

Symbol and Plain Speech

al-Majalla al-Jadida, January 1930

I take up today a question meant to complete the observations I made in my last piece, when I spoke of taste; for the relationship between writers and their readers has many different facets, each of which serves as a measure of the taste that allows writers to produce, and readers to judge — a taste that shapes what the one produces and how the other judges it, in forms that vary with the individual, the milieu, and the circumstances, general and particular alike.

We have seen people disagree, across many ages, over which of two literary modes is finer, dearer to the soul, and more capable of representing its emotions, passions, and inclinations: literature that relies on plain declaration and clear exposition, which the soul need take no real trouble to understand or grasp the purpose and aim of, or symbol and allusion, understood only by those deeply grounded in learning, whose purposes are perceived, and whose true ends are reached, only by those possessed of a certain refinement and elevation of soul, a certain delicacy of feeling and penetration of insight, enabling them to uncover secrets, pierce veils, and unravel riddles?

This disagreement among people intensifies, grows more serious, and carries a further-reaching effect on the lives of writers and readers alike, when it touches on a certain class of subjects that morality and the circumstances of ordinary social life demand be handled only gently, and that writers and poets approach only with a measure of delicacy and indirection — subjects such as love poetry, the description of sexual relations, and the description of things we would rather not see plainly, and so prefer writers to speak of only through symbol, and describe only through allusion. People still recall a debate that took place some time ago between Mr. Tawfiq Diyab and Mr. Salama Musa, over what they then called "veiled literature" and "exposed literature." Each of the two men of letters had his own way of understanding the matter, and his own method of argument and inference, and people split into camps alongside them at the time — some favouring veiled literature, others favouring exposed literature.

I held then, as I hold now, that the two men of letters were disputing over a point that was not really the point of dispute at all, and were following an unproductive path. One of them was looking to morality,

custom, and the young generation's need for high ideals; the other was looking to truth and honesty, people's need for candour, and the harmful effect of hypocrisy on upbringing and other aspects of social life. Yet both were arguing from a premise I consider genuinely open to question — and I do not think it excessive to call it doubtful — namely, that a writer, when producing his literary work, deliberately chooses to go north, when he might just as easily have chosen to go south; that he is free in what he writes, free in what he says, shaping his literary images the way a craftsman shapes his products, through deliberation, thought, and total freedom.

This premise would even suggest the writer freer than the craftsman, who must submit to the laws of his craft and can innovate within it only up to a point, whereas the writer is seen as absolutely free, bound by nothing but his own will and inclination. It was from this premise, it seems, that the two debaters both proceeded — the one demanding that the writer observe morality, modesty, custom, and high ideals; the other demanding that the writer observe truth, honesty, and candour, and avoid hypocrisy.

But what both men of letters overlooked — and what people generally overlook when they discuss literature, or dwell on it at length — is that a writer's freedom in literary production, and in shaping his own works into some artistic form, is nowhere near as broad and unlimited as they suppose; it is, in fact, severely constrained, bound by a whole set of restrictions, some of them powerful and utterly inescapable, others weaker, which a writer may occasionally manage to break.

The writer is bound by his own nature and temperament: just as he cannot change his own complexion, or his own physical constitution, so too he cannot change his own general temperament, and it is therefore difficult, if not impossible, for him to force that temperament to produce works of art that do not suit his own nature and disposition. He is bound, too, by the milieu he lives in, the public he addresses, and the region whose climate, air, and countless varied influences he is subject to; and beyond all this, he is bound by the very language that is the raw material of his art, and by the laws of art itself.

He can, of course, break some of these restrictions from time to time — his own artistic power sometimes overwhelming the language itself, sometimes overwhelming the established laws of art — and become, in certain respects, an innovator; he may even manage to rebel against the

very customs and principles his milieu was built upon, and so renew it. But this overwhelming power, this rebellion, remains limited, however great a writer's own strength, force, and genius may be. And if the writer is not, in fact, free in his literary production — if anyone truly deserving that name is shaped, in what he writes, by the public's approval and admiration, just as he is shaped by his own personality, nature, and temperament — then it is asking too much of him for his readers to demand that he follow one particular path and turn away from another; for he never followed the path he chose — or, more precisely, the path he found himself on — except because he was simply unable to follow any other.

No single writer can excel at producing both veiled and exposed literature at once; he belongs to one or the other, because his own nature, together with the general and particular circumstances surrounding him, compels him toward one or the other. And in fact, across the various literary traditions, we find ages in which veiled literature holds sway over writers, who then excel and shine at it, and other ages in which exposed literature holds sway over them, who then master it and distinguish themselves at it in turn.

