In the Air
By Dr. Ṭāhā Ḥusayn

In ancient times, when human beings were prudent and cautious, they allowed imagination to roam as far as it pleased. Releasing the imagination did no harm and inspired no fear, for it set mind and body in motion only gradually and within bounds. To unleash both without restraint, by contrast, could lead to consequences no one desired. In those earlier ages, people flew—but only in imagination. They flew metaphorically, not in fact. Their myths tell of those who attempted real flight: one rose into the air, drew too close to the sun, and saw the waxen wings he had fashioned melt away. He fell back to earth, broke his neck, and paid with death for a daring that lifted him beyond the limits appointed to humankind.

Human beings were created to walk upon the earth, not to fly through the air. Whoever exceeded his measure or transgressed his bounds met the fate of the bird of Greek myth whose wings were undone by the sun, or of the bird of Arab legend whose body outweighed his imagination: no sooner did he entrust himself to the air than it betrayed him and delivered him back to his mother, the earth, which broke his neck before pitying him as a tender mother pities her beloved child.

That was the ancient age, when imagination exceeded reason. Our Arab forebears—poets and men of letters—loved restraint. They flew without leaving their places: souls and hearts flew in longing toward those they loved, or in terror away from those they feared. Their bodies, too, "flew" to battlefields when cries for help summoned them. Yet their feet never left the ground. They ran swiftly and imagined themselves flying. Some did rise above the earth—on the backs of camels or horses—placing distance between themselves and the ground, yet always by means of something that still bound them to it.

Today I do not know whether imagination has weakened or not. What is certain is that mind and body have begun to race imagination—and often to surpass it. Flight through the air is no longer dream, illusion, or mythic tale; it has become an ordinary means of transport. It was once reserved for daring technicians, then for wealthy adventurers and lovers of speed, and has gradually descended—without ever leaving the air—until it has reached people like you and me, members of those modest, unassuming classes now called democratic.

In our own time, aviation has become a means of travel that workers may not easily afford, but that the middle classes can use without hesitation. Stranger still, after advancing so far in Europe and America, flight has reached Egypt and settled there—if flight can ever truly be said to settle. Egyptians, long known for their love of deliberation, patience, and stability, have begun to fly. Not only men, but women as well: they race through the air and even outpace men, though they were once destined to remain indoors, secluded behind veils.

Mind has risen to rival imagination; the body has risen until it can traverse distances and environments once accessible only to fantasy. Stranger still, flight has become so easy, so

commonplace, that its value has been cheapened and made available to people to whom it would once have seemed inconceivable—were it not that corruption has seeped into everything and people no longer know clearly where or how they live.

And among those now granted flight are writers—Egyptian writers. Can you imagine an Arab writer flying? Where are we from the days of Ṭarafa ibn al-ʿAbd, ʿAlqama ibn ʿAbada, Zuhayr, and their peers, who, when cares oppressed them and the demon of poetry seized them, mounted their camels and rode into the desert to lighten their hearts and receive inspiration? They returned enchanted by their mounts, composing verses whose meaning we still struggle to interpret.

Today, by contrast, our friend Professor ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz al-Bishrī flies not in imagination or philosophy, but in fact—flying from Heliopolis to Alexandria—and then speaks of his airplane as Ṭarafa once spoke of his camel. He published a dazzling account in al-Ahrām, a piece so charming that I have not forgotten it to this day.

Language, inevitably, must change. When flight was impossible, people "flew" in longing. Now they must find other metaphors for speed and desire. European writers have already begun to do this, first by understanding the airplane, then by describing it in literary language, and finally by making it a source of inspiration for all the arts. The airplane has entered fiction and drama, enriching literature with new settings, emotions, and conflicts.

The airplane is capable of inspiration, and writers are capable of giving it voice—whether or not it possesses a nose. Modern European literature bears witness to this. The airplane has created its own moral world, its own emotions, its own language.

Yet the matter does not end here. Scientific progress, which has armed humanity with instruments of destruction, may also turn flight into a tool of illusion and deception. I need only mention the young French writer André Malraux, who recently passed through Egypt, flew over the Arabian lands, and is said to have discovered the city of Sheba. No doubt we shall soon read his account—an account destined for wide acclaim.

For centuries we, too, have searched for a lost city in the desert: Iram of the Pillars. We have pilots and airplanes. Shall we not hope that one of our own writers—perhaps our friend al-Bishrī—might fly in search of it? And if he does not find it, let him invent it. French writers have never feared invention.

- **“In the Air”** preserves the playful historical sweep from myth to modern aviation, while clarifying the satire about writers, exploration, and literary invention.