

Another Verse

Mesamarat al-Gayb, 18 January 1948

Here is another verse memorized by generation after generation of schoolchildren — one they can never escape, nor find any way of avoiding having to memorize — and one they therefore forget, or try to forget, as they grow a little older, since it reminds them of school, drags them back to grammar lessons, and conjures up before them various images of teachers, some in turbans, some in tarbooshes, some in tight clothes, some in loose ones, some speaking in the affected, pedantic manner of the overly refined, others in the stiff, rigid manner of the overly conservative — teachers who parsed, and taught their own students how to parse, the poet's own line:

*Would that youth might return, one day, that I might tell it what old age
has done.*

I do not believe there is a single literate Egyptian, one who ever passed through a government or private primary school, who could claim never to have encountered this verse in the course of his own studies, never to have struggled with memorizing it, reciting it, and parsing it — for it belongs to the standard grammar verses teachers recite to their students as a model and proof text, illustrating that the present-tense verb takes the subjunctive when joined to the "fa" of causation following one of the particles of wishing or hoping. In our own boyhood, we struggled with this verse, and others like it, whenever our teachers claimed that an implied "an" lay hidden between the verb and the "fa," one that could never openly appear. Some of us asked ourselves: what exactly prevents it from appearing? Others among us pursued this business of implication and concealment down various paths, seeking out all manner of different explanations for it — but none of us, in any case, ever really understood it. And yet the verse itself still pleased and satisfied us, for it lay close to our own understanding, easy on our own taste; we found neither hardship nor effort in either its words or its meaning, memorized it without difficulty, recited it without any real strain, and understood it without any real trouble — even as we remained utterly unable to grasp what our teachers kept telling us about this hidden "an," concealed between the "fa" and the verb, so intent, or so incapable, of ever coming into view.

Nor do I believe any educated person who once passed through primary school could recall this verse without a faint, fleeting smile crossing his own lips — remembering, as he does, the teachers' own struggle to explain it, the students' own struggle to understand it, and the shared misery of both sides over this hidden, concealed particle, hidden and concealed for no real reason at all.

Many people, as they grow older, and find the life of middle and old age genuinely difficult, and are overtaken by that physical and mental weakness standing between them and youth's own hopes and pleasures, retain of those hopes and pleasures nothing but a variety of memories — sorrowful ones, stirring in their hearts a real anguish over what has passed, a real despair over what is still to come, and a real regret that they can no longer turn to face what they have already left behind them, nor resume whatever hopes and pleasures have already slipped away, with no path left to recover them.

They speak of how they once acquitted themselves in this or that moment of joy, mirth, and vigour, incapable now of ever acquitting themselves so again, of standing in such a moment again, of toying with any hope, or savouring any pleasure, or attempting any real vigour — held back by age itself, restrained by weakness from all of it — and so they can do nothing but remember, and reflect, and grieve for themselves, saying, in that same wretched, despairing tone:

*Would that youth might return, one day, that I might tell it what old age
has done!*

And they remain certain, in a grief bordering on despair, or a despair bordering on grief, that youth will never return, not on any day to come, and that they will never manage to tell it, in the smallest or greatest measure, what old age has done to them. How often they would wish youth, or boyhood, might return to them — to find themselves seated once more in their own primary or secondary school classrooms, attending closely to their teacher, or perhaps ignoring him, as he explains to them the meaning of wishing and hoping, explains the causal "fa" and the conjunctive "wa," and points out to them the place of this same hidden, concealed "an" — one that neither can, nor ought to, ever appear, whether in verse or in prose, since grammar has condemned it to conceal itself in the deepest modesty, its own existence merely assumed, or taken as certain, without the eye ever seeing it when reading, without the ear ever sensing it when listening, without the tongue ever pronouncing it when reciting aloud. It has been condemned to be present while absent,

and absent while present — more concealed, more modest still, than Bashar's own beloved, of whom he wrote:

*She turned one cheek away, then showed the other, then withdrew again,
like a retreating breath.*

But I recall this verse, and remind of it those who once memorized it, then forgot it, and would wish to return to it, or have it return to them, for a meaning that never once occurred to its own author when he composed it, never occurred to any of its readers or reciters when they recited it, never occurred to the teacher explaining it, nor to the student struggling to interpret and account for it — namely, the meaning of remorse.

Remorse — not for whatever material or spiritual pleasures of youth have passed, not for whatever hopes and aims have been lost, not for this decline overtaking middle and old age as the years advance, leaving them incapable of what they once could do, back when they faced life smiling upon it, and life smiled back upon them — but remorse, rather, for hopes that were fulfilled which ought never to have been fulfilled, for aims that were achieved which ought never to have been achieved, for gains that were secured which ought never to have been secured. For in the fulfilment of those hopes lies a real diminishment of their own selves; in the achievement of those aims lies a real belittlement of their own standing, both in their own eyes and in the eyes of others; and in the securing of these gains lies real harm — harm striking themselves, and harm striking their own fellow citizens in their own homeland — since, in fulfilling those hopes, achieving those aims, and securing those gains, they took decisive steps with no way back, and no way to repair whatever wrongs and sins have since arisen from them.

