

Our Literary Renaissance and What It Lacks

Al-Hilal, November 1933

There is nothing I fear for our literary renaissance so much as excessive praise of it, excessive admiration for it, excessive complacency about it — and it is precisely this fear, perhaps, that makes me reluctant to think about it, to dwell on it, to take it up for study and analysis. It is, without doubt, a genuinely strong revival, richly fruitful, one that took up our own classical literature and revived it, then went further still, adding to that classical literature new forms the ancients never knew, never even considered. It goes on reviving the old and creating the new, occasionally flagging, occasionally weakening, yet never long in freeing itself from that fatigue, or recovering from that weakness, pressing on its own way, vigorous and strong, turning aside for nothing — and in this respect it genuinely deserves admiration.

The road we have travelled, since the middle of the last century, is no short one; the effort we have expended, since the start of this century, is no small one; the success we have achieved, since the last war laid down its arms, is no easy one. And there is no doubt that all of this might well stir in us a certain satisfaction bordering on vanity, driving us, reluctant as we are, to cast at the mirror a glance not entirely free of self-love and self-confidence.

But for that very reason — or say, precisely for that reason — I dislike this same glance, since I fear it may seduce us, beguile us, and drive us into loving the mirror, lingering over it, losing ourselves in this same reflection it offers us, and forgetting the long road we must still travel, before we reach its own end — if indeed it has one, which I doubt. And who could possibly set a limit on the road travelled by those who aspire toward their own highest ideals? Nor am I even confident that the reflection the mirror would show us, were we to look, is entirely beautiful, entirely pleasing in every respect — I am fairly confident, in fact, that certain aspects of it hold some genuinely serious, unattractive flaw, and I worry that, should those looking into the mirror fix their gaze on these same flaws, it would trouble them, planting in their souls something not far from despair, if not despair itself. For this reason I have wished, and go on wishing, that writers press on along their own road, reviving the old literature, creating the new, without stopping, or

without stopping too long, without looking in the mirror, or without looking too long — that they might spare themselves the harm of vanity, through their own strength, and the harm of despair, through their own weakness, for in truth they remain exposed to both these harms alike.

But al-Hilal always likes to know exactly how far our revival has come, exactly where the energy of literature and writers now stands — compelling us, in doing so, into precisely this pause I dislike, this same mirror-gazing I would rather spare writers. But when al-Hilal asks us to pause, or to look into ourselves, can we really refuse her, or go against her wishes?

And who knows — perhaps al-Hilal is genuinely right, in asking us, from time to time, to look back at the road we have already travelled, in the hope that its own length, breadth, and fruitfulness might rouse fresh strength in us, renew our own energy, and drive us onward, neither idle nor despairing.

I do not know, exactly, why al-Hilal asked me, in particular, to point out what our revival still lacks, in strength, rather than asking me to point out whatever adorns this same revival with marks of accomplishment. Indeed, I do not know why al-Hilal chose to make me the spokesman for its own faults, the one depicting its weak points, while granting other writers other subjects, ones they would be glad to study and write on, and other readers glad to read their own study and depiction of them. Is this some cunning on al-Hilal's part, some scheme against me, or is it trust, and good faith? If the former, I am well equipped to meet cunning with cunning, and scheme with scheme; if the latter, I am well obliged to thank al-Hilal for her own good opinion of me, and her own good faith in me.

It seems most likely that al-Hilal has combined both cunning and good faith at once — so let me match her own cunning with cunning, and offer her my own abundant thanks, for her own good faith in me.

Let me set down, before anything else, to repay al-Hilal's own cunning with cunning of my own, that our revival is a genuine sign of this modern age, one whose full understanding and interpretation may well lie beyond even the reach of the mind, beyond even sustained, prolonged reflection: we have genuinely remade ourselves anew, and compelled the European world, not merely to recognise us, and believe in our own fruitful, productive life, but to reckon with us, and become genuinely certain that the modern world could never live without our own efforts,

that no one can do without our own share, in bearing the heavy burdens civilisation imposes on advanced peoples.

