

Between Classical and Colloquial

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Everything is possible, even that time should turn back and walk backward after having moved forward — and I do not mean by "time" those senses which philosophers argue over defining and fixing; this discourse belongs neither to the philosophy of philosophers nor to the learning of scholars in any way, but by "time" I mean the affairs of people that consume their hours and their efforts and exhaust their powers and energy, advancing sometimes and falling behind at other times, pressing forward at one moment and holding back at another.

And I have no doubt that there was a time which passed over us when our linguistic affairs were moving forward and our literary life was advancing without hesitation or delay, as though it wished to outpace events and calamities and hurry along the turning of the celestial sphere, so as to reach the twenty-first century before reaching even the middle of the twentieth, let alone its end.

For at that time education was far less widespread, by comparison with what has been granted it in these days of breadth and penetration into the depths of the people, and the elders of letters — whom God's mercy has since claimed, and the youths of letters who have since become elders in these days — used to write in classical literary Arabic, competing among themselves as to who could bend it most skillfully, grant it the greatest ease, and make it most capable of accommodating such meanings, reflections, and opinions as it had not been accustomed to accommodate without this proving burdensome or exhausting for it, or turning it away from the path that its own nature and temperament had traced out for it.

And those possessed of superior culture, and those possessed of middling culture, and those possessed of modest culture, and those who could hardly lay claim to any culture at all — all of these used to compete in reading and dispute among themselves, one faction content, another faction indignant, and a third wavering between indignation and contentment.

And the political leaders used to prefer certain men of letters over others, and would forbid their followers from reading what the writers they were indignant with had written, and would sometimes prohibit

them from reading certain newspapers by name, and would sometimes announce to them that they, the leaders, would read those newspapers on their behalf; and the followers would listen and applaud, but once they had parted from their leaders they would hurry to the forbidden newspapers, buy them, and slip them into their pockets, so that when they returned to their homes they would retreat with those newspapers and read them closely, paying no heed, between themselves and their own consciences, to their leaders' prohibition and ban on this reading.

And those newspapers used to be published in classical literary Arabic, and their writers competed in perfecting the language and refining the style; they had set for themselves lofty literary ideals from which they would not depart merely to court their readers' favor, but rather rose toward those ideals in order to entice their readers into sharing in that very elevation. And some of the youth in those days tried to write in colloquial Arabic and to promote it vigorously — not to flatter their readers, but to reach them at the level of understanding, taste, and responsiveness — yet they achieved the opposite of what they intended, for readers turned away from them and circles of the cultured mocked them, and they were forced to abandon their colloquial Arabic and return to the classical tongue.

And Hafez — God rest his soul — used to thunder with his political poetry, and Shawqi — God rest his soul — devoted himself to his dramatic and political poetry, and both of them followed the way of the ancients in their diction and style, and in their meter and rhyme, and those who listened to the two great poets or read them were pleased, admired them, and memorized their poetry by heart, finding nothing in this poetry's gravity and dignity, nor in its imitation of the ancients, to turn them away from it or make them wary of it or disinclined toward it. And we used to reproach the two great poets for their excessive imitation of the ancients and their shortfall in innovation and their extremism in preserving the ways of the ancients, so that people would read what we wrote, and a very small minority among them — those of elevated culture — would be pleased, while a very great majority — those of middling and slight culture — would be indignant.

That was a quarter-century ago or more, and I used to reproach the conservatives in language and literature for their sanctification of the language and for surrounding it with that religious reverence which preserves it from evolution and protects it from renewal, and I used to say that the Arabic language is indeed the language of the Qur'an, no

doubt about that, but it is at the same time the language of those who speak it, and it is only right that it should respond to its own people, keep pace with their development, and accompany their life through its varying circumstances. And it did so in the earliest ages, for it had scarcely emerged from the Arabian desert before it took up the new civilization, broadened to encompass its sciences and philosophy, and its own literature evolved along with that civilization, expressing with ease and generosity what had never occurred to the desert Bedouin by way of reflections, meanings, and opinions.

And people used to condemn me most severely for this stance, considering that I had overstepped every bound in excess, that I had gone too far in innovation until I had carried it beyond what was proper of moderation and restraint, of gentleness and patience, and that I had taken it down the path of revolution rather than the path of evolution and gradual transition.

And I used to laugh at the very first lesson which the students of al-Azhar al-Sharif used to hear when they began the study of grammar, when the shaykhs would read to them the author's — God rest his soul — opening words: "Praise be to God, who made the language of the Arabs the most eloquent of languages."

