

Arabic Literature and Drama

al-Musawwar, 1 June 1934.

There is another question that must be posed, and that deserves to be lingered over at length and reflected upon: what is it with our men of letters, that they take no interest in the art of drama, and do not apply themselves to it? And what is it with those among them who do apply themselves to this art, that they do not succeed in mastering it, nor attain any real perfection in it?

As for the fact that our men of letters take no interest in drama and do not apply themselves to it, that is a plain, established matter, beyond any possible doubt. You are able, if you wish, to count the Egyptian men of letters who have set about producing dramatic work, and you will not reach five of them, and perhaps not even three. And as for the fact that, when they did apply themselves to the art of drama, they did not succeed in mastering it fully, nor in perfecting it fully — to the point that we may say the art of drama has not yet come into being as it ought to in Arabic literature — that too is a thing requiring no difficulty or effort to prove. Tell me, then, of the splendid Arabic dramatic work that was staged before the public, so that they were enchanted by it, flocked to it, pressed for its run to continue, and pressed likewise to keep attending it — a work the common people believed held pleasure and delight for them, and the learned believed possessed every quality and condition that makes a dramatic work a true dramatic work, worthy of life and lasting endurance.

And here one cannot forget Shawqi — God rest his soul — who took up drama in his final years, opening for poets a door they had not entered before, and presenting to the stage a number of poetic dramatic works on various subjects, some Arab, some Egyptian-Roman, some Egyptian-Persian, and others besides these, works the public witnessed and read and admired for a time, then turned away from entirely. It would be ungrateful and unjust to deny Shawqi's merit in this field; it is no small thing for a poet to undertake what no poet had undertaken before him, and to attain in it no mean measure of success — but it would likewise be excessive and unjust to say that these poetic dramatic works Shawqi composed — God rest his soul — satisfied the needs of the art of drama, or approached its highest ideals. They were, rather, a valuable and fertile attempt, not without merit, had the poet only taken them up

before weakness overtook him, and exhaustion seized him. And this too is one of Shawqi's merits, proving that he never flagged or wearied in production — indeed, in strenuous, vigorous production — down to the very last moment of his life; and if any blame is to be assigned to anyone, it is not to be assigned to Shawqi — God rest his soul — but rather to the other men of letters who possessed strength and vitality, and a breadth, depth, and variety of culture that Shawqi himself did not possess, and who nevertheless did not apply themselves to the art of drama before Shawqi did, and did not attempt to cultivate it after Shawqi had opened this door for them. Be that as it may, Shawqi's dramatic works were, more often than not, beautiful poetic song, but they were not drama in the precise technical sense of the word.

Nor can one arrive at this point in the reflection without mentioning those two splendid works composed by Tawfiq al-Hakim and brought before the public these last months: *Ahl al-Kahf* ("The People of the Cave") and *Shahrazad*. I have already set out my opinion of the first, and I shall perhaps set out my opinion of the second before long. Both are, in any case, among the finest things produced for the public in this modern literary age; but they are works meant to be read, works that stir in the reader's soul kinds of pleasure and satisfaction, provided that the reader be cultured, broadly learned, enlightened, and richly endowed with literary and artistic acquisitions. Were they presented on the stage, before an audience, I do not know how they would fare, nor to what fate they would come. The reason for this lies, on the one hand, in their being pitched above the general run of spectators, and, on the other, in their overstepping — or at least one of them, *Ahl al-Kahf*, overstepping — certain precise technical limits of the dramatic art.

And so there does not yet exist a dramatic work which, presented on the stage and shown to an audience, satisfies the needs of both literature and the theater, and realizes the true existence of drama in modern Arabic literature; and so it may be well for us to determine the reason that has kept modern Arabic literature from achieving the art of drama.

Do not say that this reason lies in some deficiency of the Arabic language, in its inability to bear this art and deliver its message to the people, as some claim — such talk serves no purpose. So long as the Arabic language has proven capable of accommodating the foreign drama translated into it, and so long as Arabic poetry has proven capable of bearing what Shawqi attempted to make it carry of drama, and so long as Arabic prose has proven capable of bearing what Tawfiq al-Hakim wished

to make it carry of drama, it is absurd to accuse the Arabic language of incapacity, deficiency, or narrowness in sustaining this art.

