

Writers and Readers

al-Hilal, July 1934.

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And you may reverse this title; for I intended neither precedence nor deferral, and it is among the rudiments of grammar that "and" implies neither order nor sequence — so readers ought not to take offense that chance made their mention come second in the wording, for I assure them that their persons come first in meaning, or come first in the reality of the matter; indeed I can assure them that they stand beyond all precedence, because they are everything, while writers, set beside them, are nothing, or come very close to being nothing.

The proof of this is that writers live only for readers, while readers are able to live, indeed do live, for something other than writers; they live for themselves as they live for others, but this "other" is not a writer, or ought not to be a writer. The proof of this too is that writers think of readers when they set about writing, and as they proceed with it, and once they have finished it; readers, on the other hand, think of writers only while they are reading them.

And who knows?! Perhaps they think only of what they are reading, without thinking of who wrote it. Or who knows?! Perhaps they read without thinking even of what they are reading, nor of who wrote for them what they are reading, merely passing their eyes over these letters and lines, making out the words contained in them, grasping the meanings these words point to in the very lightest manner, pausing or not pausing over these meanings — because all they want is to pass the time, or to be distracted from one thing by another, or to invite sleep to eyelids that resist it.

Readers, then, are everything, set beside writers, and writers come close to being nothing, set beside readers! And if a reader could manage to come between a writer and himself, and to witness him as he sets about writing, then as he throws himself into it and proceeds with it, he

would see a strange thing indeed — he would see that the writer is wrestling with two stubborn adversaries:

the first: the subject he wishes to write about;

and the second: the reader for whom he wishes to write.

And he would see that the subject, more often than not, is neither the more stubborn of the two adversaries nor the heavier burden in the contest; rather, the truly violent, truly fearsome adversary is this reader whom the writer does not know, whose inclinations, passions, and feelings he cannot number, whose taste he cannot discern, and of whom he cannot be certain what suits him and what does not — he is a real, established danger, yet one vague, obscure, widespread, variable, contradictory, uneven, impossible to pin down or define, with no way of knowing what path must be taken to reach him.

And from this, the Egyptian writer ought to ask himself: when will writers be granted the chance to take their revenge on readers, to set themselves above them, and to be preferred over them in care and attention? I do not say: when will writers be granted the chance to take their revenge on readers and on themselves, and to think of nothing but art alone, and to attend to nothing but art alone — for it seems that this day is still far off, further than we could aspire to or hope for.

But the first question is within closer reach, one we may pause over a little, and seek an answer to: are there, in Egypt, writers who do not think of readers, or who do not go to excess in attending to readers and constantly summoning up their ever-threatening presence as they write?

And the strange thing is that most readers suppose, indeed firmly believe, the opposite: they believe that writers do not think of them at all, nor care for them, nor hope to show them any regard, but rather offer them whatever crosses their minds, with neither care nor prolonged reflection. This may well be true of a group of people I do not know; but the one thing I do not doubt is that I myself have never, on any single day, set about writing without reckoning with my readers in the strictest and most exacting manner.

And the other thing I do not doubt is that I know no Egyptian writer deserving of that name, among those I have spoken with, who does not confess to fearing readers just as I fear them, and to according them as much care and thought as I accord them, or more. But readers, in truth,

are difficult, and there is no way at all to satisfy them; they disapprove of some of what they read, and are not content with mere disapproval, but add to it a measure of anger and resentment, supposing that the writer paid them no heed, gave them no thought, did not gather all the effort at his command, nor spend all the strength at his command, to satisfy them and offer them what they expect — as though he knew what would satisfy them, or as though he knew what they expect.

It never occurs to readers that a writer may be giving them all he is able to give them, and may be spending on their behalf the utmost effort of a man of limited means, even though it represents the whole of what he possesses. And the strange thing is that readers grant themselves the right to feel eager to read when circumstances favor it, or to grow weary of reading when circumstances do not favor it, yet they grant writers no such right, nor consider that writers' souls, like their own, grow eager when the causes of eagerness are ready at hand, and grow weary when the causes of weariness converge upon them.

And readers are to be excused; for they do not force the pen into writers' hands, nor compel them to write by force — it is the writers who present their works to them; so it is readers' right to expect that these works presented to them, which they are enticed and encouraged to buy, and which they may even be compelled by advertisement to purchase and read, should suit what they had expected, should reward, or come close to rewarding, the criticism they offer, the effort they spend, and the time they are willing to lose ...

And if writers are to be excused because they cannot bind themselves by a pledge to excel always, and if readers are to be excused because they cannot spend their money, their effort, and their time without return, then who is to be blamed, and on whom does the responsibility fall? There must surely be someone to blame, who bears this responsibility, and at whose expense the reconciliation between wronged writers and excused readers is to be achieved.

