On Renewal

al-Majalla al-Jadida, 10 November 1929

I mean, specifically, literary renewal — for it alone is slow, disordered, without system or consistency, while renewal in every other area of our life follows clear, straight paths, with no crookedness or contortion in them. Science is taught in our secular schools according to the new European method, without hesitation or evasion. We know of no secular school that still teaches natural philosophy or medicine the way the followers of Aristotle, or the students of al-Farabi and Ibn Sina, once taught them; natural philosophy, medicine, and the other sciences are taught according to the very latest methods known to Europe and America. No one objects to this, no one condemns it; objection and condemnation would only arise if our schools tried to turn away from this new method of instruction toward some older method, however slightly. And the practical art that follows this science, keeping pace with it in scientific life as a shadow keeps pace with the body, likewise follows an entirely new path.

Just as we teach natural science, mechanics, and medicine according to the new method, so too do we apply them according to the new method. Our political life, meanwhile, is thoroughly given over to renewal; it is enough to note that its connection to the political life our forefathers knew has been severed entirely — there is no real link at all between whatever political system currently governs us and the rule of the Pharaohs the ancient Egyptians knew, or the rule of caliphs and sultans the Muslim Egyptians knew. You could say much the same of our social life, which has gone to great lengths in the direction of renewal; it is enough to note that our entire civil legislation is borrowed from Europe, not from the old legal systems, nor even from Islam itself, and our economic life is new through and through. The ancients knew nothing of this kind of financial institution, this kind of financial cooperation we know today, and which we indulge in even more extravagantly than the Europeans themselves.

Renewal among us, then, proceeds steadily in every domain the government itself endorses, insists upon, and forcibly imposes on people — often legislating laws specifically to punish those who reject it or defy it.

This renewal, moreover, suits our inclinations, our tastes, our natures, and our temperaments perfectly; we are entirely at ease with whatever educational, judicial, economic, and political systems are legislated for us. If we find fault with the government at all, it is only for being too slow in its renewal; if we wish for anything, it is only for this renewal to move faster still, so that the differences between us and the Europeans might disappear altogether. And yet there is one domain of our public and private life where resistance to renewal, and open defiance of it, runs strong, and where reformers can scarcely carve out a path for themselves except at real cost and considerable difficulty: the literary domain.

Reform-minded men of letters remain a small minority in the East generally, and in Egypt in particular, and this minority feels no real security or ease about its own ideals, or its own methods of thought and expression; it remains constantly exposed to resistance, opposition, scheming, and intrigue, and to every variety of honourable and dishonourable rivalry besides. Public taste follows them for a time, then turns away from them for a time, and its turning away is stronger than its following. And these reformers themselves, however convinced many of them are of their own views on renewal, remain unsettled; their faith in their own new doctrine has not reached the point where they could sacrifice themselves for it, or wage open struggle for its triumph. Some of them grow faint-hearted when opposition intensifies; others flatter the old ways, contriving to tint their own new opinions with some shade, strong or faint, of the antique. What, then, explains this kind of contradiction between our literary life and the other various branches of the life we live? And what is the way to eliminate this contradiction, and bring our thinking, feeling life into harmony with our public life?

The answer to the first question seems simple enough: the development of mind and feeling is inherently slow, far slower than the development of practical life. It may be easy enough to trade Eastern dress for Western dress, and to sit down at tables to eat and drink the way Europeans eat and drink, with nothing behind any of it but a simple desire to imitate, and a simple preference for whatever is more comfortable, or more convenient. Our material life develops, and develops to excess, without any of this touching our intellectual and emotional life at all. A great many of those who went to Europe, studied there, and lived there for long years, show every visible sign of having been shaped by their European studies and their years abroad — so much

so that people describe them as thoroughly Europeanized, and they themselves become convinced of it too — and yet, in spite of all this, they think exactly as a purely Eastern man thinks, and feel exactly as a purely Eastern man feels, and are Eastern in the fullest, most precise sense of the word, whenever they are alone with themselves, or let their true natures run free.

This often has a far-reaching, unfortunate effect on the lives of Easterners and Europeans alike. These Europeanized Easterners deceive themselves, and deceive others, and carry this deception so far that they marry into European families — Europeans take them for their own equals in thought and feeling, and accept them as sons-in-law, while these men themselves believe they truly are European in thought and feeling, and so marry European women — until, once they return to Egypt, and Egypt's hot sun melts away this outer varnish, their true Eastern character emerges plainly and clearly. Their wives no longer recognize them, and they no longer recognize their wives either, and both husband and wife are left to a bitter, troubled life.

