

# Some Aspects of Modern Thought

*Al-Hilal, February 1937.*

1 ... The clearest thing to be said of literary tendencies in these days is that they unite in a manner truly disturbing, exhausting, and frightening in the countries subject to strong rule and violent authority ... while they differ, in a manner powerfully fertile and splendid, in the free countries that enjoy democratic liberty.

2 I mean, rather, that thinking which touches literature closely, or that thinking from which literature proceeds, and from which writers' pens draw what they broadcast among people as works of art; and it is plain that a single chapter in a magazine cannot encompass the aspects of modern literary thought in one particular country, let alone encompass them throughout the whole of Europe, let alone encompass the aspects of thought in all their variety within a single milieu, or a single age; for the shades of thought differ most sharply when measured against thinking milieus, and differ too when measured against individual thinkers themselves.

3 And these shades of thought differ because the natures of thinkers, whether as individuals or as groups, differ and vary among themselves most sharply, and it is only to be expected that the shades of thought should differ according to the individuals who think, so long as each individual has his own nature, temperament, surrounding circumstances, and the orbit in which he moves.

4 But the nature of life has willed that people should gather into parties and factions of opinion, just as they gather into parties and factions of practical conduct; and however much the natures and temperaments of individuals may differ, and whatever effect that may have upon their thinking and upon the literature they produce, and whatever value that may hold for the study of a given writer, for grasping his individual personality and distinguishing him from others — it remains easy and customary for us to look for shared shades of opinion by which one group of people is set apart from another, such that this or that group comes to have its own intellectual and literary character, common to all its members, and only thereafter — or perhaps before, I do not know — do these individuals come to be distinguished from one another by their particular temperaments and natures.

5 The adherents of a given poetic school share certain traits we recognize in what they produce for us by way of verse, and by virtue of these traits we are able easily to distinguish them from the adherents of another poetic school; and only then do they differ among themselves in their output, a difference whose source lies in their individual personalities, and in the nature and temperament that compose them, and in the events and circumstances that surround them. I do not think this proposition needs argument or explanation; people have long been familiar with it, from the most distant ages, dividing poets and writers into distinct groups and divergent schools, setting out the traits proper to these groups, the distinctions among their members, and then the grounds, among the groups themselves, for their nearness to or distance from one another in agreement and disagreement.

6 But the thing we rarely consider, and seldom pause over at length, is that modern life has drawn people closer together most intensely, while at the very same time driving them further apart most intensely, producing these two contradictory phenomena at once. The means of publication and broadcasting, and the means of communication, have abolished distance in time and place entirely, and have allowed people to learn of one another's opinions without hardship, without effort, and without delay.

7 Just as the circumstances of life itself have strengthened individual personality in a manner truly strange, giving every thinking individual an inner existence that resembles independence, resembling a distinct world with boundaries no one else may cross or breach.

8 And so we have come to think independently, and to think collectively; our independent thinking produces opinions beyond counting, opinions sharply different and distinct from one another, to the point that the matter very nearly ends in chaos, defeating the inquiry of researchers and the efforts of those who devote themselves wholly to investigation; while our social thinking draws us most intensely close together, to the point that there is very nearly here a seamless unity in which scarcely any difference appears, despite the great distances separating nations and peoples, parties and factions, and individuals themselves.

9 The student of literature, then, has no choice but to pursue both of these directions at once, seeking in the literary works he reads both the manifestations of individual independence, on the one hand, and the

manifestations of social and human solidarity, on the other.

10 And I know of no age in which the struggle between the individual and the collective has grown as fierce as in this modern age; and perhaps you will agree with me that this struggle has passed through three distinct phases since man became civilized and took up thinking and producing:

11 The first phase: in it the collective tyrannizes over the individual completely and totally, annihilating him within itself, speaking through his tongue, stirring in his soul its own emotions and passions; and should the individual show an independent personality, thinking otherwise than the collective thinks, and declaring an opinion the collective does not love, the collective would resist him most fiercely, strike him down most brutally, and at times expose him to death.

12 The second phase: in it the individual tyrannizes violently, rising up against the established order and overturning it completely, wresting for himself rights he could never have dreamed of; and this tyranny ends in a great deal of disturbance and confusion, until matters settle, the individual having gained rights that were not his, and the collective having retained some portion of the authority that was once its own.

13 And this is the final phase, in which a balance is achieved between the rights of the collective and the rights of the individual. It is quite clear that this balance is not permanent, but settles only for a while, as the two contenders catch their breath — as though it were a mere temporary truce — after which the contest resumes between them with all its former force and violence.

14 It is certain that in these days we do not enjoy this balance between individual independence and collective authority; rather, we live in an age in which this balance has been gravely upset, as the men of politics say: individuals have won rights granting them broad freedom in speech, action, and thought; but the collectives have objected to individuals' excess in enjoying the rights they have won, and wish to bring them back to moderation, to subject them once more to their system, and to impose their authority upon them anew.

