

# Innovation and Imitation in Literature

*al-Jadid, 1 December 1930*

The Arabs were unanimous in placing Imru' al-Qays, al-Nabigha, al-A'sha, and Zuhayr foremost among the pre-Islamic poets, and unanimous in placing al-Farazdaq, Jarir, and al-Akhtal foremost among the poets of Islam; they then came to place Bashshar and Abu Nuwas foremost, then al-Buhturi and Abu Tammam, then al-Mutanabbi and Abu'l-'Ala'. There is no doubt that every one of these was a fine poet, greatly gifted, who delighted his own contemporaries — many of them still delight the wider public today, and a few now appeal to specialists alone. But there is equally no doubt that all of these poets, save Abu'l-'Ala', had a genius that scarcely extended beyond their own persons, and a shadow that scarcely reached beyond them: they were skilled, they were delightful, but they never managed to inspire others, or stir poetry itself to life in anyone else's soul. All they ever managed was to delight whoever heard or read them, and to captivate this or that reader with a single line worth imitating, or a style worth echoing.

But as for any of them producing that fertile spark a reader or listener could go on to exploit and build upon, this is something we can scarcely find among them at all — not a little of it, and not a great deal either.

You might search for Imru' al-Qays's influence — or any other poet's — on his contemporaries or on the poets who came after him, and you would find yourself forced to record only this: that Imru' al-Qays was the first to stop at the abandoned campsite and weep, and call others to weep with him; the first to capture wild game in verse, and compare horses to eagles — and that later poets simply followed his lead, stopping at abandoned campsites, weeping and calling others to weep, capturing wild game in verse, and comparing horses to eagles in turn. That al-Nabigha composed a fine apology-poem, and those who apologized after him followed his model; that al-A'sha excelled at describing wine, and Zuhayr excelled at praise-poetry — and so on with the other poets.

And we ourselves now mock anyone who still follows Imru' al-Qays in these very themes, still treads his same path toward these same ends. Indeed, Abu Nuwas himself, eleven centuries ago, mocked those

conservative poets who openly imitated Imru' al-Qays and followed his method — and yet I do not think we are now any more satisfied with Abu Nuwas, innovator though he was, than we are with the poets who came before him.

If we wish to form our own judgment of him and his fellow poets, it is simply this: they were fine poets for the ages in which they lived, and we love their poetry because it happens to suit our own souls, and suit the age we ourselves now live in.

The whole dispute between new and old, in these present days, has no source but this: one group refuses to take this Arabic literature as its highest ideal, in its themes and meanings, its diction and styles; another group refuses to let the ties between themselves and that literature be severed at all, and so echo and imitate it, sometimes to excess, sometimes with moderation. But there exist other literatures, other poetries, that differ from ours most sharply in exactly this respect. They delighted and impressed their own ages, most intensely, and those ages then passed, giving way to other, quite different, ages — and yet these literatures remained a source of wonder and admiration, bequeathing to the ages that followed themes, subjects, and forms these later ages themselves took up and treated with real excellence, achieving the very greatest share of mastery in them. Those ancient literatures remain alive, even though their languages have died; remain fruitful, even though the ages that produced them lie far behind us. Time passes, and passing only lends them fresh youth; circumstances shift and diverge, and this divergence only lends them further freshness and beauty. They breathe life into souls, stir vigor in minds, instill strength in feeling, and create writers who would never have existed at all, had their undying legacy not reached them. The language of those literatures has died, and the ages that produced them have passed — and yet people still live on them, live by them, and find in them a source of work, movement, life, and creation.

I write this having just finished reading a modern play performed in Paris over the past year, titled *Amphitryon* 38.

The meaning of this title is that the subject of this play has so occupied poets and dramatists that they have produced thirty-eight versions of it, from the Greek age down to the present, and every one of these plays, all treating one and the same unchanging subject, has delighted whoever watched or heard it — no one has ever refused to see the third, or fourth, or fifth version, after already having seen or read the

ones before it. And I can assure you that those who watched this thirty-eighth version were delighted by it beyond measure, some of them having already read the versions that preceded it, without any of it wearying them, or leaving the slightest room for boredom. And who knows — perhaps another writer will yet produce a thirty-ninth version, or complete a fortieth, and find the same eagerness in people, and the same enthusiasm in the audience and spectators.

I say this, too, having just finished reading another play performed in Paris this year, titled *The English Teacher* — a play original in its subject and its style, and yet its author has invented nothing at all; he shows us only that he has read Shakespeare, absorbed him, and made excellent use of him. He depicts a complicated, doubled love affair taking place in the present day, but borrows all his imagery from Shakespeare's own drama, contributing nothing of his own beyond the modern staging itself. As for the characters' own inner thoughts, and the motives driving them to act, and the ideas stirring their varied emotions, driving them to hope at one moment and despair at another, complicating their lives here and easing them there — all of it is taken straight from Shakespeare's own plays.

