashir: “I don’t
want death to come upon me whilst two of his members remain on his body” (Tabari 1985: XXX, 298). This entry immediately precedes the entry on Harun’s death and deals in fact with a battle between al-Rashid’s general and the supporters of Rafi, the man who had rebelled in Khurasan. During this battle, the general captures Rafi’s brother Bashir and sends him to the caliph who has halted at Tus. This information is illustrated by a single eyewitness report, told by one of the men who brought Bashir to Harun. He relates how the captive was received by the caliph (Tabari 1985: XXX, 297-298, my italics):

I was one of those who brought Rafi’s brother to al-Rashid […] Bashir went into al-Rashid’s presence, when the Caliph was lying on a bed, elevated above the ground by the length of the bone of the forearm.

Harun decides to execute Bashir in a gruesome way (Tabari 1985: XXX, 298, slightly adapted translation):

He summoned a butcher and told him, “Don’t sharpen your knives, leave them as they are, dismember this evildoer son of an evildoer and be quick about it. I don’t want death to come upon me whilst two of his members remain on his body.” So the butcher dismembered him until he left him a pile of severed limbs. The Caliph said, “Count up his members.” I counted his members, and lo, there were fourteen of them. (…) Then he [the caliph] lost consciousness, and those present dispersed.

Besides the fact that Harun explicitly links his own death to that of Bashir, there is a second element that entices the reader to connect Harun’s death to Bashir’s execution: the place of these reports within the structure of Tabari’s chronicle. This report is immediately followed by an entry that starts with the words “In this year, Harun al-Rashid died,” continues with the heading Mentioning of the Reports About the Cause of His Death, and then presents Jibril’s report about Harun’s dream. As a result, the report of Harun ordering a man to be dismembered is almost instantly followed by the report of a dream in which the caliph is haunted by a forearm and a hand which he recognises (although at that moment he cannot bring to mind the name of their owner).

Another hint to the reader that the two reports should be related is the remarkable attention to certain details in the story of the execution. Firstly, there
is the description of the height of Harun’s sofa. This *sarir*, Harun’s throne or sofa, is mentioned several times in Tabari’s chronicle, but, as far as I know, this is the only instance that its height is specified. Secondly, there is the strange wish of the caliph that the parts of the executed body be counted (as if he were afraid that during the removal of the corpse some of the severed members would be overlooked). The number of fourteen members apparently refers to the fact that if all the major joints of a human body are cut, feet, knees, hips, wrists, elbows, shoulders and neck, the body is divided into fourteen pieces. These remarkable details, combined with the caliph’s expression that he does not want to die as long as there remain two members on Bashir’s body, highlight two elements of the execution report: Harun’s *sarir* and severed body parts. These are exactly the same two elements which also play an essential role in the dream. In the report immediately following that of Harun’s dream, Bashir’s execution and Harun’s death are connected once again. This report, the second report of the entry on Harun’s death, states that Jibril ibn Bukhtishu had made a mistake in the treatment of al-Rashid and that the caliph had therefore decided “to put Jibril to death and have his limbs dismembered just as he had Rafi’s brother dismembered”. Jibril only escapes this terrible end because he asks the caliph for one day respite, and that night the caliph dies (Tabari 1985: XXX, 301).

We know that at least one of Tabari’s mediaeval readers interpreted these hints and linked the execution of Bashir to Harun’s demise. In 352/963, some forty years after Tabari’s death in 310/923, his chronicle was translated into Persian by Belami. This translation is a free adaptation of Tabari’s work. Belami omits Harun’s dream and moves immediately from the execution of Bashir to Harun’s death: “On le coupa ensuite, en présence de Haroun, en quatorze morceaux. Haroun mourut dix jours après cette execution” (Belami 1958: 477). In conclusion we can say that the reader is given five hints to link the report of Harun’s dream and death to the report of Bashir’s execution.