And I used to say that the language of the Arabs is indeed eloquent, no doubt about that, but there are other languages on earth no less eloquent, no less elegant, and no less distinguished. And the conservatives used to regard this statement of mine as recklessness and a squandering of inherited values, and a revolt against the traditions handed down from fathers to sons. And I used to joke about a dispute some of the ancients used to have, over whether the language of the people of Paradise in the hereafter was the Arabic language or the Syriac language, and the most extreme of the conservatives would be sorely vexed with me over that.

And I recall that when I set out to travel to Europe to complete my studies, Shaykh Bakhit — God rest his soul — asked me: "What is it you mean to study in Europe?" And I said to him, joking: "I mean to study the Syriac language!" And he said: "And why would you study the Syriac language?!" I said: "So that I may answer the two angels properly when they question me in the grave — for they question in the Syriac language!" And I recited to him what I remembered of the saying of some of the old Azharis:

*Among the strange things the eyes behold
is that the grave's questioning is held in Syriac
So ruled our shaykh al-Balqini*

So the shaykh grew angry, and those present laughed, most of them wearing the tarboosh; and I met the shaykh again after my return from Europe, and I greeted him but did not kiss his hand, and he wished to make me feel his contempt for me and his scorn for what I had learned in Europe and for the new attire I had adopted, so he would address me by nothing but "Taha Effendi"!

And that form of address alone will tell you all you need of contempt and scorn! Such was our condition more than a quarter-century ago: trust in classical literary Arabic, and faith in its capacity to endure, to outlast time, and to overcome the events that renew people's lives from day to day, not from year to year.

And there is no doubt that that old generation of ours achieved complete success in what it attempted of renewing literature and bringing the youth back to the language, after it had been overtaken in recent centuries by symptoms resembling those of old age and decrepitude.

No one in those days found fault with us for strangeness of diction or convolution of style or obscurity of meaning; rather, people followed us, pleased with us, encouraging us, sensing that we were restoring to them something dear and cherished in their souls, long absent from them, for which their longing had grown intense — namely, that artistic beauty which comes from the graciousness and fluency of diction, from the ease and clarity of meanings, and from the purity and limpidity of styles.

Al-Mazini — God rest his soul — never hesitated to revive those old styles which he found in Abd al-Qahir al-Jurjani and in those who preceded him among the masters of criticism and rhetoric, and people would read him and admire him and ask for more of that art of his, at once new and old.

And Mustafa Abd al-Razzaq — God rest his soul — never hesitated to adopt deliberate, measured patience in his literary output, devoting long stretches of time to writing the short essay, refining its meanings, perfecting its diction, and purifying its style so thoroughly that we used to compare his literary works to those jewels which craftsmen labor over meticulously and produce as a marvel for onlookers, with no possible way

to find fault with them, whether apparent or hidden.

And people used to speak of this writer or that, saying that he followed the way of al-Jahiz or the way of Ibn al-Muqaffa', considering this praise and commendation of him; but we were not satisfied with such commendation and such praise, because we were not merely reviving those styles — we were reviving them, enriching them, and using them to express meanings, opinions, and reflections that had never occurred to al-Jahiz or Ibn al-Muqaffa'.

We used through them to translate the poetry of poets and the prose of writers among the luminaries of literature in the West, finding in that no hardship or difficulty, and we used through them to express, out of our own selves, what suited the age we lived in, of the affairs of this life which resembles, neither closely nor remotely, the life of the ancient writers of Basra, Kufa, and Baghdad.

And we used to provoke Hafez and Shawqi and other poets when we said that Arabic prose was what had truly advanced in this modern age, because it had innovated things the ancients had never known, without compromising the eloquence and dignity of the language, and without deviating from its established foundations or its enduring nature — whereas poetry could do nothing but revive the ways of the Abbasids, influenced by them and influencing [its readers] through them as well.

And I used to go to excess in pressing the two great poets, tracing some of their verses back to their old models in the poetry of al-Buhturi, Abu Tammam, and al-Mutanabbi, and they would grow sorely vexed at that and attempt innovation and originality, succeeding at it a great deal.

Where, then, are we now from that life we used to live a quarter-century ago, of which I have related only brief fragments, and which is attested by texts that people still read and read often, drawing on much of them to help them bear the life they live now?!

And there is no doubt that many different causes have led us to this grave literary disorder in which we now find ourselves, a disorder that appears in forms that contradict one another most sharply; for the minds of our youth are fertile, their hearts are keen, and their insights are penetrating — none but the stubborn would deny this — and because of these qualities they possess a remarkable capacity for artistic production, and because of these qualities they have output that preserves them from despair and opens doors to broad hopes — this too none but the stubborn

would deny.

