

Organizing the Renaissance

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I want nothing but the intellectual renaissance, for it is the one I can speak of with some knowledge of its affairs, and it is, I think, the mainstay of every other kind of renaissance, however much these may differ. Human civilization today is a trace of the mind's workings, a manifestation of activity in sensation, feeling, and thought. That means it rests on culture more than on anything else: when culture is sound, civilization is sound; when culture strays from its reasonable course, civilization strays with it; when culture weakens, civilization shares in that weakness. On this basis you may measure a people's civilization by its culture, just as you may measure a people's culture by its civilization.

Civilization is a structure that peoples raise in their homelands, and that humanity raises upon the earth. If the workers who undertake to raise this structure are cultured, skilled, and accomplished, their building will be solid, handsome, close to goodness and perfection; and if they are ignorant, coarse, and remiss, their building will be unsteady, feeble, and ill-shaped, as far as can be from anything that suits beauty or deserves to be called perfect.

These are first principles we state without saying anything new, for everyone already knows them, and to dispute them is to waste time to no purpose, since everyone already believes them. And yet we still need to repeat them from time to time, because people sometimes forget them, and because Egypt is a country whose people love to dispute first principles and to argue over what admits of neither dispute nor contention. You may travel through time in history, or travel through space in geography, and you will always find this constant bond between civilization and culture that I have pointed to, reluctantly. So when we think about organizing the intellectual renaissance, or speak of this organization, we are in fact thinking about raising Egyptian civilization, and speaking of its reform; and I want to spare Egyptians the vanity of being deluded about themselves, the pride that takes hold of their affairs and makes them imagine their civilization so advanced it needs no raising, so sound it needs no reform — for if God were to afflict them with this trial in their estimation of themselves, they would be doing nothing but perishing, since they would have reached the utmost limit life allows

them, with nothing left but to await extinction. I do not claim that all Egyptians are immune to this vanity, innocent of this temptation.

There may be much excess in this claim, for among us — thank God for both good and ill — are people who believe they have reached the limit and arrived at the furthest term, and who are deeply wounded by talk such as the kind we are engaged in now; they harbor suspicions of its author, accuse him of a sin against his own homeland, and brand him as infatuated with what is not Egyptian and contemptuous of what is purely Egyptian.

I shall forget many things before I forget the anger of a group of people, roused because I said on the radio — or the wireless, as the Academy of the Arabic Language has wished us to call it for some time now — that our Arabic language was cultured in the earliest ages, because its people carried into it the sciences and literatures of other nations, and that it is uncultured now because we do not carry into it what other nations possess of sciences and letters. They were angered by that, and by my saying that those who are now content, in science and letters, with what our Arabic language contains fall short of the culture a man ought to have in this modern age, and that they must therefore seek their share of culture in a living European language, or else the state must rise and translate this culture for them, in an organized, sustained translation, into Arabic. They were angered by this, and said he has charged his nation with ignorance, has reproached half its enlightened men with deficiency, and has claimed that every educated man who does not know a foreign language well is not cultured — and that is sin enough, and excess enough in denial and outrage. And one of them said: I swear that if I were called to choose between attending the lectures given at the university and exposing myself to harm, I would choose the latter over the former, and would refuse to go to an institute presided over by a man who disdains the learned, belittles the worth of men of merit, and makes culture hostage to foreign jargon rather than to the language of Arabic.

I shall forget many things before I forget this talk that was reported to me, and before I forget another talk a dear friend addressed to me, gently reproaching me for having claimed that those who seek their culture in the Arabic language find nothing sufficient to them, nothing suited to the share that is their due in the twentieth century. For vast classes of Egypt's enlightened men know no foreign language, and cannot seek in one any further measure of science or letters, and so are

