

The Revival of Arabic Literature: Its Necessity and Some of Its Forms

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There is an unwelcome and unpalatable looseness in this word "revival"; for Arabic literature is not dead, nor has it ever died since history first knew it, that it should need reviving. It has only passed through phases, known to everyone, of languor and weakness, and the last of these phases was the one the past century came upon, and strove to remove or alter, achieving a great measure of success in doing so.

Then this century came, and its share of success was fuller and more complete still, and the source of this poor looseness of expression is perhaps some error or shortcoming in translating the French word *renaissance*, for the word occurred to us, with its meaning and its history among Westerners, for some reason, when we weighed our modern Arabic literature against our Arabic literature of the ages preceding this age we now live in; and we saw no way but to describe our literature's renewed activity after its languor, and its strength after its weakness, with the very term the French used to describe the life of the ancient literatures after their death, and their waking after a long sleep. Yet the difference was vast between the life of Arabic literature in its ages of weakness and decline, and the Greek and Latin literatures at the close of the Middle Ages: Arabic literature was alive, though ill, while Greek and Latin literature was dead, or very near death, so that scarcely anyone knew anything of it.

People knew Latin, but they knew it only as the language of the Church, and the language of whatever philosophy they possessed. Latin as the language of literature, in its various forms, they knew nothing of at all. As for Greek, the learned men of the Middle Ages, on seeing a text written in it, would utter that saying which became proverbial: "It is Greek, and therefore unread."

It is no wonder, then, that this movement — which appeared in the age of the Renaissance and restored life to the literatures of Greece and Rome and spread them among the people — should be called a revival or a resurrection, for that is precisely what it was. Our Arabic literature, however, before this modern age, was alive in the most exact sense of the

word; people took it as the expression of what they felt and sensed, and the vessel of what they thought and produced. They wrote it and spoke it on their tongues. When they wished to compose poetry, they composed it in sound Arabic, correct in substance, form, and meter; when they wished to write prose, they wrote it in Arabic that was easy and dear to them; and when they wished to write of science and philosophy, they wrote both in an Arabic free of corruption.

All that Arabic literature ever suffered from was weakness, languor, and the failing of an ailing being, and the source of this ailment was that its people were themselves ailing; and when they recovered somewhat from their illness, literature recovered somewhat from its illness along with them. The modern age, then, did not revive Arabic literature, but roused it, strengthened it, and rekindled its flame. People then ask: was it necessary to rouse this literature, strengthen it, and rekindle its flame? And the meaning of this question, when people put it, is that they wish to find out whether it was necessary for them to rouse themselves after languor, grow strong after weakness, and have the flame of their souls, hearts, and minds rekindled after dying down. Clearly, the least that can be said of such a question is that it is strange; for every ailing being is driven by nature to love health and desire it, and every weak being is driven by nature to love strength and aspire to it, so that when the ailing being wins health, it guards against losing it, and when the weak being wins strength, it seeks only to gain more of it.

It would indeed be laughable to imagine the Arabs of the East with their souls, minds, and hearts restored to health, while their tongues still fail to speak clearly and their pens still fail to depict these sound, vigorous souls, these fertile, keen minds, and these hearts rich with every shade of feeling and emotion; this is a thing with no way to it, nor any way even to imagine it, except for one bent on jest and idle play.

The renewed activity of Arabic literature was, then, a phenomenon with no avoiding it; we were driven to it by force, and compelled into it by compulsion, and we had no power either to turn away from this phenomenon or to press ahead swiftly in our modern life, leaving literature behind us sunk in sleep. And yet, at first, we took up the revival of Arabic literature only in its simplest forms, its easiest shapes and manifestations: the printing press appeared among us, and we wished to use it, so we published some of the books we had, and some of the thoughts that life had suggested to us; then the outcome of this publishing pleased us, and we were drawn further into it, and went on

publishing books and attempting to compose them, and every time we won some share of it, that winning urged us on to seek still another share, until we arrived, through publishing the literature of the past, at where we now stand. It is plain that this publishing was not an end sought for its own sake, but rather that we published books in order to read them, and read them to find in them pleasure and knowledge, and once we found pleasure and knowledge, we attempted emulation and imitation; so that the first consequence of publishing the literature of the past, in books and newspapers, was its publication within our souls, and the driving of our souls toward production.