But these young men of letters are made wretched by their own art, and their readers are no less wretched than they, for a reason exceedingly simple: namely, that the means of expression fail them most alarmingly, so that the works of many of them resemble nothing so much as a dazzling, enchanting beauty displayed in ragged, tattered garments that disfigure that charm and spoil that enchantment, leaving hearts painfully torn between being drawn to it for its authenticity and sincerity, and turning away from it for the shabbiness of its images and the crudeness of its diction.

And our young men of letters sense this keenly, both from themselves and from their readers, and are sorely troubled by it, yet they attempt neither remedy nor cure for it — they merely persist in it as one who has given up hope, clinging to it as the obstinate, contentious man clings to his position when beauty eludes him so that he becomes infatuated with ugliness, and perfection escapes him so that he clings fast to deficiency and makes of it a doctrine and a method.

Nor do they content themselves with the obstinacy into which they fall where there is no place for obstinacy, and the contentiousness where there is no place for contentiousness, but they go on to disparage those who came before them, and then to depart from the forms of expression people have grown accustomed to, preferring eloquence to clumsiness and refinement to vulgarity. And if none of this avails them anything, they rise up against the language itself and wage against it a war that can be described, at the very least, as barren — availing them nothing and bringing them little or no benefit.

For it is simply not true that classical literary Arabic has died or is on the verge of dying; nor is it true that classical literary Arabic has been overtaken by weakness, feebleness, or deficiency. The proof of this is that people express themselves through it when they write what they wish to write on various subjects, finding in that neither difficulty nor hardship; they compose books, translate what foreigners compose in the lands of East and West, and publish newspapers and magazines. And people read what is composed in books and what is translated, just as they read what is published in newspapers and magazines, finding in this no harm and suffering in it no strain.

And the proof of this too is that people publish the old books that were written in classical literary Arabic in their various eras, and they are

read by those possessed of deep and broad culture and by those possessed of middling and narrow culture, and most of them do not read them under compulsion, nor, likewise, do most of them read them for free, but spend on reading them time, money, and effort out of love for them, desire for them, and eagerness to preserve them.

And this is not the condition of a language that has died or is about to die, nor the condition of a language overtaken by weakness, feebleness, or deficiency, but rather the condition of a language that remains alive, capable of life, strong, capable of overcoming the events and calamities that alter people's lives from one day to the next.

And our young men of letters fall into a grave error indeed when they imagine that classical literary Arabic cannot be correct or sound unless it takes on that old form familiar to them from the poetry and prose of the ancients during the three or four centuries of the Hijra; and in falling into this error they deny evolution and forget its first truths, for the language of the first century of the Hijra was not entirely identical to the language of the pre-Islamic pagans, and the language of Abu Nuwas and his companions was not entirely identical to the language of al-Farazdaq and Jarir, and the language of al-Mutanabbi and his contemporaries was not that of Abu Nuwas and his peers and age-mates, and the language in which I now address them — and in which other writers besides myself address them — is not the language in which the writers of the third century addressed their readers. And the meaning of all this is that the life of a language is one thing, and its rigidity and its resistance to evolution are something else entirely.

And these friends of ours among the young men of letters fall into another error no less grave than the first: some of them have read in certain books that the Latin language was once alive, vigorous, and widespread across western Europe, and then it died, and various languages arose from it in many lands of this western Europe. And how quickly they leap from what they have read to conclude that classical literary Arabic is an ancient language from which colloquial dialects have arisen, and that it has therefore died, and that the colloquial dialects have taken its place — or that it must die so that the colloquial dialects may take its place.

And I have said a thousand times over: I fear nothing for our youth so much as I fear for them their hasty thinking and their snap judgments; for the Latin language did not die suddenly, and the modern languages

did not take its place suddenly; the Latin language did not die because the youth among its own sons passed a sentence of death upon it one fine day and decided that the colloquial dialects should take its place — rather, the Latin language died very, very slowly, after long and weighty calamities, which is not the place to speak of here.

And classical literary Arabic has likewise been exposed to long and weighty calamities, which the books of history have recorded, but it has to this day triumphed over these calamities; it has not died, nor has it been overtaken by feebleness or deficiency, but has resisted and striven, and has been granted triumph and victory, and has remained alive, strong, and evolving, while the colloquial dialects have remained weak and slight, unfit for literary expression, little or much.

And the proof of this is that we know of no splendid, enduring literary work written to this day in any of these dialects, and it is not enough for us to declare that a given language has died for it to actually die, nor is it enough for us to pass a death sentence on a given language for our verdict to become an inescapable fate, and for this language to die simply because we have willed its death.

All of this is sheer futility, a disorder in matters that bring neither benefit nor profit nor any good to people, and a surrender to the laziness that saps resolve, dulls perception, and deadens hearts; and far better than all of this is that we approach the affairs of classical literary Arabic and its problems as we approach other matters and problems, seeking for it such solutions as suit it, and never despairing of attaining these solutions.

