

Renewal in Poetry

al-Jumhuriya, 29 April 1956

We still have not finished, and it appears we shall not finish anytime soon, with the whole colloquial-versus-classical Arabic controversy, and the kind of pragmatism its own advocates invoke to excuse their own laziness and inadequacy — the very laziness that keeps them from reading and real study, from mastering the tools of expression and depiction, and from taking up the proper means toward elevated literature. We had scarcely called upon our own young writers to recognize their own right to earnestness, patience, research, study, investigation, and mastery, and to rise to whatever befits them and their homeland, and whatever elevated, distinguished literature their homeland deserves — free of vulgarity, cleansed of the great deal of nonsense now spreading through it — before their own temper flared, and arrogance seized them in sin, so that they denied every real right, rejected every act of recognition, and set upon us, and upon others who had never targeted or even thought of them, with every variety of insult and every kind of harm they could muster. One of their own spokesmen declared that we had strayed from Egyptian-ness itself, remained ignorant of our own homeland's rightful claim upon us, and sought our own literature in the depths of old books and the recesses of ages long since passed, ages bearing no relation whatsoever, near or far, to modern Egyptian-ness. They were kind enough, at least, to acknowledge that a writer such as myself had once published *The Days*, and had been genuinely Egyptian in it — only to have since strayed from that same Egyptian-ness into the depths of old volumes and books, seeking there a literature of no use to Egyptians whatsoever. As though the very man who published *The Days* had never published any other book depicting Egyptian life in all its varied colours and social classes; as though he had never spent his own life teaching generation after generation of Egyptians, cultivating their minds, and opening for them doors toward genuinely free and upright thought; as though he had never spent his own life writing thousands upon thousands of pieces on the very core of Egyptian life, and its various aspects — literary, religious, political, and social alike; and as though his own colleagues, who received the very same accusation of straying from Egyptian-ness that he himself received, had never done exactly what he did, or left behind works just as significant, or more so.

The strangest thing about all this is that these gentlemen do not actually wish their own elders any harm, nor do they set out to injure them deliberately — they simply lack the tools of correct, precise expression, and so injure their own elders quite unintentionally, letting their own tongues and pens run free, producing words spoken to no real purpose, depicting nothing of what is actually in their hearts, and expressing nothing of their own true selves — merely words they say and write without ever really meaning them, since they neither know their own language, nor master its own capacity to convey what they actually intend to say. We ought not, then, to blame them, nor hold anything against them, nor take them to task for whatever their own tongues, straying from any real purpose, have let loose, or whatever their own pens, straying not from Egyptian-ness at all, but from literature worthy of the name, have set down. We offer them, instead, this insistent advice: to master the knowledge of speech before speaking, of writing before writing, and of literature before wading into it.

We still have not finished — and it appears we shall not finish anytime soon — with this new pragmatic colloquial-Arabic problem, before another new problem was raised for us, one genuinely deserving of our reflection, of lingering over at length, and of speaking the plain truth about: the problem of prose poetry, or, as our great poet Aziz Abaza calls it, "versified prose."

There is, among Arab youth, a real inclination toward freeing themselves from the constraints of inherited Arabic poetry: they do not wish to bind their own poetry with rhyme. Some go to the furthest extreme in this, abolishing rhyme entirely; others proceed more moderately, retaining some measure of rhyme, though within loose and flexible bounds. They likewise wish to free themselves from the constraints of traditional metre, as bequeathed to us by the ancient Arabs, and take the same approach here as with rhyme: some go to real excess, letting their own language run entirely free of any formal constraint, while others proceed more moderately, binding their own language to particular metres they judge suited to whatever emotions, passions, and inclinations stir within them. None of this satisfies our own great poet Aziz Abaza, as al-Jumhuriya reported of him two days ago, and as he himself wrote in introducing certain poetry collections.

Professor Aziz Abaza is genuinely committed to remaining a conservative in poetry, proud of that conservatism, regarding any departure from it as dissolution and corruption of the art itself; he asks

those departing from this conservatism: why do they not, by the same token, free themselves from the rules of grammar, exactly as they have freed themselves from the rules of metre and rhyme? Our great poet has every right to remain a conservative, and to hold fast to Shawqi's own approach, and to the ancients Shawqi himself took as his own models — no one ought to dispute him on any of this.