15 And you see that this struggle has, in these days, reached a violence it never knew before — the very violence that now divides Europe into these three camps, each rising against the other, each scheming against the other, each striking at the other, and all preparing

for what we take to be a decisive battle, though we cannot know whether civilization will emerge from it safe, triumphant, and capable of survival and growth, or whether civilization will afterward become merely a chapter of history!

16 These three political systems now contending in Europe are, in truth, nothing but manifestations of the contest between the individual and the collective: a system that wishes to preserve, to some degree, the balance between individual and social personality — this is the democratic system; a system that wishes to subject the collective to a strong, violent authority monopolized, protected, and executed by a select few individuals — this is the system of Fascism; and a third system that wishes to return the matter to the collective, and to certain classes of the collective in particular, those that make up the vast majority, wishing to erase the individual altogether — if the expression may be allowed — and to annihilate him wholly within the collective — this is the Communist system.

17 It is certain that thinking differs in these various milieus as well, and that literary production within them differs according to that difference in thinking; for thinkers and producers in democratic milieus think and produce as individuals possessing their own independent, distinct personalities, personalities that have won whatever rights they have won, and that guard most jealously against losing any part of what they have won, striving instead to add to it ever new gains.

18 The adherents of the Fascist system think and produce on the premise that the collective is fit to attain happiness, to rise, and to reach whatever perfection is destined for it, but that its means to this end lies precisely in the strength, authority, and genius of the select individual, and in his capacity for execution, resistance, persuasion, and intimidation: the collective must rise, but only as its great, singular leader raises it.

19 The thinkers and producers under the Communist system think in a manner very close to this, save that they do not exaggerate in esteeming and magnifying their leaders, but rather make of them servants of the collective, manifestations of its authority, and instruments for realizing whatever it wishes and aspires to hope for.

20 And yet, for all that, they end in the final reckoning much as the Fascists do; for the collective, being a collective, cannot itself manage affairs, govern them, and carry them out — it must inevitably come to

rest upon particular individuals in whom it places its confidence and trust, and upon whom it relies for management, governance, and execution.

21 And how swiftly these individuals come to master the whole affair! How swiftly they slide into tyranny! How swiftly there arises among them the strong individual who monopolizes everything, imposing himself, his opinion, and his will upon the collective by sheer compulsion! And I do not know, in the end, whether any real difference exists between the authority enjoyed today by these three figures in Europe: Mussolini in Italy, Hitler in Germany, and Stalin in Russia!

22 Differences exist in method and in the outward forms of practical conduct, but the final result is one and the same: that these men are everything in their own countries, having monopolized all authority, and having imposed upon their peoples a will that admits no appeal and allows no departure from its command — save at the risk of death for those who would dissent.

23 And I know that the picture of literary, economic, and political matters differs sharply from one of these countries to another: the system of classes is the foundation of politics, society, and economy in some of them; the system of capital is the foundation of these same things in others; literature concerns itself with the common people and their lower classes in some of these countries, while in others it concerns itself with the middle classes and the privileged classes, all but neglecting the lower classes entirely.

24 I know this full well, but I wish us to pass beyond outward appearances to the realities beneath them, and to arrive at the thing dearest to the individual, the thing he prizes above all else: individual liberty — liberty of thought, of speech, and of action. I wish us to arrive at this liberty, and to seek it out among the Fascists and the Communists alike; we shall find the matter most closely alike between the two, indeed most thoroughly in agreement between them, agreeing in this: that this liberty is forfeited, that it does not exist, or scarcely exists at all; for the individual may show, in his speech and his conduct, nothing of opinion save what accords with the established order and does not depart from it.

25 The slightest suspicion of deviation from the system, in a word, a deed, a wish, or an opinion, exposes its holder to grave danger, and the events that occur in Russia, Germany, and Italy are too numerous to count, and too plain in their meaning to need explanation or

interpretation.

26 Yet the historian of literature may find a heavy, painful rest should he wish to study the literatures of these countries subject to strong authority; for he will find in these literatures but a single direction, the very direction the established order imposes, and which it compels people to take up with violence, punishing those who depart from it with secret death, or death after a merely formal trial, or exile to some distant place.

27 The literary direction in Italy and Germany, then, is Fascist, and in Russia it is Communist. This means that people think and produce in Germany and Italy exactly as Hitler and Mussolini wish them to think and produce; and whoever among them feels incapable of this submission, which does not suit the nature of the free mind, has no choice but to banish himself from his own land, and to seek out some place of exile in which to think and produce as he himself wishes, not as he is wished to.

28 Literary research grows difficult, intricate, and various only where individuals enjoy the liberty of thought, speech, and action, and where individual and social souls can flower and open as their own natures and temperaments dictate, and where individual and social souls can draw their literature and art from their own consciences, and from the connection between their consciences and life itself — not from the authority crouching in this palace or that, which from time to time prepares for them what inspiration they ought to receive, what opinion they ought to turn over in their minds, and what feeling they ought to find.

