

Between Poetry and Music

al-Jadid, 10 November 1930

I know you love song, and prize it above everything else, disparaging for its sake every other art, even the fine arts closest and most akin to it. You prize it above pure music itself, because you see pure music as closer to riddle and obscure argument — governed entirely by its composer's own personality, so that it signifies only what he intends, or by its listener's own personality, so that it signifies only what the listener wishes to understand from it.

And you prize it above poetry too, because you see it as a clear language, plain in meaning, close in signification, in which the poet's own personality shows itself in absolute freedom, saying just what it wishes to say — while the listener's or reader's own freedom shows nowhere in it, since he is bound to understand from the poet exactly what the poet meant him to know of his own inner subtleties and hidden depths, without his imagination straying too far in any direction, and without his being able to understand simply whatever he himself wishes to understand, shaped by his own particular sensibility and individual feeling.

I know all this, but I also know that you carry this preference to a real extreme, and indulge it excessively, and that you are mistaken in judging song a mid-point between the clarity of poetry and the obscurity of music — for it depends on both at once: on the first for its words and meanings, on the second for its melody and rhythm. It contains, then, something to satisfy your need for clarity, and something to satisfy your desire for obscurity.

When you listen to song, you can let your imagination roam without going astray, because the poet's own verse stands between you and error, and keeps you from wandering off the path. But is this not itself enough to convince you that song, as you understand it, is not really a thing in its own right at all — since it has no substance of its own except by depending on poetry and depending on music? However hard you try, and however much difficulty you put yourself through, you will never manage to imagine a song with neither poetry nor music in it.

So when you love song, and prize it above pure poetry or pure music, you are really doing nothing more than loving poetry when it

submits to the laws of rhythm and melody, or loving rhythm and melody when they take hold of poetry and rest on the singer's own voice.

I have no wish to speak to you of the merits of pure poetry or pure music, but I do want your understanding of song, and your judgment of it, to be a little sounder than the view you currently hold — or, if you prefer, I want you to understand song with a certain precision, and with a certain intellectual refinement at once. For as long as song stands between poetry and music, it belongs to neither music alone, nor poetry alone.

And were I not afraid of what you might make of me for saying it, I would say: it lies in neither of them at all, but in ourselves, in our own hearts — and poetry, music, and song itself are nothing but instruments revealing to us that particular faculty we were born with, without which we would have no way to live at all.

What I mean is this: when we love poetry, we do not love it for its own sake, but because it reveals to us our own emotions and passions, and whatever varieties of feeling our ordinary life is simply incapable of revealing on its own. And likewise, when we love music, we love it because it represents to us these same emotions, these same inclinations, these same sensory and emotional modes we take real pleasure in feeling, and in submitting to the power of.

The clearest proof of this is that anything at all revealing these images of our own souls to us becomes dear to us, precious to us — we linger over it, dwell on it, and seek to draw more and more from it, whether it is something we ourselves make deliberately and intentionally, such as poetry, music, painting, or sculpture, or something we never created, never thought of creating, and never tried to seek out or encounter.

Have you never seen a sight you never expected to see, and stopped before it, filling your eyes with it again and again? Have you never heard a sound you had never imagined hearing, and listened to it, and gone on listening, filling your ears with it — though you never invented that sight, never devised that sound, but simply came upon it by chance, met it without calculation or expectation? Otherwise, what would explain your own wonder at the sea and the mountain? What would explain your own delight in a tangled forest, or a well-tended garden? What would explain your own pleasure in birdsong, or the sound of insects, once night has fallen and everything around you has grown still?!

And are music's own rhythm and the poet's own verse, in truth, anything more than an imitation of these very sights, sounds, and natural phenomena we come upon and find wondrous — phenomena that stir in our souls whatever pleasure they do stir, a pleasure closer, at times, to joy, at other times to sorrow, and, quite often, something in between the two?

Song, then, lies neither in poetry nor in music, nor in the two of them combined — song lies in ourselves, stirred by poetry alone, or stirred by music alone, in the souls of those refined enough to possess a generous share of intellectual sophistication, delicacy of feeling, and fineness of sensibility; while it is stirred, in the souls of ordinary people, by poetry and music combined together, through rhythm and melody.

And I will not hide from you that I wish for you such delicacy of feeling, such fineness of sensibility, and such devotion to a purely intellectual life, as would allow you to find the pleasure of song in pure poetry and pure music alone — for there is, in that, a pleasure matched by nothing else, and a self-sufficiency of the soul matched by no treasure that could ever be reckoned.

What pleasure could equal that hour when you sit alone with some collection of poetry, or some score of music, and read — moving from line to line, from word to word, from melody to melody, from note to note — until the various turbulent emotions rise up within you, and the fires of longing for perfection blaze within your soul, or a deep calm of contentment and peace washes over you, all without ever having to trouble your own ear with the poet's recitation, or the composer's rhythm, or the singer's voice.