Do you see the difference between those poets I have named for you above, and the poet who first invented the subject of the first play, or Shakespeare, who inspired the author of the second play? The former merely delight; the latter delight and inspire forever. I do not mean to praise or blame, nor do I mean to approve or object; I mean only to use this matter as a way into a question writers themselves disagree on, without ever managing to reach any settled consensus: the boundary between the innovator and the mere developer among writers. There is no doubt that whoever first originated the subject treated in these more than thirty plays was a genuine innovator, unprecedented in his subject — his is the first credit for its invention, and his the powerful personality capable of inspiring thirty-seven poets and writers after him. And there is no doubt that Shakespeare was an innovator too, with the first credit for these dramatic works and the powerful, undying images they contain — images that enabled our modern author to fashion this latest play of his. And there is no doubt, too, that the writers and poets who composed their plays on that first subject, and the writer who composed this latest play, are all dependents of that Greek poet, and of Shakespeare. Are we, then, to regard them all as mere imitators, lacking any personality of their own, any real force or skill? If that were so, how did they win the admiration of

those who read them, or watched their plays performed on the stage? Where did they find this share of excellence that secured them such admiration? And if that is not so, then what is the boundary between the innovator and the imitator? And what share do these writers and poets have of that artistic personality that secures them excellence, without ever raising them to the rank of the first, original innovator?

Our own ancient critics, for their part, never dwelt long on a question like this, because our own ancient literature never gave them the occasion to dwell on it. What they encountered instead was one poet taking a single motif, or a single expression, from another, or imitating him in a particular style; they saw poets hurling accusations of plagiarism at one another, and trading charges of imitation back and forth — and so they laboured to distinguish plagiarism from legitimate borrowing, and to distinguish between the poet who takes a motif and develops it until it becomes genuinely his own, the poet who takes it and adds nothing to it at all, and the poet who takes it only to spoil it, through omission or distortion.

And since this phenomenon occurred, in Arabic literature, only in a single line or a handful of lines here and there, it is hardly surprising that it received only limited attention from our critics, and only a slight, modest share of study and detail.

Matters stand quite differently in foreign literatures, where the bonds between earlier, later, and contemporary writers have always been closer and far more intricate than the bonds among our own men of letters, across their various ages.

Writers grew numerous, while subjects remained few, and so writers converged on them again and again, deliberately and insistently, taking no precautions and making no attempt to conceal it. The dramatic poets of Greece drew deliberately on the subjects of epic poetry to compose their own dramatic works, and the lyric poets of Greece did the very same — none of them minded drawing on some episode of the Iliad to compose a magnificent, splendid ode of his own. Then came the dramatic and lyric poets of Greece, who drew on the whole Greek heritage and made it the subject of their song and their drama; then came the modern poets and modern writers, who drew on this Greek-Roman heritage in turn, developed it, and developed it superbly, and continue to do so to this day, and will go on doing so tomorrow and the day after. Each and every one of them had his own share of excellence — indeed, of superiority, indeed,

of genius. You see, then, that none of them invented their own subjects, and that this never once stood between them and superiority, or genius.

And who could possibly deny genius to Racine, Corneille, Molière, Victor Hugo, or Goethe — all of whom developed Greek literature, taking up subjects the Greeks themselves had already taken up before them, and excelling at them, drawing out their own full share of excellence from them?

The solution to this question is simple enough: it is simply not true that an innovator ceases to be an innovator unless he invents his subject entirely from nothing, conjuring it into being where it did not exist before. The innovator is, certainly, whoever invents a subject — but the innovator is equally whoever takes up what someone before him had already originated, renews it, and pours into it, from his own powerful personality, enough to breathe life, vigor, and youth back into it. And if you wish to trace the sources of excellence in these modern masterpieces of expression that take up subjects the ancients had already treated with excellence, you will find you cannot trace these sources to the subjects alone, nor to the personalities of the writers and poets alone — they are sources shared jointly between the two. The subjects themselves are inherently fertile and alive, capable of enduring, renewing themselves, and taking on fresh vigor; and the poets and writers themselves are strong and skilled, possessed of a talent capable of rousing this latent life, this hidden vigor, back into being.

The Athenians would listen to the *Iliad*, and be moved by all its beauty and grandeur; then they would watch a dramatic play treating that very same subject, and be moved by all its grace and charm; then they would watch another play treating that very same subject a second time, and be captivated by all its subtlety and insight; then they would watch yet another play treating the subject a third time, and be enthralled by all its reflection and its exploration of the secrets and subtleties of the human soul.

One and the same subject can, then, stir admiration in the soul from a variety of different angles, arousing quite different emotions within it — driving it toward contentment and pleasure at one moment, toward indignation and pain at another, toward calm and peace at yet another. And if eloquence, as our ancient critics put it, is simply the capacity to depict one and the same meaning in different forms, it is hardly surprising that writers and poets succeed in winning the admiration and

approval of the masses when they present them with one and the same subject in different forms, each bearing its own share of power, and its own visible imprint of the writer's or poet's own personality. There is, however, one kind of development that does no good at all, and offers nothing of value — indeed, it is pure harm, pure lifelessness: the development practised by those whom nature never endowed with any real share of expressive power for what they have taken up. These are the true imitators, who spoil whatever they take up, because they are incapable of breathing any life or vigor into it — they merely exhaust whatever life or vigor it already possessed.