If we investigate these ages, and search for the causes that push writers toward one type of literature or the other, we find that these causes trace back, more often than not, to the milieu and to the community surrounding the writer, rather than to the writer himself; and we notice that veiled literature — since we must use these terms — holds sway over writers and readers whenever communities live a calm, moderate life, resting on a stable social order and a settled political order. When the social order grows disturbed, or the political order becomes prey to instability and corruption, the dominion of exposed literature begins to appear and spread, little by little, until it gains the upper hand — but this is only a temporary ascendancy, lasting only until the social and political order returns once more to stability and settlement.

You see this clearly and plainly in our own Arabic literary life. Veiled literature held sway over the Arabs, in every branch of literary life apart from satire, right up to the Abbasid age, when the social and political order grew disturbed: non-Arabs came to desire a share of the social and political rights the Arabs had held for themselves, the political order itself changed, one state fell and another rose in its place, one system of government collapsed and another took its place — and out of all this

arose, in people's souls, an overwhelming inclination toward freedom, even alongside their own continued attachment to order and moderation.

In this very age, exposed literature appeared out in the open, in the most flagrant way, because it was simply expressing a life that was itself exposed. But once the third century arrived, and the new social order settled, and the new political order became firmly established, people grew more modest in their own lives, and literature itself grew more modest along with them; people came to imitate Abu Nuwas and his circle in form and style far more than they imitated them in meaning and subject.

Our own recent life was, in the same way, calm and settled, shaped by stable, established social and political systems, and so our own literature was veiled and moderate; then our own political and social systems grew disturbed, and we came to crave various kinds of freedom — freedom of opinion, freedom of action, freedom of politics — and, along with these, we came to crave freedom of speech as well, so that our own literature was loosed, to some degree, from its old restraints, and our own inclination toward exposed literature began to show itself.

The writer, then, is shaped by public taste in producing either veiled or exposed literature, and however much you study the literatures of other nations, you will find the very same phenomena at work: when the social order grows disturbed, exposed literature appears; when it settles, veiled literature holds sway once more.

There is, however, another phenomenon I would like to touch on in this piece, however briefly, and which I hope one day to have the chance to study at greater length: that there is a symbolist literature that appears in certain ages, coming to dominate the whole of literary life, adopting symbol and allusion as its fundamental mode of expression, and turning away from the familiar mode of clear, plain literature, whatever the subject of that literature happens to be.

This phenomenon spreads beyond literature into all the other fine arts as well: the arts of the painter, the sculptor, the musician, and the singer all become symbols and signs, following paths quite unlike their familiar ones, through which their practitioners mean things they never meant to mean in calmer, more natural ages — and people's own capacity to understand and appreciate these arts varies with their own varying share of emotional intelligence, penetrating insight, and inclination toward material and intellectual refinement.

Such ages arise, most often, when social and political systems grow disturbed, rising up against religion, morality, and everything else communal life rests upon; disorder grows more frequent, more intense, and more prolonged, yet fails to bear the fruit that had been expected, so that people despair of revolution and its results — yet, at the same time, they are too reluctant, or too ashamed, to disown themselves and return to the old order they themselves demolished. They do not want to return to the old ways; they detest the disorder, and expect no good to come from it; and they go on seeking a new life — neither the old order nor the present disorder — without ever quite attaining this new life they seek.

It is here that art and literature are driven toward symbol, sign, allusion, and, at times, riddle; for a new religious impulse, unclear and unformed, takes hold of people, assuming a shape that, if not outright mystical, comes very close to mysticism. In this shape, practitioners of the fine arts feel certain longings, longings that fill their souls, yet which they do not understand clearly or plainly, and so cannot express clearly or plainly either — nor do people understand these longings properly from them, since their own practitioners scarcely understand them themselves.

This phenomenon was observed with particular force in France at the end of the last century, when the French grew weary of revolution, disorder, and strife, and either detested, or were unable, to return to the old ways they had known before the Revolution; new ideals appeared to them, which they sensed and aspired toward, yet could not make out clearly or plainly, and so began expressing them, in poetry and art, through obscure symbolic expressions we now read and understand only the rare fragment of, while most of their meaning escapes us.

This phenomenon was observed with force in France, but it can probably be observed across every literature — whatever the nation or the milieu — wherever a community passes through a phase resembling the French phase I have just described. And is Sufi literature anything other than one variety of this very phenomenon? And is Sufism itself, in truth, anything other than a rejection of the old, a demolition of it, and a search for the new, without ever quite discerning it, or being able to attain it?

This phenomenon deserves, in my own view, far more attention and study than the whole question of veiled versus exposed literature. It could be studied from a number of angles, but the one dearest to me is

precisely the one representing the relationship between these writers and artists, on the one hand, and the people who enjoy their artistic works, on the other — that is, the taste that connects producer and consumer in art, to borrow the economists' own terms. I hope I may have the chance to return to this subject one day.