And classical literary Arabic does indeed have serious problems, no doubt about that, and we have been alert to these problems since the close of the last century, but we have not yet found the courage to resolve them without hesitation or delay; rather, those among us inclined to compromise have obstructed, and those among us inclined to maneuver have maneuvered, and we have let matters proceed as best they could — thereby exposing our language and our literature to grave harm.

And I will mention now only two of these problems, each of them exceedingly grave: the first is Arabic orthography, whose reform people have demanded since the close of the last century, as I recall, without achieving anything; and the second is the science of grammar, whose reform people have attempted since the beginning of this century, without achieving anything either.

And the principle people must be alert to is that writing — like grammar — was in the past confined to a small minority of people, but has become, under the dispensation of modern systems, imposed upon entire peoples; it was aristocratic and has become democratic, if this expression be sound. And just as aristocracy entails difficulty, hardship, and restriction, because it represents monopoly, exclusivity, and the erection of barriers and obstacles before what the privileged few claim for themselves alone, so democracy entails ease, facility, and generosity, and the removal of obstacles and the smoothing of the path.

And if you wish to be obeyed, ask only what can be done. We want the entire people to be literate, able to write and read, so let us make writing and reading easy for them, that they may attain their need of both in breadth and comfort, with ease and gentleness.

And we are writing now just as we were writing more than a thousand years ago, when writing was a privilege monopolized by a minority of people; so if that privilege is to be abolished, then abolish along with it the kinds of difficulty and hardship it used to require, and make writing and reading easy, so that all people may be able to write and read without wasting effort and time they cannot spare.

And it is the height of sheer folly and the most ignorant ignorance indeed to ask of the common people that they understand well in order to write and read well, for the proper order is that people should first write and read, and understand afterward. And say the same with respect to grammar: we teach our children and our youth the foundations of the Arabic language and its distinctive features just as they were taught twelve centuries ago in Basra, Kufa, and Baghdad, even though life has changed and minds have changed, and the old grammar has become history, studied by specialists, and there is no escaping the need for a simplified, accessible grammar that these vast millions of pupils can understand.

And our children and youth learn the European languages without finding any hardship or difficulty in understanding the grammar of those languages, because their grammar has evolved to suit the new life and the new mind.

And stranger still is that the dead Latin language is taught to children and youth in Europe, and those children and youth find no hardship or difficulty in understanding Latin grammar, because it has been simplified to suit the new life and the new mind. And say the same

with respect to the ancient Greek language — how strange, that dead languages should have their grammar taught now with the greatest ease, while a living language, our own Arabic, has its grammar taught with the greatest hardship, ending for its pupils in nothing but ignorance of it and hatred of it, and hatred of the entire Arabic language on its account.

And I am entirely confident that reforming Arabic orthography and simplifying Arabic grammar are together capable of relieving the rising generation of our youth of this heavy burden that afflicts the contemporary writers among our young men of letters, who learned the Arabic language by methods unsuited to their minds and temperaments, so that they neither mastered it well nor felt at ease with it, and were driven in the end to that literary output, wretched to produce and wretched for their readers to receive, which combines beauty and ugliness, excellence and poorness, all at once; and driven as well to that endless complaint of the difficulty and intractability of classical Arabic, and to that bitter demand that recourse be had to colloquial dialects, setting them up in place of classical literary Arabic, which suffers so at the hands of its own professors and teachers.

And I should like, finally, to draw the attention of our men of letters who call for recourse to the colloquial dialects to a grave matter which I do not think they have properly considered: namely, that the Arab world today, and much of the people of the entire Eastern world, understands classical literary Arabic, and takes it as a means of expressing their own selves and of sound, strong communication among its far-flung regions.

So let us beware of encouraging writing in colloquial dialects, lest every region persist ever more in its own dialect, and these dialects grow ever more remote and estranged from one another, until a day comes when the Egyptian needs to have the books of the Syrians, the Lebanese, and the Iraqis translated into his own dialect, and the people of Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq need likewise to have Egyptian books translated into their dialects — just as the French translate from the Italians and the Spanish, and these in turn translate from the French.

And let us finally ask ourselves which is better: that the whole Arab world should have a single language, namely classical literary Arabic, understood by the people of Morocco just as it is understood by the people of Iraq, or that this world should have as many languages as there are countries composing it, each translating from the other as some Europeans translate from others?

As for myself, I prefer the unity of the language, and I trust entirely that it will triumph in the end, and I hold, without hesitation, that this unity of language deserves that those who believe in it should struggle in its cause, and should sacrifice for its sake everything they possess.