

On Literary Taste

al-Jumhuriya, 3 April 1957

I found myself asking, a fortnight ago, about the literary taste Egyptians came to know in the first half of this century: is it headed toward survival, or toward extinction?

That question was not without its own answer: everything suggests it is heading toward a grave transformation, one closer to extinction than to survival — though optimism still tempts us toward hope... Egypt is not yet entirely without a small minority who still favour that same literary taste, still call for it, and would gladly see it spread among readers, writers, and poets alike.

One fact must be set down, a fact I do not believe anyone would dispute: modern Egyptian poetry has developed far less, and moved far more slowly, than prose. People no longer turn to poetry to express whatever troubles them in their own daily lives; they do not write poetry for the newspapers, nor write in verse whatever they wish to set down when composing books — they turn, instead, to prose, in this age just as in every age, as civilization has advanced to serve their own various purposes. Poets still entertain themselves, and entertain their readers, with the occasional ode, collection, or verse drama, whenever the occasion presents itself, and the impulse moves them, and their own hearts and natures — whose own share of fertility and capacity for real accomplishment and skill varies considerably — feel the call toward it.

This is why contemporary poetry has held on to the same standards our poets grew accustomed to at the beginning of this century, scarcely departing from them at all. There have been experiments in poetic renewal — in metre and rhyme, in subject matter and style — but they have never really moved beyond the stage of experiment and attempt. Most of those who compose poetry never took them up; most of those who read poetry never took to them; and their own practitioners never carried them further, finding no encouragement to do so.

For this reason, contemporary Egyptian poetry has remained, on the whole, exactly as we knew it in the days of our most distinguished poets, scarcely advancing a single step, and has been touched by a certain stagnation and sterility — since the world changed around it, and it proved unable either to keep pace with that change, or to respond to it.

Accomplishment

And even when real accomplishment is granted to one of our contemporary poets, he rarely adds anything of real consequence to what we have already inherited from our own ancient and modern poets alike. Prose is a very different matter: it has kept pace with life, been shaped by whatever development has overtaken it, and shaped, too, by whatever shortcomings have befallen it — and it may well be that it has gone too far in its own development, shaped more by the causes of weakness and decline than by the causes of strength and flourishing.

We must also observe that those who developed literary taste in the first half of this century were not, as many people imagine today, dwelling in ivory towers, cut off from ordinary popular life, remote in any way from people's own pain and hope, neglecting their own capacity and power. They lived, rather, with the people — indeed, lived by the people, and for the people. They lived for the people because they gave voice to the people's own inner selves, depicting the people's own hopes so they might cherish them and strive to realize them, opening new horizons of hope before them so they might hasten toward them and press onward, depicting the people's own pain so they might be freed of it and set down its own burdens... The simplest reading of what they wrote makes this plain, without any ambiguity whatsoever. They were the ones who depicted independence for the people, and made it beautiful in their hearts; they were the ones who made the occupation hateful to the people, and roused them against the English. They were the ones who made tyranny hateful to the people, gave them a taste for freedom, and enticed them to insist on demanding it; they were the ones who prepared the people for revolution, and turned them against the wretched life they were living, readying their conscience to hasten toward good whenever called to it, turn away from evil whenever warned against it, and welcome reform whenever it was offered to them. And they resisted tyranny, meeting, in that resistance, every variety of harm and every kind of hardship.

The Crooked Rulers

And they set right the crooked among the rulers, working hard to turn the people away from them, and disillusion them of them. They did all of this, and the people accepted what they did, responding to their call whenever they called, and listening to them whenever they spoke. The clearest proof of this is that people read them when they wrote, and

listened to them when they lectured or spoke. And for all they did, and for how well they did it, they preserved Arabic literature's own splendour and freshness, revived the Arabic language after something resembling death had overtaken it, established their own homeland's identity among the nations of the modern world, and established their own personal identity among writers being read across the far corners of the earth. They wrote for their own countrymen a pure, elevated literature, exactly as they wrote for them, across the various branches of learning, whatever nourished their hearts and minds, refined their character and taste, and made them love truth, goodness, and beauty.

Education

They deserved to achieve far more than they did achieve, and to grant young people far more than they managed to grant them, had circumstances only favoured them, and had public education only responded to their own efforts. But circumstances did not favour them, and public education did not respond to them. Readers must recall that political freedom had scarcely been granted to Egypt and her own children before it suffered a grave setback, well before reaching even its own tenth year. Consider the various phases Egyptian political life passed through, phases filled with denial, injustice, wanton disregard, the squandering of rights, and the confiscation of opinion. Consider those cabinets that grew intolerant of freedom, cracked down on the free, worked hard to corrupt the conscience, unleashed cruelty upon writers, orators, and university professors alike, established in Egypt a government founded on brute force, sent some writers to prison, and stripped others of their own livelihood. All of this evil formed a grave obstacle in the path of modern Egyptian literature throughout the second quarter of this century. What is remarkable is that the writers of that period managed to overcome these circumstances, and work their way through whatever difficulties were placed before them. Their own pens were cut off from freedom in the newspapers, so they turned instead to writing books, enjoying, in composing them, complete freedom — since the ministers and their own agents never read books, and had no time to spare for them! And so those dark days became, paradoxically, fertile days for genuinely elevated literary composition and authorship. Some writers resorted to symbolism in certain pieces they wrote for the newspapers, and in certain books they composed, outmaneuvering politics itself, and telling the tyrants exactly what they wished to tell them. Then there is the martial law that has continued, without