(1) The arch of suspense and the flashback to the time Harun was still at al-Raqqa raise the suggestion that all intermediate events are somehow related to Harun’s death;
The character Harun explicitly links his death to that of Bashir;
(3) The two reports immediately follow each other;
(4) In the execution report two elements are highlighted which also play a prominent role in the dream: severed members in connection with Harun’s sarir;
(5) In a third report immediately following the dream report, an anonymous secondary narrator explicitly links Harun’s death once more to Bashir’s execution.

The archangel Gabriel shows the Prophet Muhammad a handful of red earth
A connection between the report on Harun’s dream of red earth and the report on Bashir’s execution does not explain all details of the dream report. Several questions are left unanswered: Why does the forearm with the hand hold red earth? Why is Harun buried in earth that is red?

A handful of red earth is not mentioned elsewhere in Tabari’s chronicle, but it could be a reference to a report contained in another text. Arguably, the texts that were best known to Tabari’s readers, apart from the Koran, were the hadith, the sayings of the Prophet. There is a hadith, preserved in different versions, that mentions a handful of red earth (Wensinck 1923: 94). According to this hadith, the Prophet Muhammad woke up crying, after being visited in his sleep by the archangel Gabriel, Jibril in Arabic. Jibril had told the Prophet that his grandson Husayn would be killed by the community of believers, and had shown him a handful of red earth: the earth of the place where Husayn would be murdered. This hadith obviously refers to the battle of Karbala, where Muhammad’s grandson Husayn was killed by other Muslims, decapitated, and then buried on the spot.

In the hadith, the earth from Husayn’s grave is probably red because of the blood of martyrs that was shed there. In one version of this hadith the colour of the earth given to Muhammad is at first left unspecified, but the Prophet says: “If this earth turns to blood I’ll know my grandson has been killed” (Ibn al-Adim 1988: 2599). Earth, red because of the blood of a martyr, is also mentioned by the famous twelfth-century voyager Ibn Jubayr. When he describes the mosque of Hamza, Muhammad’s uncle, at the mountain of Uhud in Arabia,
where Hamza was slain fighting the unbelievers, Ibn Jubayr states: “Around [the graves of] the martyrs is red earth. This earth is ascribed to Hamza and is venerated by the people” (1990: 148).

The hadith about the death of Husayn shares two elements with the report on Harun’s dream of red earth. In both stories figures a character named Jibril, and both reports contain the narrative motif of a dream in which a handful of red earth from a grave announces someone’s death. Apparently, the author of the report on Harun’s dream of red earth wants his readers to draw a parallel between Harun’s death and the death of the Prophet’s grandson Husayn.

As can be read in Tabari’s *History*, the murder of the Prophet’s grandson by other Muslims as the result of civil war (the Second Fitna) was a traumatic event in the history of the Islamic community. After Muhammad’s death and the initial success of the conquest of the Persian and Byzantine empires under the first four caliphs, the young community of believers was not able to avoid civil war. Muslims started fighting among themselves over their Prophet’s political and religious inheritance. This civil strife eventually led to the decapitation of the Prophet’s grandson Husayn by fellow Muslims (Tabari 1985: XIX, 91-179), and to the rise to power of the Umayyads, a dynasty of caliphs who were not closely related to the Prophet and were considered by many as illegal usurpers.

After a revolution, the Umayyads were replaced by the Abbasids, who were members of the family of the Prophet as descendants of his uncle Abbas. The Abbasids claimed not only to have restored the house of the Prophets to its original supreme power but also to have restored the original unity of the early community of believers. Under Harun al-Rashid, the fifth Abbasid caliph, the Islamic empire seemed to have reached its apogee. Harun, however, could not make up his mind who of his sons should succeed him, so he decided to leave the eastern province of Khurasan under the governance of his oldest son Ma’mun and appointed his son Amin as caliph over the rest of the empire. As mentioned above, this situation resulted in a new civil war, which ended with the decapitation of the ruling caliph Amin on the order of his brother Ma’mun (Tabari 1985: XXXI, 182-206).
The events following Harun’s death are an echo of the events following the
death of the Prophet. History repeats itself, and produces similar dreams. By
way of a handful of red earth, the Prophet is foretold that after his death his
grandson will be decapitated by another Muslim, in a civil war about the su-
premacy over the community of believers: the Second Fitna. Likewise, by way
of a handful of red earth, Harun is foretold that he himself will die; a death
which will lead to his son being decapitated by his half-brother, in another civil
war about the supremacy over the community of believers, a war sometimes
called the Fourth Fitna.

