

The Lost Class

It is that class which thinks with its mind and guides others by its thought; that feels with its heart and radiates around it the tenderness of feeling; that refines life with its taste, making it delightful and pure, and awakens in people a passion for truth, goodness, and beauty.

It is the class of writers and scholars — those who use their tongues and pens as means of communicating with others, teaching them what they do not know, opening their eyes to what they have not seen, letting them taste what they have not tasted, and making them love what would never have crossed their minds.

It is this class that makes human beings truly human — opening before them horizons, extending to them the means by which they may feel they were created to rule, not to be ruled; to be honored, not humiliated; to be ennobled, not debased; to move across the earth with knowledge of it and mastery over its paths, drawing benefit from what God has placed in it for the good of mankind; to face life's circumstances with knowledge of their realities, understanding of their subtleties, and power to solve their problems, ease their difficulties, and overcome the calamities and obstacles that arise within them.

And yet this class is lost — neglected and ignored, denied even its simplest and most vital right: the law of authors' rights.

I do not write this as a complaint against anyone, nor as a plea to anyone — for I have never wished to complain of people or to them. I write to awaken the scholars and men of letters to the place they occupy, hoping that they will put themselves where they deserve to be, or at least where others have put them. They hover between these two stations, unable to find a third in which to take refuge.

They must choose: either to remain as they are now — neglected, disregarded, no one caring for them or showing them respect — or to take their affairs in hand, unite their voices, and remind society of their worth so that their rights may be safeguarded as the rights of others are safeguarded. No decisions should be made in their affairs while they are absent, nor even when they are present, without first asking for their views and desires — as in the poet's words:

“The matter is decided while Sa'd is away,
And they do not ask his counsel even when he is present.”

Much has been said about the Authors' Rights Law. It was first proposed long ago — perhaps by one of the men of letters who paved its way to Parliament in earlier times. Then it was revived in the new era after having sunk into sleep; then it was said to have gathered momentum and risen to the Council of Ministers, nearly becoming a living law with force and authority. Later it was said to have cooled again and returned to study and revision.

Writers have spoken about it — from afar, from very far indeed — for no one has asked their opinion or sought their counsel. Lately it has been said that the law has revived once more and is again on its way to the Council of Ministers — I know not whether for the second or the third time. All this while the men of letters are neither asked nor consulted.

They have not gone to the government of their own accord, for they are unaccustomed to such an initiative; nor has the government summoned them, for it too is unaccustomed to calling them or seeking their advice. And even if it had wished to, it would not have known whom to ask — for,

thank God, writers and scholars are many, but their temperaments are diverse (and rightly so), their schools of thought are far apart (as they should be), yet their organization is scattered — and that is what should not be.

In our modern life, individuals cannot prosper unless they gather together; persons cannot find their way unless they are bound by structure and order.

So the government has consulted the jurists first — as is only natural — and then the musicians and singers, who have either approached the government themselves or have been approached by it, for they are stronger than writers and scholars, and more capable of making their voices heard and their interests respected.

God forbid that I should resent this or doubt its justice! Musicians and singers have rights that must be defended, and the state is obliged to protect them with all its power and authority.

What I reproach, however, is not the government — but the writers and scholars themselves, for they have neglected their own cause, and thus the world has neglected them.

They have been absorbed in literature and science, forgetting to defend literature and science. The government protects them as it protects the rest of the populace, without their advice and without their participation — and they are content with that, at peace with it.

No one among them has gone to the authorities to present their view of this law — though they know parts of it, accept some, and reject some. The government has not called any of them, because it does not know whom to call. If the law is enacted and contains provisions they disapprove of, they will have no one to blame but themselves.

They have never gathered to discuss it, nor has any of them taken the time to study it seriously, as if it did not concern them or touch their rights or those of their dependents.

Some of its issues have been raised in the press, and a few have written about it here and there — as they always do — but not one has approached it as a matter that affects their immediate livelihood and the future of their work.

Perhaps many of them do not care, do not see its importance, do not realize that it concerns them or protects their works from exploitation and loss.

They are still, or most of them still are, like the writers of old — thinking of literature as mere words to be said; satisfied that their names be attached to those words; content, if anyone steals from them, to protest merely with other words, as poets once did when accusing each other of theft.

Our writers and scholars are so absorbed in their craft that they forget their rights. Some might even wonder why the government should concern itself with such matters. “Did not writers always defend literature themselves?” they may say. “Why should the government intervene in what does not concern it? Literature is words — and words defend themselves with words, if ever they need defending.”

As for the notion that these words possess value recognized by law — rights and property that must be protected — this is something new, something that has never crossed their minds.

They believe — as they so often believe — that neglecting such “trivialities” is a mark of nobility, a sign that the true writer rises above worldly concerns and short-term gains.

The writer, they think, is an artist — and art is beauty that must preoccupy its creator with itself alone, as though music were not art, as though singing were not art — as though these were mere trades pursued for profit rather than for beauty itself.

Such is the thinking of many of our men of letters and learning: they live in the ancient world, scarcely aware that the world around them has changed — that even the life of the writer himself has changed profoundly.

In both East and West today, writers and scholars belong to associations — some devoted to advancing knowledge and literature, publishing and sharing it, and strengthening bonds among thinkers across distant lands; others dedicated to protecting learning and art from theft, distortion, and the meddling of the unqualified.

The life of the writer in the East, too, has changed. There are no longer those nobles and magnates who once patronized literature and science out of love, vanity, or pride. Writers and scholars are now left to themselves — each must earn his living by toil, and still find time to create.

Literature, like science, is no longer produced for the author’s own delight or his immediate circle, but for humanity as a whole. Yet it remains the writer’s duty not to debase his calling by turning it into a mere means of gain. He must create for the sake of beauty first — but he must also defend his right to benefit lawfully from what his work may yield.

Many writers see their work quickly translated into other languages, broadcast, printed, or adapted for the screen — all governed by that economic law of supply and demand. From this arise benefits that must be protected and rights that must be secured.

There is no way to protect these rights, in the writer’s own land or abroad, except through law — and by protecting the rights of others abroad, we ensure the protection of our own.

All this has long been self-evident in foreign lands — since the late eighteenth century — but our writers and scholars either do not know it, or knowing it, do not care.

Then they complain when publishers, broadcasters, or filmmakers exploit them. They lament when poverty presses upon them, when the struggle for livelihood stifles their creative work. They blame time itself — as writers have always blamed time — calling their vocation one of misfortune and hardship. Then they blame the government for neglecting them, failing to shield them from life’s blows.

But they would do better to blame themselves. For it is their duty to honor their own calling, that others may honor it; to care for it, that others may care. If they defend their rights and preserve their dignity, the state will be bound to defend them and ensure their welfare.

Let them therefore cease complaining of time. Let their complaints, if they must complain, become an art like any other — a source of beauty, not of bitterness. For time does not heed their protest, but their protest may still move hearts and awaken taste.

And long ago it was said: *“Help yourself, and Heaven will help you.”*

So let the writers take their fate in hand, unite their word, and establish among them one who speaks in their name, defends their rights, and shields them from being that *lost class* of whom the ancient poet said:

“I have become like a lamp that burns itself away
To give light to others.”

Ṭāhā Ḥusayn
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