These Europeanized Easterners will talk to you while still in Europe, or just after returning from it, rejecting everything old in Egypt, so zealously devoted to renewal that you might genuinely fear for public order on their account, and take them for advocates of revolution and upheaval — and yet it takes no more than a short time in Egypt before they become, or rather revert to being, champions of the old ways, exactly as they were before ever going to Europe.

None of this has any source but what we have already said: that intellectual and emotional development is inherently slow. And if the development of thought and feeling is slow, then the development of expression — that is, the development of literary life — inevitably follows it in slowness. For any artistic composition, in verse or prose, to succeed, it must be genuine — a powerful and accurate image of whatever thought stirs within your own soul, and whatever emotion or passion you actually feel. And if you are a purely Eastern man, Eastern thoughts will occur to you, you will feel Eastern emotions, and you will express them the way Easterners express them — that is, you will remain old-fashioned in your thought, your feeling, and your expression.

As for the answer to the second question, we think it a good deal harder than the answer to the first. It is plain enough that the best cure is always to root out the underlying cause of the ailment itself; if literary

renewal is slow because intellectual and emotional development is slow, then the best remedy is to help that intellectual and emotional development along, and hasten it to whatever degree we can. And our own Arabic literature's share of renewal will be exactly proportionate to how much we manage to hasten that development.

It is curious to notice the very contradiction between our scientific and literary life, in their respective shares of renewal — a contradiction that traces back to a contradiction in the effort expended toward scientific development on the one hand, and literary development on the other. Powerful, sustained efforts have been made toward scientific development ever since the beginning of the last century, and secular science was forcibly imposed on people, because their practical needs demanded it; and thanks to these efforts, we have arrived at a scientific life that may be strong and productive, or may be weak and unproductive, but is, in any case, genuinely new.

The efforts expended toward literary development, by contrast, have been meagre, slight, and intermittent, since literary development was never demanded by any pressing need. While scientific progress had already advanced a considerable way in Egypt, the government had not yet even thought of founding the Dar al-'Ulum school. And when it finally did found it, it did so tentatively, made only modest renewals to its curriculum, and then stopped, resting content with that much effort toward literary development. It is only natural that so slight an effort should bear so slight a fruit. The government then waited half a century, before adding to its first effort a second one — founding the Faculty of Arts at the University — but this effort has not yet borne fruit, since it remains too recent. The government's effort toward literary development is slight indeed, compared with its effort toward scientific development; and yet Arabic literature in Egypt has, all the same, developed toward renewal to no small degree, thanks to individual efforts expended in publishing old books and translating new ones — books that were then read, on both sides, and out of this came the very renaissance we are witnessing now.

Had individuals given literature the same attention they gave science, our scientific life would today be far more advanced than it is; had the government given literature the same attention it gave science, our literary life would today be far more advanced than it is. All of this, of course, belongs to history now, and it may well be worth the government's while to consider devoting some genuine, serious effort

toward literary development — so that this contradiction between our literary life and the other branches of our life no longer exists, so that our tongues, minds, and hearts become as active as our hands, and so that the Arabic language might truly become a language for Egyptians, properly suited to their actual needs. The way toward this effort, in my own view, is for modern literature to be taught exactly as modern science is taught, and for this literature to be made compulsory for educated youth exactly as science has been made compulsory for them. I can scarcely make sense of a system in which ignorance of modern science is treated as a disqualifying failure, with no degree awarded without it, while modern literature is neglected as though it did not exist at all.

They will say that modern science is the path to material life, which we cannot possibly do without. We answer: modern literature is likewise the path to spiritual life, which we equally cannot do without — unless our own ideals have shifted so far that we are now content to be mere bodies with no souls in them at all. A little reflection, in any case, is enough to demonstrate that pure scientific life itself has never arisen, nor grown strong, in any age, except because literature came first, brought the mind to life, brought feeling to life, and drove people on toward inquiry and investigation, and, from there, toward production and invention.

And who knows? Perhaps the real reason so many of our own scientists are mere imitators, producing nothing and inventing nothing, is simply how little they possess by way of genuinely creative literature.