

Abu Nuwas, Once More

al-Ahram, 30 May 1953

How dear to me is this deep silence scholars, men of letters, and practitioners of the finest art carry to its very furthest extreme — so far that they forget people, and people very nearly forget them, so far that one of them very nearly forgets himself, so deeply has he immersed himself in silence, so thoroughly has he drowned himself in research, so entirely has his own work occupied him to the exclusion of everything else — until, one day, he returns to himself, and to people, some genuinely precious treasure in hand, offering it to them with real modesty and real reticence, that same fertile silence of his echoing the ancient poet's own line:

*Here is my own harvest, and its best fruit besides —
every harvester, after all, brings his own hand to his own mouth.*

How dear to me, too, are those bright, shining days that greet me, morning or evening, with one of these very treasures, offered to me by its own possessors, every now and then.

How deep was the contentment I felt, and genuinely relished, yesterday — when the morning greeted me with a genuinely valuable historical treasure, arriving from Damascus, and the evening greeted me with a splendid literary treasure, arriving from Cairo. Both treasures were the direct fruit of this same deep, prolonged silence its own practitioners carry to its furthest extreme, before finally emerging from it with something of real benefit to themselves, and to people!

The morning's own treasure was a great, genuinely valuable volume from that magnificent book counted among the most precious treasures of our own Arabic heritage: *Tarikh Dimashq* [The History of Damascus], by Ibn 'Asakir. The Arab Academy of Sciences has undertaken to publish it, entrusting the production of its first volume to Professor Salah al-Din al-Munajjid — and I shall speak of it next week, God willing.

The evening's own treasure was likewise a great volume, containing the *Diwan* of Abu Nuwas, published by Matba'at Misr [the Egypt Printing Company], which entrusted its own production and textual verification to Professor Ahmad 'Abd al-Majid al-Ghazali, with a genuinely delightful introduction supplied by our own great poet, Professor 'Aziz Abaza. This is the volume I shall speak of today, at real length — briefly, that is.

For some reason, Abu Nuwas has been genuinely pressing himself upon people throughout these recent years of our own literary life. Professor 'Abd al-Rahman Sidqi only recently produced two genuinely valuable books on Abu Nuwas, and I spoke, only last week, of the book in which Professor Dr. Muhammad al-Nuwayhi studied Abu Nuwas's own psyche. And now here is the *Diwan* of Abu Nuwas, produced for us by Matba'at Misr in a genuinely new form, its own texts critically verified, and freed from the corruptions of misreading and textual distortion that had spoiled the editions once widely circulated among the public.

What connection might there possibly be between this generation of Egyptians and that great poet of the second century of the Hijra? There must surely be some connection, hidden or visible, drawing these distinguished, cultivated figures — men whose own minds and tastes have grown refined, whose own character and temperament have grown genuinely cultivated — to concern themselves with Abu Nuwas: some presenting his own life, some his own art, some analysing his own psyche, some publishing his own poetry in a genuinely new, critically verified edition. Could this connection stem from a mere inclination toward reviving classical literature? But why, then, choose Abu Nuwas, among our own ancient poets, who are scarcely countable in number? Why not choose some poet of the Umayyad era, or some other poet who was Abu Nuwas's own contemporary, or who came after him? And how often, these days, do people speak of growing weary of the old, of losing all taste for it, of longing and yearning instead for the new! Could this connection stem, rather, from the fact that many cultivated people today find, in their own lives, the same kind of emptiness Abu Nuwas himself once found — and are turned away from whatever entertainment, dissipation, and enjoyment of life's own pleasures were once available to Abu Nuwas — consoling themselves, then, with what has been made available to someone else, in place of what has not been made available to them, entertaining themselves by describing life's own pleasures in place of those pleasures themselves?

But Abu Nuwas was never alone in his own dissipation, wantonness, and licentiousness — a great many of his own contemporaries shared with him in all of it, indulging exactly as he indulged, carrying on exactly as he carried on, excessively reckless with both themselves and with people alike in their own indulgence and wantonness, and in describing both, in genuinely beautiful, candid poetry. What, then, is it that leads these genuinely excellent researchers to favour Abu Nuwas with their

own study, above all his other contemporaries?

It appears to me this connection stems from none of the things I have already mentioned, but from something else entirely — something depicting, in its own truest form, that new spirit that filled Egyptian life, and accompanied it, ever since the aftermath of the First World War, a spirit sometimes violent, sometimes calm: the spirit of revolution, and the ambition to free oneself from a rigid life weighed down by fetters and shackles, in which social conditions grow genuinely constricted, favouring a small few with life's own comforts, and depriving the vast majority of those same comforts.