interruption, from the declaration of the Second World War right up to the present, lifted, across these long years, only for brief intervals; and the countless events that arose, distracting people, or very nearly distracting them, at various times, from any leisure for writing or reading. And if you add to all of this that public education never responded to the needs of literary renaissance, its own circumstances demanding it advance only with extreme slowness, its own circumstances demanding, too, that those managing its affairs give real, serious weight to the excessively conservative, the excessively rigid, and those hostile to any development or renewal whatsoever — then it is no wonder the Arabic language, and its own sciences and literatures, continued to be taught to students in public schools throughout this century exactly as they had been taught to students more than a thousand years before.

The Students

Students went on listening to their own teachers' lessons without ever truly grasping or savouring them, without their own hearts ever warming to them, or their own minds ever digesting them; they saw themselves as simply conscripted into these lessons, saw attending to them as a burden, and applying themselves to them as hardship — and then left school unable to properly command their own tongue when speaking, or properly express their own selves when writing, having never learned the true, elegant means of correct expression, in either writing or speech. After all of this, is it any wonder that young people fall short in reading elevated literature, or developing any real taste for it, let alone attempting to compose it, or take part in it themselves?

The Press

Meanwhile, the press underwent a significant transformation of its own, turning away, or very nearly turning away, from literature, after once loving it, delighting in it, competing to publish it, and encouraging writers to dispute over its own problems... It turned away from literature and turned instead toward news, advertisement, and light, brief pieces requiring no thought, no real appreciation, no effort of any kind whatsoever to read and understand. Nor did matters stop there: papers grew infatuated with photographs, and weekly papers multiplied, written for people in the very language they speak, offering them ever more enticements to read them, and ever more inducements to seek them out and compete to buy them. Add to this the seductions of cinema, and the great deal of empty talk radio pours into people's ears, hour after hour of

the day, and many hours of the night too, and you will not deny what has appeared in literary taste — symptoms of a change leaning toward weakness and dissolution, since it has preferred the easy to the difficult, preferred whatever reading merely helps pass the time, and turned away from reading that demands real effort of reflection and thought, that requires patience and unhurried attention, and cannot abide speed or haste. Serious daily papers have turned away from literature entirely, preferring whatever is easiest to write, to be read in the shortest time and with the least effort... and weekly papers rise with the sun each day upon their own readers, speaking to them in the language of the street, publishing enticing photographs for them, and entertaining them with jokes bearing no relation whatsoever to the beauty genuine taste would favour. It is no wonder, after all of this, that young people should prefer what lies close to them over what lies distant from them, nor any wonder that every reader should imagine himself capable of writing the same easy, accessible words he reads morning and evening, going and coming.

Young People

And now every young person is a writer; anyone capable of running a pen across paper regards himself a genuine author. Should the papers publish what he writes, he becomes the man of letters whose name spreads far and wide, read by countless thousands. Should the papers fail to publish what he writes, he becomes the obscure, wronged writer, denied his own rightful due, his own literature disregarded — and it is not the papers alone who have wronged him, but the readers too, since his own writing was never made available to them. He has every right to be indignant at everyone; the wronged always have the right to be indignant at those who wronged them. And the people most deserving of his indignation are precisely those the papers do publish — writers he regards as less skilled than himself, who have nonetheless secured a fame he feels they had no business securing. Indignation breeds envy, and our obscure, wronged writer becomes an envious rival of every writer who manages to occupy the front page of some daily or weekly paper.

The Same Language

And if the papers are proving so popular, and people are taking to reading them to this degree, what is to prevent books from being written in the very same language the papers are written in? What is to prevent these books, too, from being broadcast among people, and published on a

regular schedule, exactly as newspapers and magazines are? What is to prevent people from reading them eagerly, willingly, using them to pass the time and bear the burdens of life, distracting themselves with them from whatever events confront them, and whatever they dislike befalls them? And so taste grows vulgarized, literature grows vulgarized along with it, and language itself falls, overtaken by corruption. And to what end, then, is all this great effort our accomplished writers still bear? To what end, this reading of words a writer struggles to write, a reader struggles to read, and vulgarized taste struggles to digest — when the vulgarization of taste, of literature, and of language alike changes nothing whatsoever about life itself? The sun still rises and sets; night and day still alternate; events still unfold within them exactly as they always have; people still find happiness and misery, grief and despair, exactly as they always did, back when taste was refined, literature elevated, and language pure and free of corruption. Nor does the matter end there — it grows more complicated still, little by little, since certain foreign schools of thought arrive and reach Egypt, and certain young writers find in them something suited to their own weakness in language, their own deficiency in literature, and their own preference for ease. They come to favour them first, grow devoted to them second, and turn fanatically partisan for them in the end, wanting them to dominate literary and artistic production, and criticism, altogether.

Schools of Thought

But the subject of these foreign literary schools, and the eagerness of a certain group among our own young people to adopt them, clinging to them even after their own originators had grown weary of them — the whole subject would take us too far. Let us postpone it, then, until next week, God willing.