

THE TORTURE OF MOT
FOR A READING OF KTU 1.6 V 30-35

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1. «... et sur un échafaud qui y sera dressé, tenaillé aux mamelles, bras, cuisses et gras des jambes, sa main droite tenant en icelle le couteau dont il a commis le dit paricide, brûlée de feu de soufre, et sur les endroits où il sera tenaillé, jeté du plomb fondu, de l'huile bouillante, de la poix résine brûlante, de la cire et soufre fondus et ensuite son corps tiré et démembré à quatre chevaux et ses membres et corps consumés au feu, réduits en cendres et ses cendres jetées au vent»¹.

Thus concluded the life of Damiens, a criminal condemned to death on March 2, 1757.

In a not so different manner Mot saw his end at the hands of Anat, as narrated in KTU 1.6 II, 30-37²:

tīḥd (31) *bn ilm mt*
bḥrb (32) *tbq'nn*
bḥtr tdry (33) *nn*
bišt tšrpnn
(34) *brḥm tḥnn*
bšd (35) *tdr'nn*
širh ltkl (36) *šrm*
mnth ltkly (37) *np[ḥm]*

«(Anat) grasped (31) the son of the (?) gods Mot
with a knife (32) she cut him into pieces
with a sieve she sif(33)ted him
and reduced him to charcoal by fire
(34) with the grinding wheel she crushed him
in the open field (35) she spread
his flesh so that it would be eaten (36) by the birds
the pieces of his body so that it be devoured (37) by the birds».

¹ M. Foucault, *Surveiller et punir*, Paris 1975, 1.

² No changes in the reading of this passage in the new edition of the ugaritic literature, M. Dietrich - O. Loretz - J. Sanmartín, *KTU²*, Münster 1995, 26.

Both passages share the cruelty and the refinement of the death penalty by which one was condemned to succumb. Again in the words of Foucault: «La mort est un supplice dans la mesure où elle n'est pas simplement privation du droit de vivre, mais où elle est l'occasion et le terme d'une gradation calculée de souffrance (...) Il y a un code juridique de la douleur; la peine, quand elle est supplicante, ne s'abat pas au hasard ou en bloc sur le corps; elle est calculée selon des règles détaillées»³.

It is obvious that the tale of Mot's death, in the light of these observations, is the description of a terrible and most painful torture. Certainly, if the punishment for being «supplicante» must be «calculée selon règles détaillées», the tortures visited upon Mot's body follow a very precise code. For some time now scholars have unveiled this code by locating in the tale of Mot's torture a reference to an agricultural rite related to the working of grain. This had triggered an attempt to find possible 'archaeological' implications between the god Mot and the world of fertility which are entirely contradictory to this god's underworld character. As a consequence, the fact that the episode first and foremost wishes to recount the total destruction of 'enemy number one', was frequently overlooked; an enemy who must undergo an exemplary punishment since he is guilty of the worst crime: the momentary elimination of the god who orders the cosmos⁴.

I feel entirely in agreement with the observation by N. Wyatt: «...at least indicate (the entirety of the cruelties visited on the body of Mot) that the 'agricultural application' of the rite was not its original sense»⁵.

The narrative strategy of this episode, then, has two expressive levels: on the one hand it is the sample of the suffering undergone by Mot, while on the other, it is the allusion, from a strictly formal point of view, to a precise practice associated with working grain.

2. The narrative effect which such a description of Mot's torture must have produced seems to find confirmation in the repetition of the scene. As is known, Baal will take revenge and vanquish his mortal enemy. In the final encounter between Mot and Baal the underworld god accuses his antagonist of having been the cause of his ills and describes in the first person the series of cruelties he has suffered at the hands of Anat⁶:

³ M. Foucault, *op. cit.*, 43.

⁴ TOu I, 229-33, reviews the problem and criticises, in effect, the question of the underworld god understood as the «esprit du grain». Even though «l'énumération des supplices subis par Mot évoque en effet le traitement du grain», it is right to underline how one recognises in the passage a reference to the scene of the destruction of the golden calf by Moses. The important consideration according to which the end of the scene which provides for exposing the victim's flesh to be eaten by the birds should be connected to a suggestion totally other than «tout contexte de fertilité».

⁵ N. Wyatt, *Atonement Theology in Ugarit and Israel*, UF 8, 1976, 426-27. The author emphasized the affinity between this episode and chapter LXXIII in *Isis and Osiris* by Plutarch.