I do not mean, by life's own comforts here, merely those material pleasures available to the privileged, and denied to the deprived — I mean, rather, something broader in scope, more refined in nature and temperament: I mean both spiritual and material comforts alike. I mean freedom genuinely shared, never confined to any single class, but made available to all people; I mean equality in rights, one that draws no distinction between one race and another, nor between one class and another, one that permits no group of people to hold themselves above another, nor permits any group to monopolize, for themselves alone, whatever grants them superiority and privilege. This same spirit has filled our own Egyptian life ever since the First World War ended, driving us to demand political freedom, social freedom, and equality of rights and duties alike; driving us, too, to insist on freeing ourselves from foreign domination, striving until we secured a constitution enshrining equality among people, spending a full third of the century we have lived through in a struggle sometimes fierce, sometimes calm, to realize these same goals — a realization admitting neither argument nor dispute. This is exactly the spirit that has drawn our own cultivated people to love Abu Nuwas, and devote themselves to his poetry: Abu Nuwas is himself a fruit of that same revolution that achieved equality between the Arabs and the other, conquered nations, and his own unruly poetry, hoping for dignity from nothing and no one, is the very poetry of the victor — one so intoxicated by his own victory that it carried him quite beyond himself, driving him toward every variety of excess, in his own conduct, in his own thinking, and in his own poetry, which depicts both that same conduct and that same thinking.

Abu Nuwas is a rebel against every old social and political order — a rebel against the Arabs, whom he criticizes without any restraint, preferring the Persians to them; a rebel who angers the ruler at times, to

the point of being cast into some hidden corner of a prison; a rebel, too, against the familiar pattern of ordinary life, that same calm, untroubled life proceeding along a single, well-worn path, upholding whatever purity, restraint, and moderation religion had imposed upon it. He drinks wine, and has no wish to conceal his own drinking of it; he indulges in homosexuality quite openly, without restraint or shame; he mocks the strait-laced without gentleness or patience. He is, further, a rebel against the familiar constraints of art itself: he is thoroughly accomplished at traditional Arabic poetry, proving this through whatever dignified, traditional verse he composes, lest anyone accuse him of ignorance or inadequacy — but rebels, thereafter, against all of it, innovating instead in his own new art, turning away from the desert ruins, their own description, weeping over them, and longing for them, toward pleasure instead — extolling it, delighting in describing it to the furthest possible degree. All of this, because he grew up, exactly as his own contemporaries grew up, in the shadow of a revolution that had granted the conquered dominion over the conquerors, and driven a great many of these same conquered peoples toward every variety of excess and unruliness, in both word and deed alike.

Abu Nuwas is no anomaly among his own contemporaries in Basra, Kufa, and Baghdad; Abu Nuwas and his own companions found, among viziers, princes, and even certain caliphs, genuine approval for this same unruliness, and so exceeded every bound within it. This is exactly where I part ways with Professor Ahmad 'Abd al-Majid al-Ghazali, as I earlier parted ways with Professor al-Nuwayhi, over tracing this rebellion of Abu Nuwas's own back to what the transmitters claimed of his own mother's own conduct, or to some failed, cowardly love affair — Abu Nuwas's own rebellion was never confined to him alone, but genuinely widespread among many of his own companions, poets and non-poets alike, among the people of that same era.

I part ways with Professor al-Ghazali on another point too, no less significant than the one I have just mentioned. The artistic revolution we find in Abu Nuwas and his own companions, driving them to excess in describing pleasures, and recklessness in pursuing them, was never an Abbasid revolution, nor an Iraqi one — it was, rather, an old force that first arose in the Hijaz, and in Medina in particular, during Umayyad times, migrating from Medina to Syria during Yazid ibn 'Abd al-Malik's own reign, growing genuinely dangerous during Hisham ibn 'Abd al-Malik's own reign, thanks to al-Walid ibn Yazid, who was himself one of

its own victims, before migrating on to Iraq, where it finally settled alongside the ruling power, and did not subside until after al-Amin ibn al-Rashid's own killing, and al-Ma'mun's own rise to the caliphate of the Muslims.

If Iraq had Abu Nuwas, Muslim, Muti', Hammad, and Walibah, then the Hijaz had al-Ahwas, and Syria had al-Walid ibn Yazid himself — and this is a subject that would take us far too long to pursue further here.

I would genuinely have loved to praise this new edition of the Diwan of Abu Nuwas without any reservation whatsoever — but I find myself compelled, regretfully, to exercise a great deal of caution. This edition, for all its own quality, for all the genuinely rigorous effort expended in correcting its own text, is not a scholarly edition in the precise sense of that word. I do not know whether Professor al-Ghazali has thoroughly examined the manuscript copies of Abu Nuwas's own Diwan held in the various libraries, nor whether he has examined most, or even a good many, of them.

I happened to know that the German Orientalist Dr. Schaade had spent thirty years of his own life studying Abu Nuwas, preparing a scholarly edition of his Diwan — but he has since departed this world, and I do not know exactly how far his own research and investigation had progressed.

Another matter forces me toward reservation: the publisher and Matba'at Misr have shown greater regard for contemporary taste, and for conforming to the laws currently in force, than for scholarship's own right to publish the text complete and unabridged. They offer readers, instead, a filtered edition they might read without any real discomfort — no small thing in itself, and something is, after all, better than nothing at all, as the proverb goes.

Let readers, then, read this edition, grateful to the press and the publisher for this genuinely valuable, fruitful effort — and let scholars go on waiting for Abu Nuwas's own text to be published for them exactly as they themselves would wish it to be.