It is enough to read what Orientalists themselves write, about our own efforts at revival and creation, to agree with me that we are no longer what we once were: peoples Westerners thought of only as instruments, to be exploited, degraded, and used in the service of whatever interests colonialism pursued. We are, rather, peoples the Western nations have already become certain have slipped from their own grasp, and have come to believe in themselves, and their own rights. These Western nations can scarcely console themselves over our own having slipped from their grasp, yet they still try, wherever they can, to find some means — no longer of humiliating and exploiting us, since no path remains open to that — but of arranging relations between themselves and us, in whatever way best suits their own interests, purposes, and hopes for the future. Everything you read, in Orientalist books, and in their own long articles published in journals, dealing with our modern life, and our modern literature, is simply preparing the ground for that same day bound to come — and bound to come sooner than either we or they suppose — when the West finds itself facing an East strong, dear to itself, entirely fruitful, entirely productive, entirely hopeful, entirely industrious, with whom it must arrange relations resting on respect, and peace.

Whoever believes this same revival, which has brought us to our own present standing, and which will soon bring us to the point where the West looks upon us as an equal looks upon an equal, a peer upon a peer — whoever, I say, believes this same revival trivial, or slight, is guilty of excess in his own ambition, one setting no limit to his own hopes, no point at which they might rest, or come to an end. I am myself one of these same excessive men, content with the progress we have achieved, yet still refusing to be satisfied with it, or to rest easy in it, or to regard it as befitting what we deserve, and what we are genuinely capable of, in progress and advancement — content and indignant, both at once! And from this same contentment, and this same indignation, comes a temperament of mine, blending a smile with a frown, optimism with apprehension. And should you ask me what genuinely angers me, and stirs in me fear and apprehension, having already learned what pleases me, and stirs in me hope and expectation, you would find, in me, no answer that would satisfy you — yet one that satisfies me, and calls me, not to despair, nor to a halt, but to hope, and to a struggle that knows

neither weariness nor fatigue.

Yet our own revival, for all the success she has achieved, still lacks certain essential things, things without which no revival can genuinely endure. What is strange is not that we have failed to make good this same lack, or failed even to notice it — what is genuinely strange is that we rose, and went on rising, despite this same lack, until we reached exactly the point of progress where we now stand. But I believe we have reached a stage, in our own literary life, past which we cannot advance, unless we identify our own weak points, and expend whatever strength and effort we possess, to correct them, and rid ourselves of their own harmful effects.

The most evident weak points, in our own purely literary revival, are, I believe, four in number:

First: our own connection to classical Arabic literature remains weak, never reaching the strength it genuinely ought to have. So many of our writers know far more of foreign literature than they know of Arabic literature. Those with some grounding in Latin culture will speak to you, in precise detail, and at genuinely enjoyable length, of French and Italian writers, their own works, their own characteristics — yet ask them about our own classical writers, and few among them, God forgive me, very few, can sustain much conversation with you on the subject. Say the same of our writers steeped in Anglo-Saxon literature. People have already established, beyond dispute, that no modern writing carries any real value or substance, unless it rests most genuinely on classical literature — so, in our present state, we are building in mid-air, raising our modern literature on no foundation whatsoever, and there is simply no alternative but to redouble our own efforts in reviving classical literature, spreading it, and strengthening the bond between it and modern writers, until they feel, genuinely and strongly, that it is their own literature, not merely their fathers' and grandfathers' literature, and that they genuinely need to draw from it their own strength, and their own life.