29 Go to Italy, and you will find nothing but Fascist literature; go to Russia, and you will find nothing but Communist literature. And should an Italian or Russian writer wish to think as he himself wishes, rather than as Mussolini or Stalin wishes, he has no choice but to emigrate to London, or to Paris, or to some city resembling these two; but go to London, or to Paris, or to Brussels, or to the Hague, or to America, and you will find every shade of literature meeting and parting, uniting and contending, and between them this fertile struggle that grants individuals and collectives a life suited to the highest ideals man has set for himself ever since he began to think and to master things with his mind.

30 In Paris you find Communist literature portrayed in its strongest and most skillful form, and you find socialist literature, and you find Fascist literature, and then you find democratic literature in all its

various shades, and then you find royalist literature, and you may even find imperial literature that has not forgotten, and does not wish to forget, the glory of Napoleon. And do not suppose all this to be mere idle talk bound up with politics alone; for each of these divergent political shades leaves its mark upon art, upon the social order, and upon religious feeling.

31 If you read the Communists, you read an intense drive toward concern for the lower classes, and reform on behalf of the wretched; you find mercy, kindness, and gentleness, and beside them you find violence, harshness, and severity toward the wealthy and privileged who monopolize every blessing to the exclusion of all other people; and you find unbelief in religion, and rebellion against the Church, and resentment toward every established order.

32 And you find the artistic traces of all this in the various shades of thought and expression, indeed in the various forms of art that do not express themselves in words at all; and you find in socialist literature what suits socialism of all this, far more moderate than what you find among the Communists; and you find in democratic literature what suits democracy of all this, far more moderate and balanced than what you find among the socialists and Communists.

33 Then you find among the royalists a strong excess in the very opposite of what you find among the Communists. And out of this sharp contradiction, out of this fierce, continuous quarrel among contradictions at every hour of the night and day, there is composed, in the free countries, a truly splendid musical life, in which the mind finds whatever varied shades of intellectual pleasure it desires, and which affords it, by this very means, freedom from boredom, weariness, and constraint.

34 And stranger still, you find in the democratic countries a portrayal of Communism and Fascism more splendid than you find in Italy and Russia themselves; for French Communists and French Fascists enjoy, in portraying their views and defending them, a freedom their counterparts in Italy and Russia do not enjoy; they have their opponents who contend with them in the newspapers, who contend with them in books, who contend with them in parliament, who contend with them in demonstrations — and this continuous, varied struggle grants them a life their counterparts do not find in countries where no voice is raised for opposition, and where no criticism of the system, nor any censure of those who hold authority, is permitted.

35 In sum, should you wish to study the tendencies of literary thought, you will find no field for this study more fertile, more fruitful, or more rewarding than the democratic countries, in which a balance is achieved, after a fashion, between the individual and the collective. And yet, in these recent past days, an event has occurred that leaves no room for doubt about any of this: the event of the British Crown.

36 Have you considered this violent struggle between the person of the King and the whole collective of the British Empire — how it began? How it unfolded? How it ended? And how the collective emerged from it triumphant? And how the individual emerged from it triumphant too? For democracy preserved for the Empire its system and its traditions, and preserved for the King his liberty, leaving him free to answer his own feelings, and to follow his own heart; and the King was content, and the people were content, and not one of them was wounded in the least — then strive to imagine an event like this occurring in a Communist or Fascist country, strive to imagine it beginning and unfolding, and then to imagine the end to which it would come, and then compare the two pictures.

37 As for myself, I can scarcely imagine an event like this occurring in a country that does not enjoy democracy; for then either the individual would have imposed his will upon the collective by sheer compulsion, and the collective would have submitted absolutely to the rule of passion, or the collective would have imposed its will upon the individual, humiliating him and subjecting him to what he did not wish.

38 And do not suppose this event to be merely political; it is intellectual and literary too — for writers were given leave to write, orators to speak, and men of the street to demonstrate, and poets will be given leave to compose verse, and artists to portray their feelings about the event and their opinions of it exactly as they wish, without any one of them being harmed in the slightest for doing so. And who could say that this great event touches politics alone, and does not touch art, and literature above all, with the firmest and strongest of ties? History has known an event in ancient times resembling it, which left immortal traces in literature, and I can only think that this recent event will likewise produce, in modern literature, immortal traces of its own.

39 And so the clearest thing to be said of literary tendencies in these days is that they unite in a manner truly disturbing, exhausting, and frightening in the countries subject to strong rule and violent authority,

uniting until they very nearly make of all people a single individual, imposing upon them the life of the social animal, the conduct of ants and bees.

40 While they differ, in a manner powerfully fertile and splendid, in the free countries that enjoy democratic liberty — or you may say that literary thought, under the shadow of violent authority, takes a single direction that soon overflows with boredom and weariness, while in the free countries it takes directions beyond counting, yet directions that never overflow with weariness or boredom, and never exhaust the researcher's wonder, nor his pressing need for inquiry and investigation. As for identifying some of these directions, tracing them back to their first sources, and following them through to some of their possible consequences — that is a thing no single chapter can accomplish, and it may not even be possible to pursue it fully across several chapters.