I know people who detest nothing so much as they detest musical instruments and the din and clamour they produce, and who are, at the very same time, among the most passionately devoted lovers of music there are — yet they find their own artistic pleasure in reading notation and melody, rather than in listening to it performed. And I know people who find the chanting of reciters a real burden, and yet remain refined lovers of poetry, gifted in selecting the best of it and judging its quality — who prefer to devote themselves entirely to reading it and studying it on the page, rather than have the reciter's voice or the singer's song distract them from its pure beauty. These are the truly refined connoisseurs of art, who have grasped and absorbed it to the point of turning it into a kind of philosophy, and who stand before it exactly as they stand before

nature: contemplating, marvelling, and finding in that very contemplation and reflection all they need, without requiring the outward signs and expression that others require.

And if it is really true that song lies within ourselves, and that it is we ourselves who pour it out onto poetry and music, and onto every other artistic manifestation of beauty, then it is no longer difficult for me to answer the question you raised about what critics mean when they say they find "song" in a piece of narrative or dramatic poetry, or in a piece of artistic prose. They do not mean, by "song," the ordinary sense the word carries in the dictionary; they mean, rather, the stirring of whatever emotions, inclinations, and passions lie dormant within us — emotions that arouse contentment in us at one moment, anger at another, joy at one turn, sorrow at another.

There is no doubt that every manifestation of art stirs some measure of these emotions, and so gives rise to "song" in this sense; song, as most people understand it, is nothing more than the declaration of an emotion we already feel, or the arousal of an emotion the soul had kept hidden and unexpressed.

You may read a piece of narrative poetry, and, when the poet brings you to some moving moment in the hero's life, some wondrous natural scene, or some magnificent aspect of human existence, you feel within yourself tenderness, or admiration, or awe — and your own soul sings with what you have felt, with only the briefest distance left between you and declaring that song outright.

You could say the same of many moments in dramatic fiction, whether in verse or prose; indeed, you could say the same standing before a painting, an engraving, or a statue, and even standing before the purely natural world itself — because you find song in everything, or, more precisely, because your own soul is capable of pouring song out onto everything.

You will say: then why was poetry ever divided into narrative, lyric, and dramatic verse at all? Why is it not simply all song? In truth, all poetry deserves to be song — but this division is a purely historical one, brought about by mere accident. Among one generation of people, poetry was, at first, song predominantly narrative in character, then pure song, then song predominantly dramatic in character; and so it came to be divided into these categories, and named accordingly. Had it not been for this pure accident, and had later generations, after the Greeks, not been

so shaped by it, taking it up as a founding principle and rule, they would never have turned poetry away from being, in its entirety, pure song.

But just as you find song in narrative and dramatic poetry, you can equally find drama in lyric and narrative poetry. It is enough for the narrative poet to imagine two heroes, or two individuals, in dialogue with one another, and to depict that dialogue with such precision and force that it deceives you out of your own senses, and makes you feel you are hearing and seeing them, moved by what you hear and see of their affairs — and there you are, before a piece of narrative poetry no less thoroughly dramatic than undoubted dramatic fiction itself. And it is likewise enough for a lyric poet to imagine something similar, describe it skilfully, and sing it well, for you to find drama within lyric poetry too. You may recall the story of Ibn Abi Rabi'a and his beloved, in his famous poem rhyming in ra':

*Is it for love of Nu'm's kin that you set out, early,
at tomorrow's dawn — or leave at evening, lingering still?*

You may recall the delicate, precise, enchanting dialogue that passed between him and his beloved, and I think you will not disagree with me that this poem comes closer to being a small dramatic story than an ordinary lyric poem. And you can equally find narrative — indeed, you do find narrative — within song and drama alike, whenever the singing poet aims at telling you a story, or whenever the dramatic poet aims at a story he entrusts his characters to deliver before an audience of onlookers.

The boundaries between narrative, lyric, and dramatic poetry are, in themselves, fine and delicate ones — but they remain, in any case, merely conventional boundaries people have agreed upon for the sake of learning and teaching, classification and division. Even if these boundaries divide poetry into distinct genres, and separate these genres from one another, they can never divide people's own sense of this poetry's beauty, or their own being moved by its power and grandeur, its sweetness and tenderness, its enchantment and its power to captivate the mind, into different categories or distinct stages. There remains, always, that shared measure of beauty you find in every single instance of art, whatever form it takes — narrative, lyric, or dramatic; poetry, music, or painting.

I know you will read this piece laughing at it, mocking it, since none of this will manage to convince you of these views, or win your approval

of them. But I know, too, that you can tolerate an opinion you do not agree with, and can read what fails to convince you without losing your own composure over it — so keep these views of mine to yourself; not everyone has your own patience, tolerance, and forbearance toward those who do not share whatever error or truth they themselves hold to.

I have long grown used to tolerating a great deal of nonsense from you; tolerate, then, a little nonsense from me in return. I do not mind pressing this bit of nonsense on you until you come to share it with me, and settle into it alongside me — unless, that is, you have arguments strong enough in your own favour to turn me away from this view of mine. In any case, I remain waiting for a letter from you.