Consider that young man who was, in his own youth, an ember of fire, satisfied by nothing, content with nothing, forever indignant, forever ambitious, forever looking ahead, holding in contempt whatever things and whatever people surrounded him. He saw the old and the middle-aged as having settled for little, content with what no man of true honour ought to accept, at ease with what no man of pride and dignity ought to be at ease with — so he rose up against the old and the middle-aged, eager to renew everything, to leap, with his own person and his own homeland, toward heights of honour, dignity, and independence past generations had never managed to reach.

For this reason, he was as candid as candour can possibly be in his own quarrel with the old order, and his own rejection of the present around him; as fierce as fierceness can possibly be in his own demand for renewal and change. He was dissatisfied with politics, since it lay stagnant and lifeless; dissatisfied with culture, since it lay dormant and rigid; dissatisfied with the social order, since it was unjust and oppressive. He found no peace of mind except in politics breaking free of its own lethargy and stagnation, growing genuinely active, guaranteeing citizens their own freedom within their own homeland, guaranteeing them their own freedom against the foreign occupier, and driving them, with this freedom, to strive and work without any shortfall or failure, so that no sooner did they reach one standing than they sought a higher one still. Nor was he satisfied with culture, until it broke free of its own dormancy and rigidity, until hearts and minds were filled with knowledge and literature, after having been filled with ignorance, heedlessness, dullness, and stupor.

Nor did he trust the social order, until reform touched every one of its aspects, so that the earth might be filled with justice, exactly as it had been filled with oppression; so that the hungry might be fed, the naked clothed, the sick healed. Like a blazing ember of fire, he chafed against stagnant politics, rigid culture, and an unjust social order, wanting everything around him to change. And now, he is a minister, or something resembling a minister, having secured for himself whatever wealth, position, and standing satisfies him — he, of whom it was once assumed he would never be satisfied; grown wealthy — he, of whom it was once assumed he would never grow wealthy; grown content — he, of whom it was once assumed he would never grow content.

He is now satisfied with politics, whatever its own share of stagnation, indeed genuinely eager for it to sink ever deeper into that same stagnation, since any real activity in it would harm him, and profit him nothing. He is satisfied with culture, whatever its own share of dormancy, indeed genuinely eager for it to sink ever deeper into that same dormancy, since any real blaze rekindled in it would only injure him, never please him. He is satisfied with the social order, even as the people around him fall, dying of hunger and misery, exactly as moths fall into flame, entirely unconcerned that the fire of reform should ever touch him, from any side whatsoever, since any real evolution of the social order toward justice would deny him exactly what he wishes for — the accumulation of wealth upon wealth, riches piled upon riches. And rest

assured: he neither recites, nor wishes to recite, nor wishes even to hear, this verse:

*Would that youth might return, one day, that I might tell it what old age
has done!*

For he genuinely fears that, should youth return to him, it would rebuke him with the harshest, ugliest rebuke imaginable, exposing the contradiction between his own earlier life and his own later one in a way that would rob him of his own sleep, and poison his own life entirely. And what, exactly, would you have him tell youth, should it return to him? That he once loved freedom, and now prefers tyranny to it instead? That he once loved culture, and now loves ignorance in its place? That he once loved justice, and now prefers oppression to it?

And consider, too, that other young man who cared nothing for politics, nor culture, nor justice, since he gave no thought at all to public affairs — devoted, instead, to learning for its own sake, art for its own sake, literature for its own sake, concerned only with immersing himself ever deeper in knowledge, and producing, one day, something of real use to people, something satisfying his own need to create. Then, one day, he looks up, and finds the circumstances of life have pushed him into some office or other, some public post, throwing thick curtains between himself and learning, art, and literature — curtains with no way of being lifted, no way of seeing past them. What, exactly, would you have him confess to youth, should it return to him? Would you have him confess that he now prefers ignorance to learning, coarseness of taste to its own delicacy, dullness of temperament to its own clarity — because posts, and duties, and money have little love at all for learned minds, delicate tastes, or clear temperaments?

I could wish that God might set loose, upon a certain group of these older men, a group of those very voices that speak in old tales — so that not one of these older men, whether falling asleep, or waking, or working, or idling, might ever do so without hearing this same voice whisper in his own ear, in a tone reaching the very depths of his own soul, shaking it to its core, and filling it entirely with grief and remorse:

*Would that youth might return, one day, that I might tell it what old age
has done!*