

The Poetry of the Shepherds

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This is a valuable, delightful book, for which its author deserves the sincerest and finest thanks for the effort and time he devoted to composing it and translating its texts, and for the hardship and toil he bore in doing so.

And thanks are due to the General Culture Administration of the Ministry of Education for publishing it for the public — first, because it is the right of the Arabic language to be concerned with this and with works like it that portray the masterpieces of ancient Greek literature; second, because it is the right of Arab writers and men of letters to read these literatures, so as to delight themselves with them, and to cultivate their minds, their hearts, and their taste through them; and finally, because it is our duty to renew the practice of the early Arabs and to translate the ancient literatures in all their variety, as far as we are able to translate them; for the early Arabs built their magnificent civilization upon the translation of ancient cultures, coming to know the culture of the Greeks, the Indians, and the Persians in the East, while the people of the Maghreb added to these cultures the culture of the Romans, translating it from the Latin language into their own Arabic tongue.

And the early Arabs did not benefit from these cultures alone, but benefited by them the nations that had submitted to their authority, and then benefited by them other nations that had not submitted to their rule — namely the Western European nations, which took medicine, philosophy, and mathematics from them in the Middle Ages. And it was the triumph of foreigners over Arab authority, in those distant ages, that struck ambition with lethargy and decline, so that the process of translation came to a halt, and in the end even the benefit from what had already been translated came to an end. And God willed that our scholars and philosophers should resist this flagging of ambition and this weariness of effort, and should study foreign cultures, digest them, and add to them from their own resources, so that they left us this magnificent heritage, which we take pride in without understanding it, and which we count as our own without grasping its realities and its finer points — until the blind domination of foreigners over the Arabs became continuous, and all-encompassing, and closed in upon the Arab lands as dense darkness closes in and blots out the light.

There, stagnation became general, the flame of culture died down, and later generations came to chew over a little of what their forefathers had left behind, without reaching its depths, and without adding anything of consequence to it.

And we came upon this modern age, and saw that the European West had surpassed us in science, literature, art, and the various branches of philosophy, so we turned to it to study what it possessed, and to carry over whatever we could carry over of its works, forgetting only one thing: that our own ancient heritage, which we had neglected, had been the very first foundation of the West's own renaissance and of our own nation — the praiseworthy practice of our forebears in translating the ancient cultures. And so we became dependent on the West for everything that cultivates the mind, refines character, purifies taste, and quickens the heart, while forgetting, or coming close to forgetting, our own ancient heritage, so that none but a few scholars give it any thought, devoting themselves to it and immersing themselves in it, bearing for that much mockery and ridicule for what they do.

Then we turned away entirely from the ancient literatures — indeed, from all the ancient cultures — so that we translate nothing of them; and why should we translate them, when the Europeans have already translated them into the European languages we know? Let us read them in those translations, if we need to read them at all, and no harm will come, for all the number of our educated people, from these cultures being thoroughly and densely unknown.

Yet a small number of Egyptians have taken to thinking about these ancient cultures, recalling that they are the origin of our own Arab culture, and the origin of modern European culture as well; and no sooner had this small minority begun to show interest in something of Greek culture than people began to joke about it, speaking of it with those mocking smiles that Egyptians are so skilled at drawing upon their lips. And I recall one of our great statesmen of the recent past, known as the "Teacher of the Generation," Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyid, the author of *On Generation and Corruption*, who concerned himself with translating books by Aristotle.

I do not forget that I was once insistently demanding that Greek be taught at our old Egyptian University, when a member of that university's governing council — may God have mercy on it and on its days — said to me: "All you have brought back from Europe is a demand to teach the

language of grocers at the university." Then he laughed, and the other members laughed with him, and I too laughed along with them.

But I have strayed far from the book I wanted to speak about today, so let me return to it. It is a slight little volume, its pages not exceeding one hundred and twenty, yet it is nonetheless a very serious test of the taste of writers and men of letters in our own day; for it speaks to them of the age of Alexandria in the days of the Ptolemies — that is, more than two thousand years ago — and speaks of the flourishing of Greek culture in that city which was the capital of the cultured world, and from which Greek learning and civilization spread across the lands of the East, and which preserved valuable relics of the Greeks that the European West still studies with the greatest care, and celebrates with the greatest ceremony.

The author of this book has devoted his life to the study of the two ancient languages, Greek and Latin, and their literatures. He began his studies at the Faculty of Arts at Cairo University, and completed them at the University of Paris, and now teaches these two languages at the very faculty where he studied. He has taken a particular interest in Alexandrian literature, and in this small yet weighty book he presents to us the life of one of the poets of Alexandria, along with some of his poetry. This poet is Theocritus, who was raised in Sicily, became acquainted with various Greek cities, and then settled in Alexandria, because he found in its royal court the ease, comfort, and luxury to which he aspired.