⁶ The myth of Baal and Mot has been amply studied; I shall here only recall some of the more important general reference works: G. Del Olmo Lete, *MLC*; TOu I; J.C.L. Gibson, *CML*²; O. Kaiser (ed.), *TUAT*; J.C. de Moor, *An Anthology of Religious Texts from Ugarit*, Leiden 1987. In

KTU 1.6 V, 11-19:

yšu (11) *gh wysḥ*
 'lk b'lm (12) *pht qlt*
 'lk *pht* (13) *dry bḥrb*
 'lk (14) *pht šrp bišt*
 (15) 'lk [*pht tḥ*]n *brḥ* (16)m
 [lk (?)] p[*ht*(?)]y/h(?) *bkbrt*
 (17) 'lk *pht*(?)*šḥ*(?)⁷ (18) *bšdm*
 'lk *pht* (19) *dr' bym*

In this monologue Mot reproduces the episode of the suffering cited above; but it is clear that this is not just a duplication.

A comparison of the two texts in fact shows the divergence of Mot's recounting of the torture from Anat's in a series of important details:

MONOLOGUE OF MOT	DESCRIPTION OF THE TORTURE
1) <i>dry bḥrb</i>	<i>bḥrb tbq'nn</i> <i>bḥḥr tdrynn</i>
2) <i>šrp bišt</i>	<i>bišt tšrpnn</i>
3) <i>tḥn brḥm</i>	<i>brḥm tḥnn</i>
4) [?] <i>bkbrt</i>	
5) [?] <i>bšdm</i>	<i>bšd tdr'nn</i>
6) <i>dr' bym</i>	

As one can see, the first function of the monologue corresponds to two different actions in the description, the last two functions of the monologue correspond to a single one of the description, and the fourth function of the monologue is not represented in the description. Only the 2nd and 3rd actions coincide in the two versions of Mot's torture.

These singular divergences have thus led some scholars to intervene in the monologue's text; in particular the contraction of the first two functions of the description *bḥrb tbq'nn // bḥḥr tdrynn*, in the single syntagma of the monologue *dry bḥrb*, has suggested that the scribe had confused the list of brutalities (of the description), in the moment of transcribing it in the god's monologue⁸.

⁷ At this point and in the line preceding the text is irremediably corrupted, according to my reading of the Virolleaud copy. The various integrations that have been proposed do not find adequate justification in the poor reading of the few remaining signs or in the breadth of the lacunae.

⁸ Thus the text of the monologue by Mot should be identical to that of the description. This suggestion which begins with H.L. Ginsberg, *The Rebellion and Death of Ba'1*, Or 5, 1936, 161-96 was accepted by TOu I, 266 and MLC, 231; according to CTA the form *dry* would be a mistake for *bq'*.

In fact, this is a correct observation if we consider that the verb *dry* is used, not by chance in this context, in correlation with the term *htr* (sieve)⁹ to indicate the action of the sieve (a code word relative to the working of grain). It seems strange together with the word *hrb* meaning knife, that is, an instrument for cutting. In Mot's monologue, then, the first two distinct actions must be restored (cut and sift) just as they are found in the scene of the torture done by Anat.

But, as we shall see, if we accept this correction the narrative strategy of Mot's monologue is rendered banal.

3. If Damiens could have recounted the scene of his own torture, very likely he would have done so in a manner quite different from that in the chronicle cited by Foucault; the deformation of the suffering would have conditioned the objective description of the real wounds inflicted.

In Mot's case one may suppose that a similar fact occurred, keeping in mind, as I mentioned at the outset, that in this case the expressive models are based on a language which is highly codified (agricultural rite), and on a monologue in the form of a citation.

Thus we shall see in what this 'monologue in the form of a citation' consists when recited by the victim himself.

The beginning of the monologue, which triggers the rhetorical structure of the passage on the basis of the anaphoric repetition of the expression '*lk pht*: «because of you I have seen ...», underlines the victim's viewpoint: '*lk b'lm pht qlt*: «because of you, o Baal, I have seen humiliation». *Qlt*, «humiliation, destruction», is not one of the many tortures listed in the suffering but the statement of the subjective condition of the tortured.

After the initial exclamation comes the list of the tortures. Besides the energetic effect of the style set off by the anaphoric repetition at the beginning of each syntagma, the words of Mot overturn the descriptive language of the first scene of the suffering. All the verbal forms of this last are transformed into the relative noun forms and the instrumental nouns (*b...*) are placed last; for all:

bišt tšrpnn ----> '*lk pht šrp bišt*

The dramatisation of the torture event, in the words of the victim, reelaborates, beyond the form, also the substance of the punishment endured.

The actions of sifting and cutting are condensed into the single expression *dry bhrb*, but the image of sifting is not lost in the excitement of Mot's lament as it resurfaces in an unexpected manner after the activity of the grindstone and fire: [?] *bkbrt*¹⁰

The unusual pairing of the root *dry* and the term *hrb* seems to be part of this allusive play of meaningful formal ambiguities. In this context the ugaritic root *dry*, it

⁹ J.C. de Moor, SP 210.

