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SAID (1947-)

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SAID (1947-)

[Amy Kepple Strawser \(Otterbein University\)](#)

Poet.

Active 1970- in Germany

SAID, born 27 May 1947 in Tehran, came to West Germany in 1965 as a student in order to escape the Shah's rule, which had precipitated the imprisonment and execution of friends, acquaintances, and fellow students. The son of a military officer, he has written since the early 1980s — in addition to six volumes of poetry — radio plays, essays, short fiction, a memoir, journals, children's books, and satirical and humorous nonfiction in the German language. After having studied political science in Munich, where he currently resides, SAID served as president of the German chapter of the International PEN Association from 2000-2002. In 2006 he received the Goethe Medal for outstanding achievement in the field of German literature as a non-native, and has been the recipient of many other literary honors and awards. SAID's writing career is marked by his consistent and forthright political engagement with issues of social justice and the protection of civil liberties, particularly for imprisoned and persecuted writers.

After the Shah's ouster, SAID returned briefly to the land of his birth in 1979 and experienced firsthand how the Islamic Revolution had alleviated neither the country's social problems, nor the infringement on citizen rights; instead, it had caused further detainment and torture, and ordered the execution of yet more fellow Iranians. His hopes for an improved political system after the change in government in Iran were quickly deflated by the rigid fundamentalism which Ayatollah Khomeini's rule had inaugurated. Although the pendulum had swung in the opposite direction from the Shah's dictatorship, rather than finding a democratic state, SAID found only more suppression of and intolerance for human rights. Since that time, he has never again visited Iran; he uses a single name as a security precaution.

SAID, who publishes in the German language, has in recent years begun avoiding the use of any upper case letters whatsoever in his writing — with the exception of his pen name being in all caps: not for proper names, nor for the beginning of sentences, nor for the German spelling convention of capitalizing all nouns. SAID's eloquence in his acquired tongue is at once breathtaking, heartrending and mesmerizing. The beauty and precision of expression in his writing display a profound lyric artistry of heightened perception:

Am Vorhang
der verirrte Falter.
Die Fensterflügel öffnen,
vierhändig schweigen,
bis er hinausfliegt.

[A straying butterfly
by the curtain.
Opening the window casements,
a silence for four hands,
until he's flown.]

The tenderness of these lines in conjunction with their brevity is striking and reminiscent of a Japanese haiku. The matter of his finding literary expression in German as a non-native speaker has been addressed by the writer (cf. his book *In Deutschland Leben: Ein Gespräch mit Wieland Freund* [*Living in Germany: A Conversation with Wieland Freund*, 2004]), yet any struggle he may experience with the language is not apparent in his work. Now a German citizen, SAID seems as much at home as is possible in his language of exile. For example, the title poem of his much-celebrated and oft-reissued volume *Wo ich sterbe ist meine Fremde* [*I Will Die in my Foreign Home*, 1983] demonstrates the aplomb with which the poet has invented a crystalline distillation of thought and emotion in a single phrase, a line which ends this brief lyric:

Geliebte,
auf diesen Strassen kann ich
nicht einmal Deine Hand halten.
Wie verspottet hier
die Liebe ist.
Wo ich sterbe,
ist meine Fremde.
[Dear one,
on these streets I can
not even hold your hand.
How ridiculed
love is here.
I will die
in my foreign home.]

This book, in its fifth edition (2000), details the author's visit to Iran and the concomitant personal and interpersonal observations and realizations. SAID gives voice to the plight of an exile — painfully, realistically, yet without sentimentality.

His first major publication *Liebesgedichte* [*Love Poems*, 1981] has served as a prototype for two other poetry collections: *Sei Nacht zu mir* [*Be Night to Me*, 1998] and *Aussenhaut Binnenträume* [*Outer Skin Inner Dreams*, 2002]. In these works, sensuality and eroticism as well as an emotional connection to a lover come into the forefront, aspects also in sharp focus in the volume *Auf den Leib: 66 erotische Miniaturen* [*Onto the Body: 66 Erotic Miniatures*, 2004], fantasies in short prose texts inspired by photographs of the Munich artist James Dummler. Similarly, in *Das Rot lächelt, das Blau schweigt: Geschichten über Bilder* [*Red is Smiling, Blue is Silent: Stories about Pictures*, 2006], SAID has created monologues based on diverse works of art from the twentieth century back to the Renaissance that allow the pictured subjects to speak for themselves.

Perhaps the author's most personal account, the memoir *Landschaften einer fernen Mutter* (2001) [*Landscapes of a Distant Mother*, 2004], poignantly outlines the wrenching reunion with his birth mother in Canada as an adult, many decades after their separation shortly after his birth. Conversely, a more global and socio-political view is afforded in a number of his writings which grapple with his native Iran and the state of Islam in the world and how he, an intellectual living in a western democracy, struggles to come to terms with his origins and upbringing in a Muslim land. Beginning with the radio plays *Ich und der Schah/ Die Beichte des Ayatollah* [*The Shah and I/ The Ayatollah's Confession*, 1987], along with the journals and essays in *Der lange Arm der*

Mullahs: Notizen aus meinem Exil [*The Long Arm of the Mullahs: Notes from My Exil*, 1995] and most recently *Ich und der Islam* [*Islam and I*, 2005], SAID revisits the topos of his work as an exiled writer who consistently chronicles unsettling reports of human rights abuses, and continues to ask vital yet disturbing questions about violence, terror and the lack of basic freedoms in a world embroiled in religio-political conflagrations.

In a letter published in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (25 June 2007), SAID directly addresses fellow exiled writer Salman Rushdie in a gesture of friendship, encouragement, and solidarity for his having to live in protective seclusion:

der anlass für diesen theaterdonner ist diesmal die ritterwürde, die dir von der englischen königin verliehen wurde.
diejenigen, die jetzt von der verletzung ihrer gefühle sprechen, wollen mit mord antworten.
als ob man den gott lieben und zugleich seine geschöpfe töten kann.
diejenigen, die sich durch deine ehrung „provoziert“ fühlen, sprechen gleich im namen von eineinhalb milliarden muslimen. was für eine hybris!
[the occasion for these theatrics this time is the knighthood bestowed on you by the english queen.
those who now speak of having their feelings hurt want to respond with murder.
as if one can love god and at the same time kill his creatures.
those who feel “provoked” by your honor speak at once in the name of one and a half billion muslims.
what hybris!]

SAID's most recent publication, *Psalmen* (2007), with an epilogue by Hans Maier, reveals an in-depth vision of the poet's inner-directed spirituality, to be distinguished from any conventional form of organized religion or religiosity, which the author disavows. One reviewer (Carl Wilhelm Macke in *Titel-Magazin: Literatur und mehr* [www.titel-forum.de]) notes the inherent contradictions in this book: a non-believer has written moving and convincing psalms to a heavenly father in the German language with a voice more adept and authentic than most native speakers could muster.

As a native Iranian living and writing in the heart of Europe, this writer continues to publish substantial works of interest to many readers that transgress boundaries of genre and culture and that speak both to and beyond the circumstances of exile writing. The Persian-German author SAID, with his insight into the state of the world as well as the contradictions and impulses of the human heart, is a beacon in the landscape of German belles-lettres today, a gem of grand proportions awaiting our attention.

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