The entry on Harun’s death being the final entry of his reign, this was an
appropriate place to dwell upon what was going to happen in the following
reign, and how the next caliph, Amin, would come to his end.

Harun is buried in earth that later becomes the grave of the eighth Shi’i
Imam Ali al-Rida
But if this comparison between the civil wars after the deaths of the Prophet
and Harun was the sole intention of the author of this report on Harun’s
dream, why then is the similarity in their dreams only partial? Why isn’t Harun,
like the Prophet, shown a handful of red earth from the grave of his son, but a
handful of earth from his own grave? Why is it the caliph himself who will be
buried in blood-red soil? Why is the place where Harun was buried of specific
importance, as can been concluded from the heading: “Mentioning of the
Reports About the Cause of His Death and the Place Where He Died”, which
immediately precedes the report on the caliph’s dream?

The place where the Prophet’s grandson Husayn was martyred and buried
(in Karbala in Iraq) became a shrine or martyrium, a mashhad, that was visited
by pilgrims and venerated especially by Shi’i Muslims. The Shi’ites considered
Husayn to be their Imam, i.e. a spiritual leader from among the descendants of
the Prophet’s son-in-law Ali ibn Abi Talib, who had inherited the right to rule
as well as a divine esoteric wisdom that ultimately reached back to the Prophet.
Husayn was considered to be the third in line to have inherited such wisdom,
after his brother Hasan and their father Ali ibn Abi Talib, and therefore to be
the third Imam.
Surprisingly, the place where the caliph Harun was buried would also become a place of worship for Shi’i Muslims. Some ten years after Harun’s burial at Tus, his son Ma’mun visited this city in the company of his adoptive son and heir apparent Ali al-Rida. This adoptive son was not an Abbasid but one of the descendants of Ali ibn Abi Talib. Moreover, the Shi’ites considered Ali al-Rida to be their eighth Imam. When passing at Tus with Ma’mun, Ali al-Rida suddenly died, apparently after eating too many grapes, although some rumoured he had been poisoned. He was buried next to his (adoptive) grandfather Harun. Whatever the cause of Ali’s death, his grave also became a martyrium that was visited by Shi’i pilgrims. As a mashhad almost as important as that of Husayn in Karbala, the place of Ali al-Rida’s grave became the centre of an entire city known as Meshhed, which would later become the new capital of Khurasan.

Red earth apparently stands for the blood-drenched earth from the grave of martyrs. In his dream, Harun is foretold that the place were he will be buried will later become the place of a mashhad; he will be buried in red, that is “venerated” ground.

Conclusion
By way of the use of certain motifs, Jibril ibn Bukhtishu’s report of Harun’s dream and death is linked to four other episodes from Tabari’s History:

(1) The innocent brother of a rebel is dismembered by the caliph (Tabari 1985: XXX, 297-298);
(2) The Prophet’s grandson is decapitated by fellow Muslims (Tabari 1985: XIX, 91-179);
(3) The caliph’s son is decapitated by his own brother (Tabari 1985: XXXI, 182-206);
(4) The caliph’s grandson dies under mysterious circumstances (Tabari 1985: XXXII, 84).

By way of juxtaposition, character speech, and the recurrence of concrete props – the caliph’s bed and the disjointed forearm – Harun’s death is linked to the dismemberment of Bashir (episode 1).

By way of the recurrence of the motif “death is announced in a dream by
showing a handful of red earth from a future grave” the caliph’s dream is linked to another, well-known dream: the Prophet’s dream about the death of Husayn. The parallel dreams of Prophet and caliph invoke the parallel destinies of their children. Just as the Prophet’s grandson is decapitated by fellow Muslims after a civil war (episode 2), the caliph’s son is decapitated by his brother after another civil war (episode 3).