¹⁰ Even though in this case it is impossible to reconstruct the exact text, the term *kbtr*, sieve, leaves no doubt as to the general sense of the syntagma.

is true, should have evoked the technical activity of sifting¹¹: however, one must not forget that this root in ugaritic, as in other semitic languages, also has a broader meaning of *throw about, select, separate, divide*¹². The unusual pairing of these two terms, apparently discordant, initiated a series of semantic connotations in the passage (the dismembering in a simultaneous sense of sift and cut) that must have rendered its effect especially strong. Not secondarily comes the biblical comparison with Am. 9, 9:

ka 'āšer yinnōa' bakkōbārāh
 (...)
baḥereb yāmūfū

«as one shakes (the grain) in the sieve
 (...)
 by the sword shall die (the sinners)»

In this passage the theme of divine revenge, meaning the total annihilation of the sinners, is articulated in the parallel images of the sieve (*kōbārāh*) and the sword (*ḥereb*), just as in Mot's monologue.

In an analogous way to the phenomenon of compression of the two distinct actions of cutting and sifting in a single syntagma of the monologue, one must note the development in two members of the motif of the dispersion of the ashes. In the end of the list of the sufferings undergone by Mot, he articulates this as a parallelism:

[?] **bšdm**
dr' bym

while in the description of his suffering the dispersion was contracted into:

bšd tdr'nn

In this case as well the emphasis of Mot's words connects the root *dr'*, to sow, usually associated with the earth as in this description, with the waters of the sea: *bym*. This semantic slippage is suggested by the *earth/desert - sea* parallel which recurs in ugaritic (and biblical) literature¹³.

11 We think of the arabic use of the root *miḡarrat*, an instrument for sifting grain, and the hebrew *mizre'* which has the same meaning.

12 M. Dietrich - O. Loretz, *Ugaritisch dr', drt, dry und hebräisch zrh*, UF 23, 1991, 79-82; M. Dahood, *Some Afel Causative in Ugaritic*, *Bibl* 38, 1957, 67-73; W. Leslau, *Observations on Semitic Cognates in Ugaritic*, *Or* 37, 1968, 352-53; E.H. Merrill, *The Aphel Causative: does it exist in Ugaritic?*, *JNSL* 3, 1974, 44.

13 N. Wyatt, *Sea and Desert: Symbolic Geography in West Semitic Religious Thought*, UF 19, 1987, 375-89, see the bibliography cited.

On the whole it seems clear enough that Mot's monologue reproduces the torture in a way that is somehow 'confused' in contrast to the previous description of the event; and the reason for this would seem to reside in the emphasis given in the victim's own recounting.

Furthermore, we must not forget that the 'agricultural' code language, as we noted previously, is only a form, an aesthetic mean of recounting and rendering a more dramatic event, and that is not necessarily or more than vaguely related to the theme being narrated. Precisely because this code language is used, so to speak, in an inappropriate manner, it *may be no more than an elaborate metaphor*¹⁴, it may be pushed to the limits of its expressive possibilities. Just because *the 'agricultural' application of the rite was not its original sense*, the words of Mot, even though within the expressive code of that rite, must not only describe that rite, but also evoke it by narrating another theme altogether.

For this reason, every correction of presumed errors on the part of the scribe, in my opinion, renders banal a text which was conceived and developed according to the expressive logic which we have just described. Mot's monologue distinguishes itself, in fact, as a typical example of *intertextuality*. The words of the god are quotations, a voluntary nod to the scene which had already narrated his exemplary torture. As a modified quotation, the text is revived in a new and original form¹⁵.

Ugaritic literature should, I think, be reevaluated overall from a point of view which not only underlines its formulaic and oral characteristics but also reveals the more complex aesthetic dynamics of its written character¹⁶.

¹⁴ N. Wyatt, *op. cit.*, 427.

¹⁵ Of works on stylistics of the argument I cite for all, G.B. Conte, *Memoria dei poeti e sistema letterario*, Torino 1985.

¹⁶ Cf. P. Xella, *Tradition orale et rédaction écrite au Proche-Orient ancien: le cas des textes mythologiques d'Ugarit*, in *Phoinikeia Grammata. Lire et écrire en Méditerranée* (= Actes du Colloque de Liège, 15-18 Novembre 1989, ed. C. Baurain - C. Bonnet - V. Krings, Liège-Namur 1991, 69-89; R.E. Whitaker, *A Formulaic Analysis of Ugaritic Poetry*, Harvard 1969; K.T. Aikten, *Oral Formulaic Composition and Theme in the Aqhat Narrative*, UF 21, 1989, 1-16; C.F. Swanepoel, *Orality and Literariness: the Interface of Values*, JNSL 20, 1994, 143-54; F.E. Deist, *Orature, 'Éditure', Literature-Reflections on Orality, Literariness and First Testament Literature*, JNSL 20, 1994, 155-63; P. Fronzaroli, *Impieghi della scrittura a Ebla*, in *Studi linguistici per i 50 anni del circolo linguistico fiorentino*, Firenze 1995, 81-94.