

Between Literature, Politics, and Money...

Al-Wadi (Hadith al-Wadi), December 5, 1934

And I imagine you noticed, from this title, that a third element has entered between literature and politics — namely, money. My best guess is that it did not force its way in between these two friends uninvited, but was rather invited, and answered the invitation, because it heard the call — even though our writers and poets did not. For I go on saying today what I was saying a week ago, and what I have been saying since these pieces began: that our writers are too preoccupied to attend to life and the living, off on this distant excursion their demons have led them upon, from which they have not returned.

The truth is, I do not know whether money entered between politics and literature, or literature entered between politics and money. Nor do I wish to go on turning these words over on their different faces, for I fear the reader might either laugh or grow weary of it — though I myself find in turning words over on their different faces a certain diversion and delight. Our teacher, Sayyid ibn Ali al-Marsafi, God rest his soul, was a towering man of letters, cut from the cloth of the third or fourth century of the Hijra. He used to teach us literature in the old fashion, and called it *adab*, and we called it *adab* too. Then, as the days turned, and Al-Azhar was made subject to the new system, I met him one night, bewildered, downcast, and tight of chest, because they had changed his course — in subject and in title alike — and named it "The History of the Literature of the Language." The Sheikh could not understand this name, nor could he stomach it, and so he took to asking us: why do they not say "the History of the Language of Literature"? Why do they not say "the Language of the History of Literature"? Why do they not say "the Language of the Literature of History"? And he took to turning these words over on their different faces, drawing out for us, from their varied connections, things that made us laugh and diverted us for no short while. And ever since that time I have been fond of turning words over on their faces, and I take to doing so whenever I find solitude and an empty mind, and find in it a rest from the effort and toil life sometimes burdens me with. And yet, for all that, I do not wish to turn literature, politics, and money over on their faces, and draw out what connections might lie between them. I wish only to observe that our daily life has opened for our writers a curious door of

literature — if only our writers knew how to pass through the doors life opens for them.

For everyone knows that between politics and money lie strong bonds, whose effects never end, and never cease; the men of money find advantage in overseeing politics, and the men of politics do not dislike this oversight, but exploit it and profit by it, and the effects of the bond between politics and money show themselves in the internal and external life of states. It is among the elementary truths that the bond between politics and money is what stirs up wars when wars break out, and what settles peace when peace settles, and what influences the life of parliaments, and the decisions they take, now veering to the right, now to the left, now steering a middle course between the two. It is what raises the voice of the newspapers, and what lowers the voice of the newspapers, and it is what brings about, in the life of nations, wonders known to the likes of you and me — mere simple souls — and not made known except to those who stand upon secrets, and know the hidden and the concealed.

All this is known to people, and to speak of it is idle talk, and to dwell on it is tiresome; foreign writers have gone over it a thousand times and more, and produced upon it splendid works, in which is earnestness, and in which is jest, in which is what delights, and in which is what grieves.

But politics and money have their own particular happenings in Egypt, which ought to stir the attention of our writers, if only our writers concerned themselves with the images life sets before them every day. And I have before me now two incidents, and I do not know how our writers came to neglect them; perhaps they neglected them only for want of time, and perhaps we shall see their attention turn to them tomorrow, or the day after. In any case, I lay them before the writers and poets, and hope to see the marks of their attention to them before long:

As for the first incident, it is the story of the Good Man, and this celebration he held in Alexandria in honour of the anniversary of the King's Accession. The heads of Egypt's ministries always celebrate the Accession Day — this is a duty imposed upon them by devotion to Egypt, and then imposed upon them by devotion to their political duty as heads of ministries. We have heard of the heads of ministries celebrating the Accession before the War, when Egypt had Princes; and since the War, when Egypt had Sultans; and since Independence, when Egypt became a

Kingdom whose affairs His Majesty the King, God preserve him, directs. We have heard of the beauty and splendour of these celebrations, of the attention and admiration they used to stir, of the descriptions and talk that used to follow them, and of the poetry of every kind that used to be recited at them. But one thing alone we had never heard of, until the premiership fell to the Good Man — namely, the sum of money spent upon these celebrations. Expenditure is the last thing that ought to be mentioned in such circumstances; indeed, expenditure is the last thing that ought to be mentioned at any social occasion meant for celebration and the depiction of joy, for whatever stirs joy in the soul. Yet the expenses of the last celebration, which the Good Man held two months ago, were mentioned, and mentioned in precise detail — for we now know that the Good Man spent, at this celebration, two thousand three hundred pounds. God forgive me, and forgive history, and forgive the present Prime Minister! For the Good Man did not himself spend this sum; he merely ordered it spent — ordered it spent, and promised payment, and then did not keep his promise. So said Al-Jihad: the Casino had asked His Excellency to make good on the debt, and he put it off a day, then put it off a day more, then put it off several days; and when the Casino grew weary of the delay, it left the outgoing Prime Minister and turned to the new Prime Minister, demanding payment, in a letter it registered, duly, by post.