By way of the motif “buried in earth that is red (with the blood of martyrs)” the caliph’s death is connected once again to the death of Husayn, but also to the death of his grandson Ali al-Rida, who was buried next to the caliph (episode 4). The “buried in red earth” motif therefore draws the reader’s attention to another parallel between the Prophet’s and the caliph’s children. Both of their grandsons were Shi’ite Imams. Just as the grave of the Prophet’s grandson at Karbala became a shrine visited by pilgrims, so the grave of the caliph’s grandson became a martyrium as well.

Now imagine a reader who has never encountered another work of Classical Arabic Literature, and who has only read the episode of Harun’s dream and the twenty or so pages that precede and follow this section in Tabari’s History. Even this reader can appreciate how the dream has been used as a flashback to create suspense and dramatic irony. Even this reader can appreciate how Harun’s dream has been linked to Bashir’s execution by way of character speech, juxtaposition, and the recurrence of certain props.

Admittedly, Harun’s dream does not completely speak for itself within the context of Tabari’s History. To understand the references implied by the handful of red earth, the reader has to be aware of the contents of another Arabic contribution to World Literature, the hadith, and in particular of the hadith about the Prophet’s dream of Husayn’s impending death. However, knowledge of this one reference to another text is sufficient to appreciate how, in a web of associations, the caliph’s natural end is connected to the traumatic deaths of four other characters from Tabari’s chronicle.

Apparently, Harun’s death does not stand alone. By way of the images contained in the dream, readers are encouraged to link the caliph’s downfall to his cruel injustice towards one of his subjects, and to link this injustice in turn to
the tragic destiny that would befall the caliph’s children (see also El-Hibri 1999: 53-58). Moreover, the motifs that connect these five episodes – amputation, blood-drenched soil, the killing of brothers – illustrate larger politico-historical themes: injustice, civil war, regicide, and shedding the blood of the descendants of the Prophet.

To appreciate how this intricate web of cross-references is constructed, no knowledge is needed of the specific time and place in which this text was produced. No knowledge is required of the life of the author, of the person who commissioned the text, of the make-up of the intended public, or of the actual course of events the text purports to describe. Zero knowledge is required of the aesthetic values of the culture in which the text was produced. This web of associations is created by the application of a highly familiar, universal narratological device: motif repetition.

Here we can draw three conclusions. Firstly, at least this section from Tabari’s History is not “so disjointed, so full of cryptic comments, so apparently pointless as to leave the most diligent reader utterly bewildered” (Daniel 1997: 288). Moreover, in the case of the immediate juxtaposition of the reports on Harun’s dream and Bashir’s dismemberment, Tabari’s “paratactical method” does make sense. Although Tabari does not comment on the way he has strung his anecdotal material together in his own voice, he uses other, more indirect but equally well attested methods, such as motif repetition, to imply that an anecdote should be read in connection with other anecdotes or larger episodes from his History.

Secondly, by focussing on the rhetorical aspects of this foreign text with the help of the structuralist approach of Literaturwissenschaft, any reader can judge the game of cross-references in this section of Tabari’s History, by his own criteria of good versus bad literature.

Thirdly we can conclude that Van het Reve was on the right track in his search for universal aspects of literature, aspects which can be understood and appreciated by readers from all times and from all over the world. His demand for instant, unmediated appreciation of these qualities, however, was too much to ask for. Some foreign texts appear so alien, so deviant from the expectations raised by the reader’s own culture that he is inclined to dismiss them at first
contact as worthless. Here the reader needs the guiding hand of literary studies to point him to those elements of a text that are familiar and truly universal, in this case the rhetorical devices that are studied by narratology.

I owe a debt of gratitude to Thijs Weststeijn for his help in the writing of the introduction and to Kathie Somerwil for correcting my English.

References