On the University Union Debate Between Haykal and Mutran

al-Siyasa al-Usbu'iyya, 21 April 1928

The Egyptian University Union wanted to borrow, from its counterparts at the English universities, a custom that appears to be common practice there, and one that has no small effect in refining students' tongues and accustoming them to public speaking and skill in it. Some weeks ago, it held an event featuring a debate in English on a curious topic: the purpose of the university — is it to earn a living, or is it pure learning for its own sake?

This week it held another such event, featuring a debate on a topic no less curious than the last: whether Arabic literature, old and new, is sufficient or insufficient for forming a man of letters. The custom in the English university is for the audience itself to take part in the debate, one section siding with "the proposer," as they call him, and another with the opposer, until, once the debate has run its course, a vote is taken.

The Egyptian Union's imitation of what happens at the English universities was carried out faithfully: the proposer laid out his position, the opposer refuted it, the audience took part, one section siding with the one, another with the other; then the "discussion," as they call it, was closed, and a vote was taken. The result of the vote, some weeks ago, was that the purpose of the university is to earn a living, and those who held that its purpose is pure learning for its own sake were defeated.

The result of this week's vote was that Arabic literature, old and new, is sufficient for forming a man of letters, and those who held that Arabic literature is in urgent need of foreign literatures if it is to genuinely form a man of letters were defeated.

There is nothing at all surprising or strange in these debates, or in whatever results they arrive at; they are, in themselves, simply innocent forms of play, intended purely for exercise and training, not intended to establish any actual truth. It is a kind of performance, a form of verbal sport — no more, no less.

Those who organize these debates never imagine that any literary or scholarly truth could actually be established through this kind of imperfect argument, before an audience of such varied backgrounds, or

by taking a vote on matters of scholarship and literature the way votes are taken on political and administrative affairs.

We approach these debates, then, smiling, just as we approach what is played on the sports field, smiling, and take our share of that innocent pleasure to be found in listening to a fine orator and a skilled debater. But a certain group of people — some Egyptian, some foreign, some young, some already fully formed intellectually — took this bit of fun as a serious matter, and grew genuinely alarmed and anxious over its results.

There is no harm in mentioning that I ran into some of our colleagues among the University's senior professors — not English ones — and found them thoroughly alarmed; having learned that the audience had voted the purpose of the university to be earning a living rather than pure learning, these professors grew anxious, fearing for the Egyptian youth's mind, that self-interest might corrupt it, that it might become more practical than it ought to be, and that pure learning might be sacrificed to comfort and the luxuries of life.

It took me no small effort to convince them that the matter was, in itself, harmless, amounting to nothing more than a bit of fun, a form of verbal sport; for this particular style of debate simply is not customary in Latin countries the way it is among the English, and the Latin professor is, by nature, a man of pure seriousness, with no room for jest in him — and perhaps carries this seriousness to excess. The same thing happened again when this week's audience voted, and its majority declared that Arabic literature, old and new, is sufficient for forming a man of letters: a certain group grew alarmed at this result, and worried on behalf of Egyptian youth about this excess of vanity in what they already possessed, about this mistaken understanding of what nationalism truly means, and about this error of conceiving national sentiment and submitting to its power without insight or deliberation.

These alarmed colleagues said: this result reveals a harmful tendency in the youth toward contenting themselves with what they already have, without genuine insight into it or understanding of it, without any real ambition toward excellence, without a sound sense of how things actually stand — and that it is the professors' duty to correct this tendency, straighten out this crookedness, and accustom the youth to understanding things as they truly are, and to set for themselves an ideal suited to their need for a steadily, continuously advancing life.

With these colleagues, too, it took me just as much effort to convince them that the matter never amounted to more than verbal sparring, an oratorical contest, and that this result never amounted to more than an announcement that the majority favoured one side's rhetoric over the other's — for the very people most fervent in championing self-sufficiency for Arabic literature, most insistent that it alone suffices to form a man of letters, are, in point of fact, among the people most firmly convinced that no literature, whatever it may be, can ever be self-sufficient and dispense with all the others; and in their own literary lives, they embody this very conviction more faithfully than anyone.

Indeed, I was with Professor Mutran only minutes before this debate, and found him genuinely uncomfortable with the position he had been given, since that position did not match his own view; he had only accepted it in order to answer the Union's invitation, and out of his own fondness for the exercise it gave students, accustoming them to fine and skilful public speaking. I remarked to him, as we made our way to the lecture hall, that in this position he most resembled a lawyer appointed by the court to defend a defendant every other lawyer had refused to take on.

But Professor Mutran proved a calm, deft, skilful orator, who knew exactly how to toy with his listeners' minds — and I suspect he toyed a little with the truth itself, too, in order to discharge this duty, the duty of defending a defendant with no lawyer of his own — and he succeeded admirably in winning the audience over. I find nothing at all strange in this, as I have already said, nor does Professor Mutran himself find anything strange in it, for the whole affair was, as I said, mere play. But there are certain points on which one's position must be made perfectly clear, particularly with respect to those who take this whole business as a genuinely serious matter, with no play or jest in it at all.