And it is certain that other nations had no prior acquaintance with drama, but saw the Greeks performing it, attempted to imitate them, and succeeded, making drama one of their own arts, and excelling in it to a considerable degree. Let our own case, then, be like the case of these nations: let us attempt drama in imitation, and we shall not be long in establishing our own original character within it.

Nor should you say that this reason lies in some deficiency of the Egyptian character itself, in its inability to bear the burdens of drama; for the Egyptians are known to be the most skilled of all people in precisely what good acting requires: imitation and mimicry, movements light or weighty, the display of hidden feelings, and the concealment of visible ones. The Egyptian in the street is always an actor, whether quarreling or amusing himself, whether conversing or buying and selling; and perhaps the first impression the streets of Cairo and Alexandria leave on the European's mind is that the Egyptian is a natural actor. Need we go far to prove this, when we set out to imitate the Europeans in the whole of our public life, and found no difficulty or effort in it at all — so much so that we deceived the Europeans about themselves and about us, persuaded many of them, and made all of them imagine that we had become just like them in everything?

We are, then, natural actors, and skilled ones, and our language is capable of bearing the burdens of drama, of rising to its demands, and of penetrating its secrets and subtleties. What, then, keeps our men of letters from attending to drama? And what prevents them from excelling in it, should they attempt it? Two things, and no third, I believe — two things you will always find whenever you seek the causes behind any manifestation of weakness in our literary and artistic life: the meagerness of our share of culture, and the meagerness of our share of freedom. We are capable of imitation, and skilled at it, but we must know what it is we ought to imitate; we must study the art of drama as other nations have known it, in their ancient and modern ages alike. We must master this art, and gain a thorough knowledge of its secrets, its phases, and its various techniques. The masterpieces of drama must be taught to us through a broad, deep, exacting course of study that reveals to us the beauty within them, that makes us love this beauty, and that drives us to imitate and emulate it, and to carry its finest works over into our own Arabic tongue. Where, then, is drama taught in Egypt? Where is dramatic

literature taught in Egypt? And where is the man of letters who can say he has attained a truly broad dramatic-literary culture? And where, further, is the audience versed in what an ordinary cultured person ought to know of dramatic matters? We are capable of imitation, and skilled at it — but only where that imitation is permitted, where nothing in law or social order forbids it. Do our men of letters, then, enjoy this literary and artistic freedom that would permit them to treat whatever subjects they wish, composing dramatic works on them and bringing them before the stage, having addressed in them whatever they wished, by way of critique and analysis, of public and private life? No. Our men of letters do not enjoy this share of freedom; rather, they are bound by heavy fetters and chains, among them official censorship, which permits of this nothing but what satisfies it alone, and popular censorship, which permits of this nothing but what satisfies its own particular taste, and other forms of surveillance besides, which it is better not to address just now. I imagine people know these forms quite well. And if we are denied both broad culture and broad freedom, it is no wonder that we take no interest in drama, and produce nothing in it; the wonder, rather, would be if we took the interest in it that we have taken so far, and produced in it what we have produced so far.

You will say: and who is to blame for denying the Egyptians the culture and freedom they ought to have in art and letters?

The answer is easy; for there are not two parties to blame, but one single party at fault, one single party to blame, and that is the State; for the State in Egypt has, rightly or wrongly, monopolized culture and freedom, distributing them to the people whenever it wishes, however it wishes, and in whatever measure satisfies it. So when Egyptians complain that their share of culture is meager, they are really complaining of the State's stinginess toward them in their due share of culture; and when Egyptians complain that their share of freedom is meager, they are really complaining of the State's stinginess toward them in freedom. God has willed that Egyptians should not seize their needs from the State by force, but should instead petition for what they want through request, insistence, and excessive insistence, whereupon the State grants at times and withholds at others. Be that as it may, the rise of drama — I mean true drama, drama deserving of the name — the rise of drama in modern Arabic literature is one of the necessities of modern Egyptian life; for the Egyptians — whether regrettably or happily — have become a people no longer content with material life and material

comfort alone, but who desire an intellectual life and an intellectual comfort as well. And drama is one of the pillars of intellectual life and intellectual comfort, so the Egyptians can do without it no longer, and have no way to it except by winning their due share of broad culture and broad freedom. Let the Egyptians, then, consider how they may win from these two what they want.