All I fear, and all I regret that we have in fact fallen into, is that we should remain at the understanding our immediate forebears held of publishing and disseminating the literature of the past; for the publishing of books among us, to this day, is nothing but copying. It is the repetition of a manuscript copy of a book we have come upon, which we wish to repeat and circulate in many copies among the people. So we have gone on since we first began publishing books, and we have scarcely advanced beyond this stage, except a little. Meanwhile the Europeans, ahead of us, took to publishing our Arabic literature in a sound, exact, critically edited, scholarly manner, so far as their particular circumstances allowed them, so that the books they published were far more correct, and far closer to being useful, beneficial, and accurate, than the books we published.

It is enough to look at al-Tabari's History as the Europeans circulated it, and as we ourselves circulated it, to see the painful, vast difference between the two. Stranger still, and more deserving of sorrow, is that some among us took up the publishing of books as a trade — and there is no harm in that in itself — but they made fraud, deception, and negligence the very basis of their trade; they saw books the Europeans had published in edited, studied form, and republished them without study or editing, drawing attention through them to a kind of corruption that the Europeans, on seeing it, meet with indignation, mockery, and contempt.

Stranger still, other books we were first to publish, in our careless manner, only for the Europeans to step in afterward with revision and the compiling of indexes. The stories of Kitab al-Aghani, Khizanat al-Adab, and Subh al-A'sha are well known and widely told among people. And the state has, for a long time now, taken an interest in what it called the revival of Arabic literature, and has taken to publishing many books; but

its interest amounted to no more than repeating the manuscript copies and circulating them — refining the quantity, as logicians would say, without refining the quality.

Now that the university has been established and the Language Academy founded, we hope the Egyptians will succeed in circulating the old books in a manner suited to the needs of the people and the principles of scholarship, though we do not think this will be easy or soon achieved; for this calls for customs and traditions that came to the Europeans out of their long-standing interest in reviving the Greek and Latin literatures, and we shall not win what the Europeans won from it unless we learn what they learned and follow the paths they followed, and we are, unfortunately, very far indeed from that. Yet this manner of rousing the literature of the past is, as I have said, the simplest of its manners, and the nearest to naivety; the true, fruitful rousing lies in something other than publishing and imitation, and has, I believe, two essential manifestations: one coming from scholars, the other from writers.

The first manifestation is this exact, deep scholarly study that enables scholars to depict the literature of the past in its various forms, and to present it to people as it truly was, and as the modern mind ought to understand it; and we have already begun to pursue this, and to reach a certain stage in it, however modest, and there is no harm in that — it is a good beginning on a fruitful path that promises great success. It is enough to read a number of the books that have begun to appear in the study of Arabic literature since the start of this century, to see that we have not stopped at circulation and imitation.

The second manifestation is the stirring of our souls, hearts, feelings, and emotions by the life of the ancients and their works, and the expression of this stirring in a modern language and a modern style, read by people who turn to nothing else in its place, and prefer nothing over it among the various works the Europeans write. It is this taking possession of the life of the ancients, claiming it, and seizing it, and making it our life, which we feel and sense as the ancients themselves felt and sensed it, and then depicting it in our modern language and modern style, as they depicted it in their ancient language and ancient style. This is the manner of literary cooperation across generations that turned the *Iliad* into song after it had been narrative, and then turned it into drama after it had been song, and that made the literature of Greece a vessel for the life of Rome, and then made the literatures of both a vessel for the life of the modern Europeans.

It is this manner that enabled Corneille, Racine, Shakespeare, and Goethe to draw upon the literature of the ancient Greeks and Romans, and so produce enduring works, among the signs of human eloquence that outlast time. This manner is the true revival of the literature of the past, and it is one in which we have scarcely advanced, little or much; and if the great figures among the Europeans to whom I alluded a moment ago were able to achieve what they achieved in reviving Greek and Latin literature by this manner, despite the differing ties between them and the Greeks and Romans, and despite the distance of time and the divergence of race, language, religion, and culture, then how much more should it be possible for us, whose differences from the ancient Arabs, if they touch time, environment, and culture, scarcely touch race at all, and do not touch language or religion in any way? Yet the path to this revival is long, arduous, and difficult, resting above all on bringing the literature of the past close to the souls of the young, and enabling them to understand it rightly, and to blend it with their souls and their whole lives. And this can only happen, first, in the school — and how far is our school from this?! And when will our school ever reach it?!