

The Egyptian University in the World of Freedom (I)

A Shortcoming, or Falling Short? — al-Musawwar, 18 May 1934.

I do not wish to be caustic or stinging, nor to weigh heavily upon our men of letters and writers in this discussion, even though my own soul wrestles fiercely against me on this point, and pushes me toward it with great force; for I am anxious to be gentle with our writers and men of letters in these days, in which people's patience has grown so thin with everything, in which criticism has become one of the sins, and reproach one of the grave offenses, and a delicate hint a heavy, wounding, deeply hurtful declaration. And yet the subject of this discussion calls for a measure of severity and vehemence, and provokes no small amount of reproach and criticism; and it is enough that you should know the subject of this discussion to share my view, and to arrive with me at what I intend. What is it with our men of letters, our writers, and our poets, that they travel abroad from Egypt and visit various countries, then return as though they had never traveled, come back as though they had never left the soil of their homeland — their intellectual and literary baggage exactly as it was when they set out, with nothing, or next to nothing, added to it, and their literary output, just as before, unchanged in substance or in form, or scarcely changed at all? They visit the countries of the earth and roam its horizons, and see generations of different peoples, and are touched by every manner of influence, and yet little or nothing of this shows itself — or scarcely shows itself — in the prose they compose or the verse they string together, as though what they saw and heard had inspired nothing in them, had whispered nothing to them, as though nature, in all the variety of its scenes, had been mute, unable to speak to them, or as though they themselves had been deaf, unable to listen to it!

Is this not a question worthy of long reflection, and worthy of our seeking for it a convincing answer, however much that search may cost us in the toil of inquiry and investigation, and however much declaring that answer may cost us in the resentment of writers and poets? Indeed it is; for it is not true that nature is incapable of inspiring writers and poets, of whispering to thinkers and artists, and of enabling both to produce splendid, masterly works of literature and art. The proof of this is that this same nature inspires the writers of the West, and allows them to fill

the earth with their literary and artistic works, works that differ among themselves most widely, and vary most greatly, yet remain, in any case, valuable and delightful works — some stirring a fleeting pleasure, others a renewing pleasure that knows no path to extinction. Indeed, you need only look at the literary works that Egypt alone has inspired among the French alone in this modern age alone, to see a wonder among wonders, and to ask yourself whether what you see is reality or fancy; suffice it to know that a French professor, taking up this very subject, composed on it a book running to two massive volumes — and this despite his being intent on brevity, averse to prolixity, and setting aside all but the men of letters among those who visited Egypt and took some interest in it. How much more, then, if you were to read the works of these men of letters themselves! And how much more still, if you were to consider what Egypt has inspired among the English, and what it has inspired among the Italians, and among the Germans, and among others besides these Westerners who visit it and then return to their own countries carrying a book, or a story, or a volume of verse.

Is it not strange that this very Egypt, which inspires the men of letters of the West with all these works, inspires its own sons with little or nothing at all? Is it not strange that the lofty literary pleasure Egypt ought to stir in Egyptian souls is not to be sought among our own writers and poets, but must instead be sought among the writers and poets of the West? And if you look beyond Egypt to other countries, Western or Eastern, that our writers and poets frequent from time to time, you will find nothing portraying these countries in the works of these writers and poets beyond a handful of slight, scattered touches that amount to little, and are scarcely worth mentioning.

All these thoughts occurred to me some days ago, as I was reading a delightful book by the French writer André Gide, in which he describes his own life, and recounts his first journey to North Africa, portraying for us the traces this journey left upon his soul, traces that enchanted and captivated him — some fit to please us, and many fit to fill our souls with resentment and sorrow. But the writer tells us that he returned from North Africa to Italy, and then to Switzerland, and there he met his friend, the well-known French writer Pierre Louÿs, who was on his way to Germany, meaning to spend the musical season there listening to Wagner's music, as the leisured, the cultured, and the devotees of art are accustomed to do every year. When the two friends met, André Gide told his friend of what he had seen, and spoke to him in particular of the

pleasure-seeking life in a certain Algerian city, and of a girl of pleasure in that city, called Meriem; and no sooner had his friend heard this than he lost all desire for Germany, for Wagner, and for music, canceled his journey there, and set off instead on another journey to Algeria, went to this city, met this coquettish woman, and stayed in Algeria as long as he stayed — then returned to France carrying one of his most splendid, most skillful, and most beloved books, even if our own taste cannot stomach or approve of it: *Les Chansons de Bilitis*.

This book appeared in France at the end of the last century, and most people believed its author in what he claimed, or in what he led them to imagine — that it was a translation of a body of Greek songs once sung by a courtesan in the Greek lands of Asia Minor, then on the island of Lesbos, then on the island of Cyprus — when in truth the book was nothing but a kind of poetry portraying pleasure and dalliance, inspired in the poet by this Arab girl in an Algerian city. You may search Gide's books for the mark Algeria has left on this great writer's literature, and you will find that this mark is no less than the mark left by France, Italy, and the other countries he visited and lived in; and yet there is no doubt that our own writers and men of letters roam the horizons of the earth, East and West, and see in them many things and many peoples, and are touched there by many influences — so what is it with them, that they neither write nor compose verse from it? As for André Gide himself, he found an answer to this question that I hope is not true, for if it were true, it would be a harsh judgment indeed upon our literary and artistic life: he holds that Orientals exhaust everything they find of pleasure or pain, in the face of nature's and life's manifestations, in these very words and gestures that escape them as they taste the pleasure or bear the pain; and once they have finished with that, nothing is left for them to write. This means that, in this French writer's eyes, Orientals are instruments of brief pleasure and brief pain, affected but never affecting, their whole life a matter of sensation with no share of will, reflection, or deliberate design — and he draws support for this from the fact that the lands of the East are the richest lands on earth in all that stirs the artistic life in the artist's soul, by way of manifestations of beauty, yet are, for all that, the poorest lands on earth when we come to reckon the splendid artistic works that endure through the ages and immortalize what Orientals have found of these kinds of pleasure and pain. As for myself, I hope — as I said — that this answer is not true, and that our artistic and literary poverty, and our inability to portray what we find, and to translate nature and life, do not stem from some deficiency in our artistic nature for which

there is no remedy.

And it seems most probable that the source of this poverty, which is beyond doubt, is one of two things: first, that our share of culture is exceedingly small, not enough to let us hear nature and life when they speak to us, nor to understand them when we hear their speech, nor to translate that speech once we have understood it; and second, that our share of literary and artistic freedom is exceedingly small, not enough to let us express what we find, nor to portray what we feel, nor to declare what we see. And I do not doubt that many of our men of letters are touched by a great deal of Western life, and then find themselves unable to portray it — either because their culture is too slight to enable this portrayal, or because they are ashamed to attempt it, since their purely Eastern milieu has not grown accustomed to seeing it, nor accustomed to tolerating it once seen. And it seems most probable that if Orientals were granted a broad, deep culture, and granted an open, generous freedom, they would attain a great share of artistic production that would erase the differences between them and the writers of the West. But will this culture be granted to them, and will this freedom be granted to them, and when will that be, and what is the way to it? How fitting it would be for writers and thinkers to study this question, and to study it well, and to press insistently in a productive call for this culture and this freedom! For it seems to me that we have been kept in ignorance until we are sated with ignorance, and humbled until we are sated with humiliation, and that the time has come for us to gain knowledge and to be free in literature and art, if we must in any case wait for the day we are permitted to taste political freedom.