

After the Return

Majallat al-Sufur, 5 November 1915

*Praise be to God, that through my fate I have come to the worst of states,
my soul scattered, my passion far away, fallen into a stumble of my own
time that cannot even be spoken of.*

*I strove for good for my own sake, yet attained from it nothing but a
phantom of imagination —
wishes and hopes that tore me apart, until their gilded show cleared away
to reveal nothing but impossibility.*

Sleep now, O wakeful night; be still, O restless mind; take comfort, O
grieving heart — for what good is an anguish that avails nothing, and
what use is persistence in a sorrow that profits no one?

May God forgive the stumble of the University — it has intruded
upon a peaceful flock and thrown it into terror, upon a tranquil heart and
thrown it into turmoil, upon a clear and untroubled life and clouded it; it
has led me toward some end it has not yet brought me to, and has left me
standing between praise and blame, between contentment and
resentment, between hope and despair.

*The fault lies with the days — were it not for their ill omen, his character
would never have changed,
and had they gone straight, all conditions within them would have
remained upright.*

You wish me to write, my friends, though you know well I have no
strength left for writing, nor any path left to writing well.

And what do you want from a man who had scarcely begun to grow
at ease with a life of light and guidance, before fate cast him back to
where darkness gathers thick and error stands plain?

Alas for a life whose beginning was fair and whose end was foul; alas
for a dream in which I had scarcely tasted the sweetness of hope and the
pleasure of expectation, before the ugliness of pain and the bitterness of
despair came to spoil them both for me.

*What a night it was, whose length grew short —
though my nights, before that one, had never been short at all.*

Yes, my friends, you have known well that that life was one of light and guidance, and that this life is one of darkness and error, and I can only think that you did just as I did — that you bid farewell to your own intelligence and to your own hearts on the very day you bid farewell to that country.

And what could we possibly do with our intelligence in a country as easily satisfied as Egypt, whose people are content with a little of everything — content, in learning and letters, in philosophy and wisdom, with a few phrases they chew over, words they mouth, sentences they repeat back and forth between lip and palate, without ever arriving at any new meaning, or pointing toward any fresh opinion?

They have turned away from inquiry and reflection, content instead with mere transmission and imitation, because they have not yet become conscious of themselves; it does not concern them whether they have any share or portion at all in the inheritance of the human mind.

And what could we possibly do with our hearts in a country as easily satisfied as Egypt, whose people are content with a little of everything, and for whom mere sensation and motion suffice as life, and whose pleasures amount to nothing more than a flattering of their outward senses? God, it would seem, has placed their emotions in their hands and their feet, and at the very tip of their tongues; they know nothing of love but its coarsest and harshest form, and cultivate no affection except what serves some need, or yields some benefit, or ends in the attainment of some want or the fulfilment of some hope.

God is my witness that I have not exaggerated, nor gone to excess, nor even said the full truth of what I mean to say; and I know well that I write these lines for two kinds of men only: one who has tasted the pleasure of life in the West, and who will believe what I say and hold it true; and another who has never experienced any of it, and who will accuse me of exaggeration and charge me with going too far.

To the first, I can offer nothing but a hand of brotherhood and a word of consolation; and for the second, I can only hope for guidance, well-being, and a life of untroubled serenity, and that God may spare him what we ourselves have tasted — for we had scarcely begun to praise the sweetness of its harvest before it left us with a lump in the throat that will never leave us, except with the very last breath of life.

How strange, how utterly strange it is: other people return to their own countries after a time abroad joyful and rejoicing, while I — I swear by all the intelligence of heart and soundness of judgement in that other country, by the purity of its character and the refinement of its taste, by the tenderness of its feelings and the loftiness of its morals, by the beauty of its qualities and the balance of its temperament — I returned to Egypt sorrowful and grieving, and I am almost ashamed to speak the truth and declare that I met her again in tears.