The Man of Letters’ Complaint

Misr al-Fatat, 27 November 1909

I have wasted away — not from love of coquettish women;
I have yearned — not for the fair gazelle-eyed maidens.

and I have been consumed — not by the coyness of a gazelle
whose swaying figure once captivated me;

nor has the love of any beloved redeemed me —
for that love has long since departed.

What is love to me now, that it should still delight me?
Enough of love is what once delighted me.

I tasted passion once, naive and unguarded —
how many pains it has since afflicted me with!

How many fair ones gave thanks for my torment,
back when I still had skill enough in love!

The fair ones held sway over me for a long age,
then at last my reins turned away from them.

I will not lie before God: a whole year
has swiftly passed, without pause.

whenever I recall it, the tears of my eyes
stream down like scattered pearls —

when I lived in pleasure and safety, rising early each day
to amusement, never growing weary of it,

facing each day with a clear and easy heart,
and no malicious rival knew where I stood.

My reproacher never lets me be,
though never once has his rebuke turned back my resolve.

I am full of mercy and tenderness even toward my enemy,
though he despises me.

I have contented my soul with what is wholesome,

free of sin and free of temptation.

The two recording angels have written down no evil against me
that would bar me from the heights of Paradise.

If there is any fault in a kiss,
then I am safe from that fault.

I did not take it as licence for wrongdoing —
rather, two muftis themselves have ruled it lawful.

I obtained it, and sought still more of it —
though a mere portion of what I gained would have been enough.

Then time folded that chapter away from us —
would that death had folded me away before it.

Let the envious take no joy in this —
I have put my love behind me, though it has not put me behind.

I saw that passion would soon cast my soul
into the pit of humiliation,

so I said to my heart: turn away from it,
and leave it to the pampered coward.

The pleasures of life pass away,
but the sweetness of good repute does not perish.

They are only wishes, yet they have possessed my heart —
woe to my heart, on account of these wishes!

They have driven all drowsiness from my eyelids,
and told serenity: let it never look my way.

They have brought their promptings close to me,
though the bounty of fortune still remains far off.

Between me and Time there is a war —
God grant no victory to Time.

No one who attacks with sword and spearhead
will ever win vengeance upon Time.

If eloquence alone can serve my cause,

then I am indeed a master of eloquence.

Whoever wages war against Time has no recourse, in the end,
but to accept it in every matter.

I have not yet passed twenty years,
and yet I have tested my fate just as it has tested me.

I, before life's calamities, am nothing
but a supple branch before the wind,

bending with it wherever it leans,
though my heart and courage remain steadfast.

When every gifted man complains of hardship,
two poets at least have escaped it —

while we endure it, Shawqi revels
at Karmat Ibn Hani, his villa,

and Hafiz amuses himself aboard the train,
his cares scattered, free of hardship.

Or has some misfortune touched him instead, driving him
off in search of greener pasture, a once-close friend now distant?

Then he turned back again, safeguarded
by his special favours against the arrogance of Time.

So let the two poets rest easy —
we have made our peace with what we endure.

Nothing has ever delighted me for a single hour as much
as my own hardship, with youthful letters as its companion —

I have grown so weary of companions
that I have wished every one of them would forsake me.