The author presents to us, in a fine and concise manner, the characteristics of Alexandrian poetry in general, and the characteristics of Theocritus's poetry in particular, and shows us this poet's influence upon the poets who came after him among the Greeks, and upon the Roman poets, chief among them Virgil; he then offers us examples of Theocritus's poetry in a particular genre of verse, which it appears he first devised in Alexandrian literature, and which then passed from there to some Greek cities and to the Romans in Italy — the genre the author calls "pastoral poetry," that is, poetry portraying the life of shepherds in the countryside, in the mountains and the forests, describing their flocks and their pastures and their sources of water from rivers, streams, and springs, and portraying in particular the feelings, inclinations, and passions that come upon these shepherds, and the love that touches their hearts, bringing them a little happiness and much sorrow, and the rivalry among them over their flocks and the milk they produce, and all else that

is likewise produced from milk.

And the meaning of all this is that this genre of poetry is confined to the life of nature outside the cities, but nature, in the eyes of this poet and his Greek and Roman disciples, does not belong purely to these shepherds; for the Greek and Roman gods love this nature and are at home in it, frequently entering into contact with it, mingling with the shepherds, and intervening in their lives in ways that bring them happiness and sorrow alike. And for that reason, mention of the gods abounds in this poetry, as do the myths recounted within it — and this, as you can see, is utterly strange by comparison with us, for there is nothing in our own poetry where poets devote themselves to describing this nature in its ease and simplicity and its rough-hewn life, with the gods in contact with it, and the Arabs have no myths handed down from their gods in the days of paganism. It cannot be denied that the gods of the pagan Arabs did mingle with people, with shepherds among them especially, in their everyday lives, whereas this was far more common and widespread among the Greeks, and among the Romans after their poets studied the Greek language and its literatures.

And because this poetry is so utterly strange by comparison with us, I said that this book is a serious test of our modern taste, since we are unaccustomed to it in our own literature, nor in our ancient or modern customs. And it might be asked: why did the Arabs, in their early ages, not translate anything of this ancient Greek literature? The answer is very simple: the Arabs did not know these literatures, and had they known them, they would have translated something of them, and our poetry would have been influenced by that translation; and the Arabs did not know these literatures because Byzantine Christianity detested them, turned people away from them, and forbade their reading and their study, on account of how much they mentioned the gods of paganism.

And with a similar answer one may respond to those who ask: why did the Arabs not translate Greek drama?! For Greek drama was never free of mention of the gods, and the gods frequently played major characters in Greek plays.

I do not know whether our writers and men of letters will develop a taste for this kind of poetry, or will turn away from it and lose interest in it; but I know full well that it is their duty to read it, to read it often, and to ask those who are skilled in the ancient languages to translate as much as possible of these literatures for them. They read modern Western

literature because they find pleasure in reading it, find culture in it, and find it close to their own taste; but it is equally their duty to read the ancient literatures as well, for they are the origin of the modern literatures, and there is no doubt that they contain a great deal of culture, and pleasure too, for those who grow accustomed to them through frequent reading. The strange is not to be abandoned merely because it is strange; rather, it is to be studied, known, and even composed in its own right. Its very strangeness calls for this, just as it calls for the cultivated person, and the man of letters especially, to be one who ought to love the strange, and to seek to uncover its strangeness and grow familiar with it; for if people abandoned everything strange merely because it was strange, they would never come to know anything at all.

How I would have loved to include in this discussion some of these delightful examples presented in this book! But I fear going on too long, and besides, the book itself is readily available, and anyone can read it.

The book contains a few small lapses connected with language, and I would urge those who translate poetry in particular to take care over the purity and clarity of their language; and I will illustrate these lapses with only a single example, again so as not to go on too long.

The translator coins, on page 77, the word "al-tarid" [التريد]. He imagined it derived from "riyada" (exercise) or "riyad" (gardens), forgetting that the yā' in all these words originally derives from wāw: the verb is rāda-yarūdu, and riyad is the plural of rawda; it would have been better for the translator to coin the term "al-tarawwud," with a wāw rather than a yā'.

Be that as it may, the effort in this book is valuable and fruitful, and the book itself is delightful and refined, and I offer the author my sincerest and most heartfelt congratulations, and hope that he will produce more such books, and that his fellow scholars skilled in these two languages will multiply in translating Greek and Latin literature; for in doing so they render their fellow countrymen the greatest service, and increase the richness and growth of our Arabic literature.