Which of Them Am I?

Misr al-Fatat, 8 October 1909

In this country there are certain writers such that, when one of them announces that an article of his is to appear in some newspaper on such-and-such a day, he finds souls eager for what he writes and hearts avid to read it, and afterward tongues loosed in praise and pens flowing with commendation — some of it praising the writer simply because he is the writer, some of it arising only from a genuine conviction that he has done well and done justice to his subject. And after all this, tongues and pens multiply that take up the writer's article critically, proceeding in the manner of sincere counsel, aiming at the truth, or else tending toward caprice and drifting into deception and misguidance. And though the writer's pain at criticism and his irritation with the critic may sometimes overstep their bounds, his comfort in the praise and commendation lavished upon him often tempers his anger and dispels his resentment — so he is, by every reckoning, a man of good fortune, his standing ever on the rise. As for the unfortunate among writers, he is one of two: a man who has met with nothing from people but bitter censure and shaming reproach, because he did not aim at the right path and was not granted success in getting things right. Such a man deserves a measure of good fortune too, for this very thing is bound to check him, keeping him within due limits, far from vanity and the love of renown. Or a man who has met with neither good nor ill from people, and has tasted from them neither sweetness nor bitterness, because he has written nothing that merits either praise or blame, or because his article happened upon readers in a season of languor and weariness — God forgive me for saying so. But there is yet another man, who tastes bitterness and hears harsh words in defending the truth and standing up for it, and I think I have not forgotten him except that he is rare indeed, few among us.

So which of these could I possibly be? This thought occurred to me, and it put the question to me after I had read Friday's article in Misr al-Fatat: it turned out to be the seventh piece published under this title, and perhaps the fourteenth published under this signature — and here I am as on the first day I ever wrote. I do not say this because I have heard no word of praise, for God knows I neither sought it today nor wished for it. And though I was once wholly enamoured of it, it is now, as Ali ibn Abi Talib says, "more trifling to me than a goat's sneeze" — for I know that its season has not yet come, and I am reserving it for the day when it seeks

me out rather than I seek it. Rather, I say this because I have not heard a single critical word, nor seen a single article by a detractor, even after I had invited readers to dispute with me every point of what I write and say. I had thought my misfortune complete in everything, even in writing, and that my footing was unsteady everywhere, even among writers … I looked, and found I was not among the first-rank writers — and that did not trouble me, for that rank is a goal reached by every writer like myself who has set no limit to his love of doing well and excelling. Then I looked again, and found myself one of the two men of the third rank; so I gave thanks to God that I had merely passed by Abu Fasada's house without turning in. And I fell to wavering between placing myself in the position of the first of the two men, and so being at ease and finding rest, or placing myself in the position of the second, appeasing myself with excuses, and then setting out toward the readers to rouse them from their languor — at which point I would find my full share of criticism. And I had feared that my excess of love for criticism might turn into an excess of aversion to it, had the nights of the fast not brought me together with a group of people, every one of whom found fault with me over words that recur often in my writing, calling them strange and jarring, while some of them took me to task for my fondness for logic and my leaning toward it in Friday's article, saying: how can it become a man of letters, writing on love to one of the lovelorn, to bring in logic or incline toward it? This, they said, is manifest injustice. These words of theirs met in me nothing but a thirsting soul and a heart avid for them, and they were like nothing so much as drops of water that a parched throat sips, moistening its thirst and easing it — just as a man does when he meets his wish after long hope and long waiting. And had the critics been in the right, I would have stopped at their judgment and settled into it; but, alas, they were mistaken. As to the first charge: the Arabic language, whose richness we praise and whose abundant vocabulary we boast of, has never confined its familiar usage to those words with which we glut the newspapers every day, and not every word that sits heavy on the tongues of Cairo's fashionable wits, or that jars against their taste, is thereby strange. For such people are not pleased by the Arabic tongue unless its words are fashioned from the passing of the breeze, the glances of eyes, and the winking of eyebrows; they insist that their vocabulary be borrowed only from the breathing of flowers and the cooing of birds; they wish that their own ears and other people's tongues be set aside, so that neither do they listen nor do others speak, but rather souls converse and hearts confide in one another; they suppose that likening speech to pearls makes it pearls, and comparing it to wine makes it wine; they exaggerate in fancy

until the sight of reality grows repugnant in their eyes and its very display becomes artificial before them. However much we may commend such people for their refinement, we will not consent that their delicacy reach the point of affectation and remove them from the manner of speech proper to grown men. Refinement is nobility of character and soundness of taste; what is truly strange is only what an Arab cannot understand and whose sound jars on his ear. We stand today before a language whose former glory we wish to restore to it, and that will never come about except by drawing out its hidden gems and deriving its splendid modes of expression from deep within the lexicons and the pages of books — and with this I am passionately enamoured, and I hope, God willing, to be granted success in it. As to the second charge: I know of no discipline by which one may be guided in the search for the distinguishing traits and particular qualities of souls, save logic; nor do I know that following the path of logic in one's speech is any fault in a writer. The fault lies only in departing from the matter at hand into some chapter of formal logic and plunging into its depths, as Abu Hilal says. Logic, in the realm of meaning, is like grammar in the realm of wording, and my only offence is that I have set a thought straight by logic just as I set my wording straight by grammar. And besides, it is as if these critics had forgotten that I was writing to my friend, turning him away from love and making him hate it — and whether, after all this, they commend me for my fondness for logic and its use, or condemn me for it, I remain, for their criticism of me, among the grateful.