From this letter it became known that the Good Man spent and did not spend, resolved and did not act, was generous and then grew stingy, advanced and then drew back, went forward and then fell behind, invited people and then told the restaurant: "They're yours — whoever dined at your table, take from each of them the price of what he ate, and the price of what he drank, and the price of his enjoyment!!" From this letter, then, we learned all this — but we do not yet know what the present Prime Minister has done about it. Did he hasten to pay, since a debt incurred for the Accession celebration ought not to remain a debt? Or did he refer it to the outgoing Prime Minister, since whoever ordered the spending ought not to burden another with the payment? Or did he order it paid, to satisfy the creditors, and then order it reclaimed from the outgoing Prime Minister, to satisfy the Treasury?!

These are questions tomorrow may answer, or may not; and they may not, in any case, concern us in this piece. What concerns us, rather, is what thoughts this story stirs up, and what it ought to loosen upon the tongues of poets, and set flowing from the pens of writers, in verse and in

prose.

In the readiness for generosity and munificence, followed by a drawing-back from payment and debt, there is enough to loosen the tongues of poets, and set the pens of writers flowing, of old, with splendid poetry and consummate prose; and our modern poets and writers ought to be no less productive than our earlier writers and poets. And in the display of money where money ought to hide itself, there is matter for fine poetry and curious prose. And in readiness to spend when one is Prime Minister, and reluctance to spend once the premiership has turned away from one, there is a field for the demons of poetry, and the imps of prose, if prose has imps. And in making light of what people say, and mocking what they think, over a matter that ought to be a slight, easy thing — sligher and easier than to invite gossip and rumour, explanation and interpretation — there is enough to make poets speak, even were they mute, and to inspire writers, even had they long since abandoned writing.

This, then, is one of the two stories, from which I have not drawn out all the treasures our writers and poets ought to exploit, to show people where the good lies, and what conduct ought to be, when one of them is given the chance to become Prime Minister.

Nor is the second story any less rich than the first, nor any less provocative to the demons of literature. What do you think of the People's Party, which bought itself a house when the premiership belonged to its first chairman, and went on paying the price of the house as long as things went smoothly for it; but when power turned away from it, and both its chairmen departed from it, and God transferred authority from one people to another, and turned dominion from one set of men to another, the Party drew back from payment, fell short in fulfilling its debt, delayed its instalment, and forced the owner of the house to freeze its funds in the banks — and even that did not satisfy him, for he refused to let the property's owner keep the price frozen, and brought the matter before the courts; and when the courts permitted the property's owner to keep what money he had frozen, the buyer insisted on appealing the ruling. We shall witness the story of this appeal, and perhaps we shall witness troubles and terrors between the owner of the house and its purchaser. What do our writers make of hardship after ease, and constriction after abundance, and stinginess after generosity? And what do our writers make of the fact that this hardship arrived only when the state turned its back, that this constriction assailed only when power fled,

that this stinginess descended only when things were overturned, and the master became the mastered, and the mastered became the master — and rule passed to Nessim, after having belonged to Sidqi and Abdel Fattah?!

Do our writers not think it a failure of art itself, a dereliction of literature's own due, and a neglect of what its readers are owed, that this story, and the story that preceded it, should pass by without poetry recording them in one of its splendid odes, and without prose immortalising them in one of its fine chapters?! The earlier poets used to compose verse on matters slighter than this, and of less consequence; and Al-Jahiz used to write his epistles on matters scarcely worth mentioning beside these two stories. Would our poets and writers be content to fall short where the earlier ones did not fall short, while claiming superiority for themselves, and imagining that they are renewing literature anew?! No — but the demons of literature have gone away, as I told you some lines back. And who knows? Perhaps they will return — and perhaps, by then, forgetfulness will already have swallowed up these two stories, and whatever is richer still than these two stories?!