This party to blame surely exists, and perhaps it is not one party alone, and perhaps it is not two, and perhaps counting them all is no easy matter. Readers in Egypt are few, that is beyond doubt — but writers are a thousand times fewer still; for the count of readers rises into the thousands, indeed into the tens of thousands, while the count of writers scarcely rises into the tens.

And these readers, few by comparison with Egypt's population, few by comparison with the needs of writers and publishers, yet numerous, for all that, by comparison with writers' capacity — these readers differ among themselves most sharply, in a way that forces one to despair of ever truly satisfying them: among them are the cultured, who are impressed only within measure; among them are the half-cultured, who are impressed when there is nothing to be impressed by, and grow indignant when they ought to be pleased; and among them are those who have little or no share of culture at all, but who, like the rest, need to read, and are able to buy newspapers, books, and magazines.

And each of these groups is in turn divided within itself into factions: some who were educated in Egypt's higher civil schools, some who were educated in European universities, some who graduated from al-Azhar after completing their studies there, some who hold the civil secondary certificate, or are seeking it, others who hold the Azhari secondary certificate, or are seeking it, some who stopped at the primary certificate, and some who never went beyond what they learned at the Qur'anic school — and all of these, for all their differences and disparities, want to read, and want to be satisfied.

And there are in Egypt only a small number of writers, not reaching the tens, of roughly similar culture, who are expected to provide, to all these people together, what suits their temperaments, their tastes, their capacities, and their highest ideals.

There is another thing that may be blamed: the devotion of this small number of writers to the various newspapers, and the inability of most of these writers to find leisure for the kinds of literature and composition they themselves love. And whoever mentions newspapers has mentioned regularity and continuity, and whoever mentions regularity and continuity has constrained art most severely, and has told excellence and perfection: go your way, for Egypt is no home for you! — because art needs broad freedom, and excellence and perfection need peace of mind and leisure of thought.

God forgive me! I do not mean by "peace of mind and leisure of thought" that plain sense everyone understands — the kind of leisure that, were it granted to men of letters, would still leave them producing nothing — rather, I mean peace of mind and leisure of thought from this very regularity and continuity, and this relentless pressure to which the writer is subjected once he commits himself to a daily, weekly, or monthly

newspaper. How much worse, then, when a writer commits himself to all these papers at once?! How much worse when the press presses upon him every single day, and every single week, and every single month?! How much worse still when these three kinds of pressure converge upon him in a single day, and he is told: write, that people may read when morning comes, or when evening comes; and write, that people may read on such-and-such a day, for the press cannot wait; and write, that people may read at the beginning of the month, for the magazine's appearance must be regular and continuous?!

This very regularity, which squanders art's freedom and severs the connection between the writer and excellence and perfection, is the first party to blame whenever writers fall short and fail to satisfy readers as they wish to; for it drives writers toward haste and hurry.

And whoever speaks of haste and hurry ought not to speak, in the same breath, of art, nor expect from them excellence or perfection. Nor does the matter of regularity and continuity stop there; for if it merely stood between writers and excellence in the articles and essays they offer newspapers — pieces never meant to reach full maturity — the burden would be bearable, and one could say to readers: blame the writers for these pieces if you wish, and turn away from reading them if you prefer, and console yourselves instead with those valuable books offered to you from time to time. But the matter is far harder than all this, and far more distressing; for who will give writers the time in which to think?! Who will give them the strength they must spend in study?! Who will give them the effort they must spend in composition?! Who will give them the leisure of thought they rely upon for excellence?! Who will give them all this, while the press stands behind them, driving them on relentlessly, demanding from them the daily, weekly, and monthly pieces that must appear with order, precision, and regularity?! For regular, continuous newspapers do not merely prevent writers from excelling in what they write for them — they prevent them from excelling in what they write for themselves and for others.

God forgive me! Rather, they prevent them from writing for themselves and for others at all. Believe me, dear reader: the writers you grow impatient with, and judge so harshly, are true heroes in Egypt, bearing a toil of which you yourself could not bear even a small part. And what toil could compare with the deep sorrow a writer feels when a delightful subject occurs to him, and he longs to have the leisure to study it and write on it, only to be turned away from it most forcibly and

violently — because the press wants from him, instead, the piece that must appear in order and on schedule?

These thoughts occurred to me an hour ago, as I finished reading a piece in the *Nouvelles littéraires* on an inquiry some people in France are conducting, on this question: "Can writers be journalists?" The author of that piece answers "yes," with a certain reserve. As for me, I should like to reverse the question: "Can journalists in Egypt be writers?" For Egypt has journalists; as for writers, in the precise sense of that word, I am afraid I must say that they will come into being — God willing — only after a long or short while, but they will come into being.