compelled to content themselves with what they find in our Arabic language; and it is not right that we should describe these vast classes, whom we love and regard with sympathy, and from among whom we honor rare men deserving of reverence and esteem, as lacking the share of culture suited to this age. And so, it is said, we ought to be content with what God has apportioned us, and should seek no more of good, nor any further measure of advancement. I do not know what our condition would be if we followed this same path in the other branches of our life, and said that our economic system, for all its deficiency, for all that it falls so far short, in so many of us, of rising to the great works of economic life, ought not to be criticized nor its reform sought, since to do so would be a reproach to many Egyptians who know of economic affairs only what is old and long outworn and no longer suited to the circumstances of the modern age. And what would our condition be if we said the like of our social life, and what would our condition be if we shrank from reform and detested the call to it, on the ground that every call to reform is a repudiation of something old that must be abandoned, and a complaint of some deficiency that must be disavowed. No: those who chafe at the call to reform do not chafe at reform itself, for they aspire to it, take up its causes, and press toward it with all their might; but at the same time they love themselves and hold themselves in high regard, and it pains them to have their deficiencies pointed out, or to be reminded by anyone of the perfection they still lack. The proof of this is that al-Azhar itself, for instance, utterly discards all its old institutions and begins a new life bearing no relation to its recent past, let alone its distant one, and believes everything we have told it for many long years — that Europe has sciences worth seeking, a philosophy worth studying, a literature worth acquiring. Nor does it merely believe this, but answers the call we made to it so many years ago, and sets about acquiring European science, European letters, and European philosophy — acquiring some of it in Egypt, and sending a party abroad to seek it in France, England, and Germany. Yet if you deny it this, it grows angry and resentful at you, for trying to hold it back from life and keep it from advancement; and if you tell it that its old learning no longer suffices, and that its present Arabic culture avails it nothing, it grows angry and resentful at you, for wounding its pride. So it combines these two opposites: it seeks European culture and goes to excess in seeking it, on the one hand, and resents being told there is good or benefit in this culture, on the other. And the School of Sciences (Dar al-'Ulum) comes close to resembling al-Azhar in this respect: it desires reform, proclaims this desire openly, insists upon it, and seeks ever more of European

culture, demanding that foreign languages be taught within it — yet if it is told that its present contentment with the old and its scant share of the new do not suit it, nor its standing, nor what is expected of it, it grows angry and takes offense, for such talk wounds its pride.

How I wish we could understand pride in a sounder, truer, more upright sense than this. It does not wound me to be told that I am ignorant of this or that branch of knowledge, if I am indeed ignorant of it; what wounds me is to be told that I know this or that branch of knowledge when I know nothing of it at all.

And I assure these gentlemen that I am pained when I hear a lecture in German and do not understand it, and when I find a book in German and cannot understand it except by way of a translator; I am pained by this, and grieved by it, and complain of it, and sorrow over it, because I do not find the time or the favorable circumstance that would let me remedy this deficiency — but it does not wound me in the least if someone should say of me that I am ignorant of German and can reach what it contains of knowledge only by way of translation and transmission.

And so we do not reproach these gentlemen for their deficiency, any more than we reproach ourselves for ours, of which we have no little; we wish only that the coming generation's condition be better than this generation's, that the coming generation's deficiency be less than this generation's, and we want to understand the matters of the renaissance rightly, and to correct an ugly, widespread error into which many of those who oversee and concern themselves with education fall. Many people want foreign languages to spread in Egypt, thinking this the road to culture; we would have these people know that the spread of foreign languages in Egypt is no bad thing, and may indeed hold much good, but it is not the road to culture, or is not the straight, productive road to it; rather the road is for culture to be carried to Egyptians in their own language, and for them to seek it in this language before seeking it in any other.

Foreign languages are rather tools for adding to knowledge, not for acquiring what is essential of it. And so long as we rely upon a foreign language to acquire by its means what is essential of knowledge and culture, we remain dependent on the foreigner, and fall short in our own selves, in our own language, and in our very homeland itself. Al-Jahiz, I think, was a cultured man — perhaps one of the most broadly and deeply

cultured of his age — and I do not think he knew Greek or Syriac, yet he knew what Greek and Syriac held of knowledge, because it had been carried into the Arabic language, and because the men in power at that time understood culture better than we understand it now, and judged better than we judge now what was owed to cultivating the language and the people.

So if we demand that the sciences and letters of Europe be carried into the Arabic language, that the language itself be made rich and cultured, and that its sons be able to find knowledge within it without having to seek it against the foreigner and by way of a foreign language — if we demand this, are we thereby charging the nation with ignorance, holding its scholars in contempt, reproaching its enlightened men, falling short in our duty to the homeland? By God, I do not shrink from this charge, nor hesitate to bear its consequences however heavy, nor hesitate to press upon the Ministry of Education two things that are indispensable for organizing culture in Egypt: first, the founding of a bureau of scientific translation, charged with carrying the great works of science, letters, and philosophy into this language, which was once rich and ought not now be poor; and second, that it set aside in its budget a worthy sum of money to reward those who undertake to carry valuable books in the various sciences and arts from foreign languages into Arabic.

And I assure the Ministry of Education that setting aside ten thousand pounds each year for a bureau of translation and for encouraging translators would benefit Egypt and serve it, and would discharge the national duty, far better than the hundreds of thousands spent on various kinds of material luxury that we might well do without, and that it might be well not to think of for a long time yet.