Second: our own writers have managed only a genuinely limited culture, even within foreign literature itself — some influenced by Latin literature, scarcely venturing beyond it, others influenced by Anglo-Saxon literature, scarcely venturing beyond it either. This is an ugly deficiency, one that genuinely needs correcting, ridding ourselves of its own harm — a deficiency, since it narrows the very horizon of culture and knowledge; a deficiency, since it very nearly dissolves the writer's own personality,

and his own readers', into whatever Latin or Anglo-Saxon literature he is influenced by, and very nearly loses himself entirely within it. A writer genuinely deserving the name ought to draw the greatest possible share, from the widest variety of literary cultures, so as to complete his own personality through it, broaden his own horizon through it, and protect himself, through it, from dissolution, and from excessive imitation.

Third: our own writers, who genuinely master foreign literature, master it in breadth, and in extent, but not in depth — if this strange expression may be allowed — for they remain ignorant of the classical literatures that produced this same modern foreign literature. They are ignorant of Greek and Latin literature, exactly as they are ignorant of Arabic literature, or even more ignorant of it. They can, at least, read the works of the Arabs in their own language, yet they cannot read the works of the Greeks and Romans except in translation, and few of them even read those in translation. I genuinely cannot understand how anyone could master any single thing, without mastering its own origin, the very source it sprang from. I know perfectly well that there exist, in Europe, distinguished men with no real interest in studying classical literature — yet I would not want our own writers to be misled by this apparent inclination among these Europeans: they do not wish classical literature, and the classical languages, to remain compulsory for every educated person, as they once were. But they cannot conceive of a writer genuinely deserving the name, unless he has genuinely mastered this same classical literature, genuinely studied it and come to know it thoroughly. I am the last person to want classical literature imposed on all our students, or all our educated people — but I am among the most eager for our own productive writers to take a reasonable share of it.

Fourth: our own writers pay no real attention to science, never holding themselves to studying it, and becoming genuinely acquainted with a decent portion of it — and whoever remains ignorant of science, or of certain branches of it especially, remains ignorant of life itself. I genuinely do not know how any writer could be a true writer at all, unless his own writing is a genuine picture of life — nor do I know how any writer could possibly picture life, while remaining ignorant of it, knowing nothing of its own secrets and subtleties, nothing of its own phenomena and laws.

Perhaps these same varieties of weakness I have pointed to are exactly what explain the complaint we all share, and what Orientalists themselves hold against us: that our modern literature is manufactured,

not genuinely inspired, contrived, not a true picture of our own life. Had our own knowledge, of classical Arabic literature, been greater; had our own knowledge, of the various forms of modern literature, been greater; had our own knowledge, of the earliest origins of this same modern literature, been greater; had we taken a reasonable share, too, of pure science — had all of this been complete in us — life could never have passed us by, unnoticed, or rather, we could never have passed through life, unnoticed. Had all of this been complete in us, we would have genuinely lived, genuinely been touched by life, genuinely felt its own pleasure and pain, its own lessons and warnings, and everything in it that calls for inquiry and reflection. And had we genuinely felt all of this, we could never have turned away from depicting it, nor fallen short of what we wanted from doing so.

You can see, then, that despite these same ugly flaws, we have already managed to rise, and to produce, for ourselves, a contemporary literature genuinely worthy of admiration! What, then, might we achieve, were we to erase these same flaws, make good this same lack, and place ourselves exactly where Western writers have placed themselves, refusing ever to meet them and find ourselves unable to understand what they say, or to speak with them, whenever they expect us to speak?

It is a genuinely fine thing, to have achieved what we have achieved, despite such deficient means, such weak tools, such inadequate instruments — but finer still, more splendid still, would be to genuinely sense the weakness in our own revival, and remove it, putting in its place strength, fruitfulness, and vigour. How I wish we might take up the means to this, starting now — and how I wish that, after not too many years have passed, al-Hilal might return, and put exactly this same subject to me again. Then I would accuse her of no cunning, fear no scheme from her, and feel no hesitation at all, in answering whatever she wanted, happy to answer it, delighted to set down whatever triumph we shall, by then, have achieved — one beside which what we record today would scarcely be worth mentioning.