But others, I believe, have every right of their own to pursue, in poetry, whatever approaches suit their own nature and temperament, and whatever new forms their own souls have found expression in. There is nothing strange in this, nothing dangerous about it. Poetry is not imitation; poetry is not mere signature — poetry is, rather, an echo of hearts, souls, and natures altogether, emerging from them exactly as they are, not as we might wish them to be, and no one bears any blame for innovating, in poetry, upon its own metres and rhymes. The ancient Arabs themselves innovated in their own poetry: they devised, in the Islamic era, metres that had not existed in pre-Islamic times, and devised, in later eras, metres that had not existed in early Islamic poetry — and did with rhyme exactly what they did with metre.

They came to know varieties of music the ancient Arabs never knew, and came to know arts of song the ancient Arabs never knew either — and so they matched their own poetry to these newly known varieties of music and song.

A new civilization was granted them, one that stirred new emotions and passions within them, indeed altered their own natures and temperaments considerably — and they matched all of this, too, to the poetry they composed. There was nothing wrong or blameworthy in this; it simply suited the nature of things. Shortening long metres, devising new ones, pairing rhymes together, and sometimes departing from them altogether — all of this the ancients knew well, and no one ever condemned them for it, save the occasional person given to excess against himself and others. In certain Islamic eras, poets and prose writers actually competed with one another, each encroaching on the other's own art: poets composed verse in the manner of prose writers, and prose writers composed prose in the manner of poets; certain prose writers took up forms of expression once reserved for poetry alone, and sometimes surpassed the poets at it — as al-Jahiz did, when he ventured into the art of satire, achieving, in his book *al-Tarbi' wa'l-Tadwir*, what no poet before or alongside him had ever achieved. And certain poets took their own poetry in the direction of prose writers' own methods — detail,

analysis, and elaboration — as Ibn al-Rumi did in some of his poetry, particularly in the art of reproach.

The poets innovated in the metres and rhymes of poetry exactly as they innovated in its images and meanings, matching their own poetry, in this way, to their own civilization, and to whatever new temperaments and new natures had come upon them. Certain conservatives grew uneasy at this, but their unease accomplished nothing, and never held the poets back from innovating. The poets of the Arab Maghreb played, too, with poetic metres and rhymes exactly as they pleased, and people came to love — and still love — that very play of theirs. Nor do I imagine our own great poet Aziz Abaza rejects the muwashshah form, or would refuse it, should his own nature call him to it under certain circumstances — for poetry, as I have said, is an echo of the heart's own emotions and the soul's own passions, or, as Abu Tammam once put it, the voice of the mind itself. And the essence of art lies, on the one hand, in pure freedom, and, on the other, in weighty constraint.

Freedom in expression, in its own methods, and in whatever images and meanings it devises; and constraint the artist himself imposes upon himself, in his own chosen manner of execution — a constraint he binds himself to, and that no one else binds upon him. Humanity has known magnificent, immortal poetry that never knew rhyme at all, simply because rhyme never suited its own nature, its own language, or its own setting.

Ancient Greek poetry knew no rhyme; Latin poetry knew no rhyme — and yet both were granted a magnificence and an immortality beyond any doubt whatsoever. Certain European poets, too, have freed themselves of traditional metres and rhymes, without this ever diminishing the poetry of the truly accomplished among them.

There is nothing wrong, in my view, in our young poets freeing themselves from the constraints of metre and rhyme, should these constraints genuinely clash with their own temperament and nature. All that is asked of them, in exercising this freedom, is that they remain sincere, without any affectation; that they express their own genuine selves, without imitating this or that foreign poet; and that they remain truly creative in what they produce, without descending into nonsensical, worthless talk.

And should this fertile, productive, creative freedom be granted to any one of them, or to many of them, we would become the fondest

admirers of their poetry, the most devoted to it — for we would find in it a genuine quenching of thirst, a real cure for this burning craving that scorches our own hearts. How deeply we thirst for fresh breaths of new life in poetry! And how fervently we long for a new form of this elevated literary art, one capable of satisfying our own need for a fresh depiction of beauty!