There is one point on which I would like to take up, calmly and gently, a discussion with the "Poet of the Two Lands" — his invoking of the Holy Qur'an in support of the position he had merely borrowed for the occasion. This argument alone is what won Professor Mutran the majority by which he defeated his opponent Haykal; and the strange thing is that this very argument in fact tells against Mutran, and in Haykal's favour. It stands as clear proof that Arabic literature alone was not sufficient to form a man of letters at the moment the Qur'an was revealed; the Qur'an did not draw on what the Arabs had composed by way of literature before the age of Prophethood — it was, rather, the very sign of renewal, and

stood as the living proof that Arabic literature, at that time, fell short of forming a man of letters.

Among the very marks of the Qur'an's inimitability, with which it challenges its Arab opponents, is that it contains things the Arabs did not know, and could never have arrived at without revelation — and a great many of these things were already known to other nations. The stories connected with the Children of Israel, for instance, were already known to the Children of Israel through the Torah, or through other scriptures besides the Torah; for the Arabs, then, this was foreign literature, Arabicized by the Qur'an when God revealed it in the Arabic tongue. God bestowed this favour of these stories upon the Prophet and upon the Arabs, just as He bestowed upon them, beyond these stories, other wondrous forms they had not known, and could never have known, had God not revealed them in a clear Arabic Book.

You see, then, that the Qur'an stands as an argument for Haykal, not against him. They will say: Arabic literature was deficient until the Qur'an was revealed, and was thereby perfected, becoming, after its revelation, sufficient in itself to form a man of letters. I find nothing to prevent accepting this view, were it not that it leads to results of a very grave kind. The first of these results is that all Muslims stood in violation of the Qur'an the moment they took pride in foreign literatures — Persian, Greek, Indian, and Coptic among them, and whatever other literatures you please that were translated for Muslims from the middle of the first century of the Hijra onward.

But Muslims did not, in fact, violate the Qur'an in taking pride in these literatures; their pride in these foreign literatures stands as clear proof that they themselves believed Arabic literature alone was not sufficient to form an Arabic man of letters. Another point one might hold against Mutran — were he not merely jesting — is his own pride in al-Jahiz and Ibn al-Muqaffa' and other men of letters who enriched Arabic literature and raised its standing; for these very men of letters enriched Arabic literature only because they drew upon foreign literatures, Arabicizing them and adding them to Arabic literary wealth, being themselves convinced that Arabic literature alone was insufficient to form a man of letters, and so adding to it, from the literatures of foreign nations, whatever might enable it to do so.

The matter today is exactly as it was in the days of al-Jahiz and Ibn al-Muqaffa': we take pride in our men of letters, ancient and modern

alike, we love our literature, ancient and modern alike, and we want this literature to be sufficient to form a man of letters. It is for this very reason that we complete it, urge its growth, and swell its wealth — and our means to that end is to connect it with foreign literature.

We are convinced that our Arabic literature — old and new alike — would have died, and been rendered incapable of movement or benefit, had it never made contact with foreign literature. You have already seen how our ancient literature grew rich and prosperous precisely by drawing on ancient foreign literatures, and you can see, too, how modern literature grows rich by drawing on foreign literatures, ancient or modern. Who, after all, would Haykal be, or al-Aqqad, were it not that, for all their mastery of the ancient literature, they had also made contact with foreign literature, benefited from it, and been shaped by it in whatever modern Arabic literature they themselves produce?

Even those who know no foreign languages, and have no direct contact with foreign literatures, can only produce anything at all to the extent that they are shaped, indirectly, by foreign literature. Al-Manfaluti won his own literary personality from precisely those books that were translated for him, and to which he then lent an Arabic style. Even the most rigid of our men of letters today, the most averse to innovation, the most steeped in love of the old, is shaped, in spite of himself, by foreign literatures — for he reads whatever translators translate, whatever Haykal and al-Aqqad write, whatever the newspapers publish, and is shaped by all of it, and is compelled to keep pace with all of it in whatever literary work he himself produces.

The position taken by Mutran and his side is, then, an "impossible" position, as the French say — indefensible except as a piece of play and jest, exactly as it was in the University Union's debate.

And if there be anyone naïve enough to imagine that this business on Wednesday was a genuinely serious matter, let him change his mind at once, and know that the reality of it never went beyond play; that literary and scholarly questions are never settled by a show of hands; and that literary independence, like scholarly, political, or economic independence, does not mean isolation, or contenting yourself entirely with what you already possess — it means, rather, having a strong enough character of your own to both give benefit and receive it, or, as the economists put it, to engage in a genuine exchange of benefits.

Our ideal in literature is not that we should stand in need of no foreign literatures whatsoever — that would be a form of death, and we take refuge in God from it. Our true ideal in literature is, rather, that our own Arabic literature should one day be able to give to foreign literatures just as it draws upon them — that our Arabic literature should possess such strength and wealth that it can give just as it takes, rather than merely taking without ever giving.