

On Taste

al-Musawwar, 25 April 1947

It is said that taste is the very essence of refined civilization, and, for this reason, that it arises, strengthens, and spreads wherever civilization is given room to rise, to flourish, and to extend its own dominion over people's hearts. It is said, for this same reason, that taste is found more in cities than in villages, more in capitals than in provincial towns, more in palaces than in ordinary houses, and more in houses than in huts.

So it is said, and a great deal more besides is said about taste: taste shows itself in literature and art, taste shows itself in everyday social life; taste is a quality belonging to the refined, distinguished individual, a quality belonging to the cultured, well-mannered community, a quality belonging to the people whose own share of civilization, and whose own immersion in it, has grown great... And it appears the Egyptians preceded other peoples toward civilization and its varieties of refinement, so that their own share of taste was great, and their own portion of it abundant... An Egyptian, praising another Egyptian, calls him "a man of taste"; an Egyptian, praising another Egyptian, calls him — in either the construct form or as a simple description — "a man of taste." An Egyptian, faulting another Egyptian, calls him "lacking in taste," or "devoid of taste" altogether; and a man from Cairo, when his companion does, or is about to do, something unseemly, tells him: "Find your taste!" — meaning: cultivate taste in yourself, and avoid whatever might diminish your own taste, or your own distinction within that refined, cultivated civilization that allows people to keep company with one another, and to find, in that company, comfort, pleasure, and real delight.

Certain dictionaries define taste as a natural faculty preceding thought itself, one that helps distinguish good from bad, beautiful from ugly, and what is fitting from what is not.

This dictionary tells us every human being possesses some share of this taste, though that share grows stronger or weaker according to the culture, civilization, and refinement present in that person's own mind, heart, and conscience... It is likewise said that taste changes along with whatever development befalls civilization itself, growing corrupt after having been sound, growing ugly after having been beautiful — its own corruption and ugliness spreading in exact proportion to whatever weakness and decline befalls civilization itself.

Taste is corrupted most of all when some violent, sudden disruption befalls a settled, secure civilization — one long established, familiar to people's own hearts, and passed down through the generations — a disruption that first alters people's own conduct in their material lives, and only afterward, in their intellectual lives as well.

The refined Cairene, at the beginning of this century, had inherited from his own family a whole array of manners and customs shaping his conduct toward himself, toward his own family, and toward other people. He appeared before his own family only in a particular, informal style of dress; he spoke to them only in carefully chosen, refined language. He appeared before others only in an elegant, moderate style of dress, whose smallest details he had matched together with the most scrupulous harmony and consistency; he spoke to others only in sweet, gentle language, in a measured voice — never so loud as to offend the ear, never so soft as to trouble the listener.

He was gentle, refined, elegant in his own gestures and movements, and whenever he left his home for his work, or to visit a friend, he took that same refined carriage of his, drawn by a refined horse, and driven by an elegant coachman.

Then, as the century advanced somewhat, the world changed, and Western civilization began its own assault — an assault growing more violent by the day, reaching its very furthest extreme after the First World War... The refined among the Egyptians began abandoning their own old, elegant refinement, the one they had once known and grown familiar with, and had learned to perfect and adorn, in favour of a new Western refinement they neither knew nor had ever grown familiar with, and were never given the chance to master with real skill — they simply took it exactly as it was, and threw themselves into it without any reserve whatsoever, becoming, thereby, "modern."

Their own conception of life changed along with the change in the tools and instruments surrounding them; their own judgments on things grew confused, their own assessment of circumstances grew poor, and their own taste changed, little by little.

Say the same of intellectual life: Egyptians, up until the beginning of this century, leaned toward conservatism in their own culture, nourishing their minds on the Arabic heritage far more than on any foreign heritage. Then foreign culture launched its own assault, no less violent than the assault of foreign civilization itself; minds grew disturbed by its

onslaught, matters grew confused, manners were affected by it, taste was changed by it, and there arose that tremendous battle between the old literature and the new.

Then came the Second World War, bringing with it a fierce, materialistic civilization of its own; it had scarcely ended before everything in Egyptian life — material, intellectual, and moral alike — had been thrown into disorder, and the disruption of taste, after all of this, and under the influence of all of this, became simply unavoidable, with no way of warding it off at all.

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of this assault that transformed Egyptian civilization, and so violently and gravely transformed Egyptian taste along with it, is that it was shaped far more by the American element than by any European one. We had, after all, kept company with European civilization since the beginning of the last century — indeed, since the middle of the eighteenth century — and were shaped by that company; our own manners, tastes, and lives changed considerably under its influence. But that change proceeded with a moderation that never did us real violence, never threw us so far off our own balance, as this sudden change between the two wars did, and especially since this Second War broke out, and most especially since it came to an end.

All of this, I believe, has but a single source: the assault of materialistic American civilization, and that easy, undemanding American culture that cares nothing for depth, nor scrutiny, nor patience, but prefers, instead, speed, fleeting knowledge, and hasty familiarity. One might well say we owe to it this violent moral disruption the rising generation now delights in, and the passing generation now suffers under, one that exposes Egypt herself to real and grave danger.

So if you see the value of things changing to the degree we now witness; if you see young people caring for nothing, hesitating over nothing, holding themselves back from nothing, in word or in deed; if you see the newspapers wading into subjects they were never accustomed to wade into before, in a manner utterly at odds with everything we once knew of gentle manners, easy temperament, purity of heart, and delicacy of taste — then attribute all of this, without hesitation or timidity, to this sudden civilization America has beguiled us with, one whose influence has reached deep into our own material, economic, and literary lives, even as people rush headlong toward it, without ever quite realizing they are doing so.

You might well ask what has led me to speak to you of taste — of its meaning, its own development, and its own corruption. Ask yourself, then, about what you read, and about what you see — and you will find, within yourself, and within the hearts of others too, the answer to that very question.