

Our Literary Life

Beirut, 30 September 1944.

When I was in the city of Lyon this past September, I met my friend Professor Gibb, who concerns himself most closely with modern Arabic literature, and who has written valuable chapters on it, some translated, some summarized — all of which captivated people and charmed them with their power of observation, precision of analysis, and thoroughness of inquiry. We spoke of contemporary Arabic literature, and I asked him: What is being prepared for us these days, and about whom does he wish to speak to us next? He said: "I am still waiting for the new Arabic novel I should write about, by which I might record the growth and progress of this literature — but this novel is slow to appear, and my wait for it has grown long, and I see nothing but that it will grow longer and longer still; for there is nothing on the horizon of Arabic literature that heralds the appearance of this novel. Indeed, it grieves me to say that everything I see on this horizon suggests that the splendid vitality which had once possessed Arabic literary life has begun to flag, and that this literary life has for some years now fallen into a stagnation unlike any other, becoming so sluggish and lifeless that it has all but lost both movement and output."

And it is strange that as I listened to these words I found in listening to them a painful comfort, and a wretched satisfaction; for I had been saying much the same thing to myself, and so I took comfort in our agreement of opinion, in the fact that the same thought had occurred to each of us independently — yet it pained me that this opinion should be true, that this thought should be correct, and that it should be an undeniable fact that our literary life has, in these last years, stagnated in a manner both visible and disgraceful, bringing with it a great deal of sorrow and disappointed hope; for the political movement that shook Egypt and the East after the Great War had stirred a visible vitality into literary life, so that writers and literary producers multiplied on the one hand, and their literary works grew more varied on the other.

And this vitality grew so intense that it compelled a number of orientalists — in England, such as Professor Gibb at the School of Oriental Studies in London; in France, such as Professor Pérès at the Faculty of Letters in Algiers; in Germany, such as Professor Kampffmeyer in Berlin; and in Russia, such as Professor Krachkovsky in Leningrad — to

turn their attention to modern Arabic literature, to pause over it, and to take it up with study, criticism, and analysis; and some of them turned away from classical literature altogether, fixing their attention, or very nearly so, upon the modern alone.

And some of them selected chapters of this literature and gathered them into books published to the public, read by young orientalist students at universities, and read likewise by orientalists who observe the East and watch over the political, artistic, and intellectual development it undergoes. And it seems that this concern of Easterners for this modern literature, and their eagerness over whatever literary works we produced, and the orientalists' attention to these works of ours, and their energetic study and criticism of them — all of this pleased us and delighted us, and filled us with vanity and conceit, so that we were deceived about ourselves, and it seemed to us that we had reached the very summit of a rich and valuable literary life; and the writer among our writers began to care more about what people said of him in East and West than about writing and producing itself.

And some newspaper proprietors did not hesitate to translate what the orientalists wrote about him, or to reprint what Easterners wrote about him, gazing at it admiringly, indulging excessively in gazing at it, extravagant in their admiration of it — like a beautiful woman gazing into a mirror, delighted by her own reflection, who goes on gazing and staring at it, so absorbed that it distracts her from everything else. And then these writers themselves took to studying one another, speaking of one another, each taking up the other for criticism and study, and each answering whatever fault was pointed out in him, until we indulged in this to a hideous excess, and were kept busy with it at the expense of actual production.

And I recall that I sensed this excess, drew attention to it, and warned against it, saying two years ago that our writers resemble fire in the old proverb: it consumes itself when it finds nothing else to consume. And I asked our writers to leave themselves alone for a while, and to turn instead to life itself, to understand it, to study it, to depict it, and to carry on with that rich and valuable production in which they had once engaged — but not one of our writers heeded this call; they went on speaking of themselves, and reading what people said about them, until people grew weary of them and fell silent about them, and they themselves grew weary and turned away from it — but they turned away into silence, not into speech, into languor, not into vitality.

And the proof of this is that you may search for the books that appeared some years ago and scarcely find a thing, and search for the splendid literary chapters once published in newspapers and magazines and find nothing at all; the literary fare now offered to people in these days is merely what the newspapers and magazines publish of political talk, which has grown so frequent and repetitive that it has become hateful and detested, along with this easy, trivial, empty sort of literature that satisfies neither mind nor feeling, calls for neither reflection nor thought, but is merely a diversion by which people while away their time on the tram or the train, and hasten their sleep when they retire to their beds at night. Whoever among them refuses to settle for anything but the enjoyable literature that nourishes the soul and satisfies the mind has no choice but to seek it in whatever foreign European literature happens to appear.

And this evil, for all its ugliness and disgrace, would be a mild one, bearable enough, were it not that it brings in its train another evil, uglier still in its effect and more disgraceful, for the nature of a healthy literary life requires that there be, in literature, successive generations following one upon another — moderate elders and innovating youth — so that when the elders fall silent, the young speak, and when the elders fall short, the young come forward. But the matter among us stands otherwise: our youth have turned away from literary production, indeed from any concern with literature at all, while our elders grew old before their time and fell silent, though there remained in their tongues and their pens some little life yet.

And you may search for the young poet who has arisen in these years, turning a number of young people away from Shawqi, Hafiz, and Mutran, and you will not find him; and search for the young writer who has appeared and devised some new method in prose, turning some people away from Haykal, al-Aqqad, and al-Mazini, and you will not come upon him either. And the sum of our literary situation is that the leading figures of our literature have grown idle and produce nothing, and that Egyptian youth has turned away from literature altogether, taking no interest in it, let alone producing within it. And worse still, there are among our Egyptian youth some who possess a feeling soul, a beating heart, and a thinking mind — who are moved by life and wish to depict it, or to depict their own being moved by it — but when they attempt this, their Arabic fails to serve them, and so they describe what they wish in French or in English instead, describing it well, achieving real excellence,

and winning the admiration of European readers.

And it is a strange thing that there exists in Egypt today a literary circle, made up jointly of Egyptians and foreigners, which has taken a foreign language as the mirror of its hearts and minds, the tongue of its emotions and feelings — and yet we still insist on believing that there is in Egypt a literary renaissance, which we describe now as vigorous, now as magnificent. No — there was once a literary renaissance in Egypt, but it has been flagging for some years now, and I fear that this flagging is itself the herald of stagnation, and after stagnation, of utter torpor. As for the cause of this ruinous flagging, seek it, if you wish, in the teaching of the Arabic language and Arabic literature in the secondary schools — which is, thank God, barren and sterile, as it has always, invariably, been barren and sterile; and seek it too in the newspapers' and magazines' eagerness to attract the greatest possible number of readers, and their consequent descent from valuable literature that calls for reflection to empty literature that suits idleness and merely fills time; and seek it, beyond this and that, in these empty political quarrels, which advance no political renaissance and bring nothing new, but merely repeat today what they were saying ten years ago. Whatever the cause of this flagging may be, it is an evil that must be reckoned with by those who still imagine that Egypt possesses a thriving literary life.